



**The 2009 New Seminary Year-End Religious/Spiritual Dialogue
Selected Questions Answered by Rev. Maurisa Brown-Latham
Class of 2009**

I. Dimensions of Spiritual Growth/Living a Spiritual Life

1. Briefly describe the basic tenets of your own faith or belief system.

I believe in:

- the unity of God and oneness of creation.
- loving God and every human being with my whole heart and soul.
- honoring the sacredness of all life in my words, deeds, and actions.
- being a steward of humanity and Nature.
- seeking God within and without.
- giving and receiving forgiveness.
- living a nonjudgmental lifestyle.

2. What is the difference between Religion and Spirituality?

Spirituality is centered on how one can experience the divine reality; whereas, religion seeks to define it.

3. Describe your own prayer/spiritual life.

I pray with a fully present mind, heart, and spirit. I accomplish this by approaching my praise and devotion whenever I am moved by my love for God.

4. What is meant by 'ONENESS' when describing all religions?

The oneness of religion is our oneness with the Divine and how we all have access to divine guidance and inspiration.

5. Give several examples of connection between tenants of different religion.

Most religions of the world seek to live a decent life, honor the sacred, and develop a relationship with the Most High. Through our own language, sacred words, and expressions we dedicate our prayers, chants, meditations, dances, songs, art, and even ourselves to the source of our life and talents. The Muslims, Jews, Bahais, Sikhs, and Zoroastrians all pray several times a day to stay in a constant state of devotion and remembrance of God. Hindus and Buddhists both seek divine oneness and enlightenment through their daily chants and meditations. Jews, Muslims, Zoroastrians, and Pagans, similarly share a tradition that welcomes a child into adulthood and shows him/her how to live a holy life.

6. Whether or not you include the following in your own prayer life, what can you see as the value in the following types or forms of prayer:

- **Spontaneous, personal prayer**
- **Collective, group, or community prayer**
- **Saying traditional prayers (e.g. found in prayer books of organized religions)**
- **Singing, chanting, dancing etc.**

The benefits of spontaneous personal prayers are that they instill within a practitioner a deeper and more sincere love for the Divine. Likewise, singing, chanting, dancing, etc. create a uniquely personal relationship with the sacred. Furthermore, collective, group, or community prayers encourage and help us to maintain our communion with God. In the same way, traditional prayers found in sacred text and oral traditions, act as a grounding force that inspires devotees to have a sense of ownership and a personal (cultural) connection to their prayers.

7. How do you understand and deal with the times when prayer appears to go unanswered?

I believe that all prayers are answered in some way, shape, or form. If not on an individual level, but a collective level. An injustice or evil act always spark a reaction from Spirit. Spirit works within the human heart and soul and prompts a response. That response might be a good Samaritan or a group of concerned human beings coming along to remove that harm from your life or society in general. What is more, Spirit works within the human being to rise above his/her circumstances.

8. What is the purpose of meditation? What techniques or types of meditation have you found helpful?

The purpose of meditation is to create a greater awareness, peace, and oneness with the divinity within and/or without. In my personal experience, I've found that guided meditations are very effective. Through simple and personalized visualizations, they allow a practitioner to effect positive change on a conscious and subconscious level, which promote spiritual healing and growth.

9. What do you see as the place, importance, and purpose of service in spiritual growth? What kinds of personal challenges or blocks interfere with your own capacity to be of loving service to others? How might you address these challenges?

The spiritual importance of service is that by serving others, we in essence serve ourselves. By letting ourselves be an instrument of divine service, we become a co-helper and provider of the Most High. The act of service instills within a human being many sacred qualities such as humbleness, unconditional love, patience, and selflessness. One major block that I have encountered when serving others is my level of sensitivity when witnessing pain or suffering. A part of me reacts and calls for instant relief of my fellow brother or sister whom is suffering. Which in most cases, won't happen immediately. I have addressed this challenge of mine by surrendering any outcome of my service, whether it be helpful or not, to Spirit. I remind myself that my duty is to serve, love, and be present. Spirit will do the rest.

10. Are there other kinds of practices that you consider important or helpful to spiritual growth and balance? (e.g., body work, physical practices such as hatha yoga, breathing exercises, ritual, shamanic journeying, journal writing, etc. How do you understand the value or benefits of these particular practices?

Spiritual journaling, contemplative meditations, and centering prayers are all valuable spiritual tools that guide practitioners on a path of spiritual wholeness, reconciliation and stability. By getting in touch with our deepest spiritual thoughts and aspirations, we are given space to explore our limitations and potentials. This process, in my opinion, leads to an awakening of our higher selves.

11. As best you can, describe your concept/understanding of God/dess and your relationship to God/dess. How do you communicate with Him/Her/It? How do you experience God/dess in your daily life?

