

Creating Brave Spaces through Interfaith Programs in Spirituality & the Arts

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Abstract: A brief description of Northeastern University's Spirituality and the Arts initiative, followed by a selection of poems illustrating the way the arts can contribute to the creation of brave space.

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Much has been written about the nature of safe and brave spaces in higher education. As chaplains and spiritual life professionals, we strive to create environments- physical, spiritual, dialogical, and communal- that engender powerful experiences of renewal, learning, healing, and growth. While these spaces may provide a sense of safety and sanctuary from the demands of campus life, at their best they also invite courageous risk-taking and creative experimentation. Through structured dialogues and spiritual practices, chaplains offer “comfort zones” and “homes away from home,” while simultaneously inviting students to step outside those comfort zones and open themselves to the inward life, to the sacred dimension, to “the other,” and to wider worlds beyond our campus walls.

In my experience at Northeastern University, some of the most profound experiences of “brave space” – relational sites of deep encounter with what Martin Buber called I and Thou and the Eternal Thou between and among us- have occurred through our Center’s initiatives in Spirituality & the Arts. These programs invite students to exercise their authentic voices and visions. Accompanied by seasoned spiritual mentors and artists, many students discover gifts and talents they never knew they possessed, or areas of life and learning that had long lain dormant. Experiential immersion in spirituality & the arts demands of young adults a brave engagement with challenging artistic themes and subjects, and an opportunity to take risks in reflective dialogue about whatever “third thing” we gather around – a painting, a poem, a photograph, a story.

Our Spirituality & the Arts initiative launched in the spring semester of 2020, just as we left campus for quarantine at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over several years, we have developed an array of dynamic offerings led by teams of students, staff, faculty, and internationally known writers and artists. Each program invites students to imagine, co-create, and experience brave space. In the process, they discover a sense of belonging across difference

and summon the courage to be and become the persons they are – co-creators of a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world.

Among the programs we have found most successful in creating brave spaces are the following:

- 1) *Pensive: A Global Journal of Spirituality & the Arts* (www.pensivejournal.com). Beginning in Spring 2020 and approaching our fifth anniversary and tenth issue in 2025, *Pensive* is an online annual journal that invites submissions from interfaith poets, writers, and visual artists ranging from established, award-winning contributors to newer, emerging voices. Some of our students submit their work for peer review, a courageous act in an encouraging space. The entire Board engages in thoughtful, reflective dialogues around the thousands of submissions we receive each year. As part of the editorial process, our board members take creative risks, offering their unique responses and insights in a supportive, non-hierarchical, democratic environment. At the same time, they develop professional skills in leadership, editing, publishing, graphic design and layout, social media marketing, public speaking, website management, and correspondence with contributors and readers. Together, our students and staff design a range of *Pensive*-related events including hybrid Celebrations to launch each issue and special readings for Black History Month, Juneteenth, and other occasions.
- 2) Brave space requires careful tending and ample opportunities for self (and group) expression, Our *Writers-in-Residence* offer biweekly *Creative Freewriting & Journaling Workshops*, employing mindfulness practices and empowering pedagogies drawn from Nadia Colburn's Align Your Story model and Pat Schneider's Amherst Writers and Artists organization. These sessions invite students to bravely engage their own stories and concerns in safe, structured, liberating workshop settings, and to share their first drafts of writing aloud with others in a judgment-free community of practice.
- 3) Similarly, our *Faculty Affiliate-led programs* provide skilled mentors who enable students to experiment with poetry, music, baking, cooking, and leading others in creative mindfulness practice. Our Music as Healing and Soul Sessions, for example, invite students to learn the basics of healing rhythm, improvise and listen to one another, and share their musical works-in-progress.
- 4) Our student-led *Art and Soul Nights* and *Open-Mics/Coffee Houses* provide opportunities for creative expression, interfaith/intercultural community-building, dialogue, mindfulness, and stress management through a range of media, including painting, origami, collage, mindfulness jars, bracelet-making, slam poetry, flag-making, etc.
- 5) *Off-campus Cultural Immersion Trips* to local theaters, museums, and poetry readings open our students to ever-wider experiences that advance interfaith/intercultural/artistic learning, bridge building with off-campus communities, and personal spiritual/ethical reflection. Examples include attending plays about restorative justice from a Caribbean perspective, a reading by former US Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith, visiting Boston

Museum of Fine Arts galleries featuring Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Christian, and traditional African art; and taking field trips to read/perform poems at local venues.

- 6) *Global Dance and Musical Events*: our Center hosts a range of South Asian student groups for their weekly practices, performances, and sacred festival observances, providing celebratory occasions for embodied cultural and spiritual practice in a safe/brave setting.
- 7) *Integration of creative/expressive arts programming into our annual Global Spirituality and Leadership Retreats and Experiential Learning Trips to Spiritually Rooted Social Justice Sites (pilgrimages to the Civil Rights South, the Arizona-Mexico borderlands, etc.)* When we travel with students off-campus, we strive to create interfaith brave spaces through a variety of pedagogies, including creative expression to enrich dialogue, processing, and growth. For example, our Jewish and Buddhist Spiritual Advisors (chaplains) have both led journaling workshops; our Muslim staff and students lead Islamic calligraphy and henna sessions; our Protestant spiritual advisors and students lead interfaith prayer bead-making.