I understand God to be an active presence and guiding force in my life. Therefore, whenever I am spiritually inspired and moved, I acknowledge this as Spirit communicating with me. I normally respond with my whole being by letting my love for the Divine flow from my heart to my mind and from my mind to my lips. Furthermore, if Spirit's advances call for an active response, I extend my love by heeding Spirit's call of duty or service. Outside of this, I just spend my days playing with Spirit. We write together, walk together, and champion life's obstacles together.

12. What is your understanding of forgiveness? Why do you think forgiveness is seen as so important in the teachings of most religions and many healing practices?

Forgiveness is an important aspect of most religious traditions because without it a person will carry the spiritual burdens of shame and guilt. Shame and guilt tear down spiritual growth before it begins. They are major blocks that foster additional negative quality traits and spiritual energies such as anger, resentment, hatred, and an array of judgmental behaviors. Last but not least, if a person doesn't know how to forgive others, he/she won't know how to forgive him/herself.

13. What is your highest spiritual aspiration? How might you deepen your own spiritual practice?

My highest spiritual aspiration is to achieve a fuller awareness of God's presence in all life. I want to be able to say, I see you Lord, I feel you Lord, I hear you Lord with assurance and confidence.

14. What is the difference between a ritual and worship service?

Ritual is how, where, and when you worship God. Worship is why you worship God. Thus when someone partakes in or performs a ritual there is a set time and art to the process, which normally includes personal and traditional touches. Rituals can be performed formally or informally. It might involve one or more people. However, a worship service is a formal gathering of people for the sake of honoring and praising the Divine in different expressions. This will include but is not limited to ritual.

15. When someone believes that they ‘create their own reality’, and continually get sick, or have ‘bad’ things happen to them, what do you say?

Sickness and death is part of reality as well as good health and long life. Creating one's “own reality” is to empower someone to overcome their pain and suffering, which has been proven as a powerful approach to promoting healing and recovery.

22. What are the essential parts of a Baby Naming? In the Jewish Religion? For Christians? For Others?

The essential parts of the Baby Naming Ceremony are the welcoming of the newborn, blessing of the child, vows of parenting, and naming of the baby. In the Jewish tradition (in addition to the above stated “essential parts of the Baby Naming Ceremony”) a baby will receive two names (English and Hebrew) and the ceremonial placing of water, wine, maple syrup, and lemon upon the baby's lips that represent birth and the experiences that one might face in his/her life to come. In the Christian Tradition, (in addition to the above stated “essential parts of the Baby Naming Ceremony”) , a baby might receive assigned God parent(s). In the Muslim tradition, (in addition to the above stated “essential parts of the Baby Naming Ceremony”) the baby's head is shaved and an animal is sacrificed (one goat for a boy and two goats for a girl) and the meat is distributed to the community in a communal celebration in honor of the newborn child.

23. What do you see as the function(s) of a minister in preparing and conducting a funeral or memorial service?

I see a minister's primary purpose when conducting a funeral or memorial is to create a sacred space for receiving, mourning, honoring, and accepting the passing of a loved one or friend.

24. How do you understand the purpose and experience of a worship service?

The purpose of a worship service should be to open one's heart and spirit to an experience of communing with the Divine, creating a sacred space that gives and partakes in Divine love and oneness.

26. What is your understanding of spiritual counseling? How does it differ from psychotherapy and/or other forms of counseling?

Spiritual counseling is not a replacement for in-depth psychotherapy. As a discipline, it exists to deal strictly with the spiritual side of one's life. By incorporating a variety of religious methods that promote spiritual growth and healing, trained counselors guide anyone seeking their help towards a greater sense of wholeness and spiritual grounding. A person's progress is strictly an internal matter and deeply depends on his/her will to improve or ability to reconcile any burdens carried; therefore, a counselor's duty is only to assist and empower his/her counselee, rather than act as a psychiatric doctor.

31. It is not uncommon for people to misuse metaphysical teachings to blame or judge themselves or others for the so-called “negative” things that happen in their lives. In the same way, spiritual or metaphysical teachings are sometimes used to deny, circumvent or skip over human experiences like anger or grief. How would you address/work with these issues in someone who came to you for spiritual counseling or direction?

I would first start off from a platform of goodness and emphasize that Spirit is a source of goodness and offers many ways for us to grow into our full potentials both physically and spiritually. I would further explain that it is within our means and capabilities to use these gifts to benefit our lives and promote healing whenever we are met with anger, pain, and grief.

33. Discuss the importance of confidentiality and trust in the counseling and/or pastoral relationship.

If confidentiality and trust are breached in a pastoral relationship, the road to spiritual healing and recovery would be destroyed. The pastoral relationship would then become a source of harm for the counselee instead of a source of good.