When we launched these programs in 2020, we could scarcely imagine the myriad and meaningful ways our students would discover and create brave spaces of learning, healing, and interfaith cooperation. If our work is to educate and mentor rising generations of leaders to tackle societal problems and build a better world, we must harness the sacred powers of imagination. Spirituality & the Arts can help lead the way.

In closing, I share three poems I have written that depict discrete experiences of “brave spaces.” These pieces are part of a larger poetry collection I’m writing about the vocation of chaplaincy and interfaith leadership in higher education. These poems – and poetry more broadly- can be incorporated in spiritual life programs such as creative freewriting and journaling workshops, guided meditations, liturgies, retreats, vigils, or open mic nights and coffeehouses. Each of these poems arises from a vastly different “moment” or “situation” in campus life, where brave spaces are either consciously curated or arise spontaneously under certain conditions. These moments include:

- an ecumenical prayer night in the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, held each January across the United State. Here, as an attender, I witnessed students’ worshipping, singing, and speaking their truths - a wildly diverse group of people at their most vulnerable, and paradoxically, perhaps, at their most powerful.
- a one-on-one spiritual caregiving conversation with a Chinese international student on Zoom, calling Boston from Northeastern’s San Jose campus to share her story of spiritual opening,
- an experience I had - sadly all too familiar- of planning a campus vigil following a school shooting in a far-off city

What I Learned from Students Last Night

And so, friends, I thought I knew all there is to know
about mantras, chants, & repetitive prayers.
After all, my mother & her Quaker friends
would gather in the treetops of West Virginia
to read sacred texts & add their voices
to the peepers & crickets & great-horned owls,
each one a little great part of the whole.
As for me, my heart fell in love with the chants
of Taizé – sitting with other young seekers
as the white-robed monks sang lullabies
and psalms of the world to come.

In college I learned of the mysteries of Om,
and added my voice to the millions chanting
peace to the streets in the roiling rivers of war.

Yes, I thought I knew something
of how word becomes flesh,
and sings in the choir lofts of the heart,
and seeps through the university halls
as the Sufis and Buddhists of Soka Gakkai
deliver us to the place beyond words.

But just last night I stood with Catholics,
Protestants, & charismatic praise-singing students,
and my assumptions about popular music melted
as I heard in the exquisite repetitions
the ancient repetitive naming of Life
then a brave young leader named Isabel Silva
spoke with prophetic power and poise
on how the final word of faith is Acceptance
& radical embrace & acts of service we cannot explain,
yet nevertheless we must repeat,
again, again, and again.

Yes, Beauty *Will* Save the World

On the far side of Turtle Island
in the glass towers of Silicon Valley
my Chinese student speaks of a world away,
a memory so precious we both had to cry
for there was nothing more to say.

I asked her whether she'd ever felt
a moment of unequivocal joy
or awe or wonder, or known a time
when heaven & earth held hands,
to remind us we're not so far apart.

She paused, drew a breath, looked squarely
at me, through eyes that had seen eternity
but perhaps never mustered
a little satchel of brittle words,
to share the glory she'd seen.

“It was wintertime in St. Petersburg,
at the symphony, *Swan Lake* I remember-
it was as if I were transported suddenly,
enraptured as I walked out into the world,
the world of winter, ice on the river,
so glorious as the evening sun peeked
through the clouds, a sunset so orange
& scarlet & purple & blue and then
I saw her: a woman on the bridge,
sun setting behind her, her arms extended
as if she could fly, as if she too were a swan.”

Note: the poem's title comes from Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot*, often quoted by Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker. Turtle Island is a traditional Indigenous name for the continent others call North America.

Beyond the “Thoughts & Prayers”

Before you gather up all your spiritual doodads,
your electric candles and singing bowl,
soft chairs in a circle for healing & support,
in the wake of another mass shooting –

before you open up the desktop file
marked Healing Vigils & Times of Remembrance
and wonder whether any words remain
to offer some meager comfort and care –

before your wounded heart bursts the bounds
of your Oxford shirt with its little panes
in two shades of blue, before your soul blows
through an open window out onto the quad

gathering every precious young life in its care,
before you check the closets
for extra tissues and dim the lights
of the Sacred Space, & open your arms

to the cluster of bodies, seekers like you,
with no spiritual cures or theological scrolls
to explain the mysteries of why we humans
still kill each other, before all this –

look up and notice the January snowfall
as it anoints the evergreens & broken boughs
of deciduous trees and the head of each stranger
and neighbor shuffling by, whirling their words

back into being, with that strange white manna
that feeds our hunger, and look for the chill balm
that reminds us all: You are ever beloved:
each winter-damp hair on your head is counted,
cherished, & known. I will not leave you
to face your fears alone.

Note: the final sentence of this poem alludes to Thomas Merton's prayer in times of transition from *Thoughts in Solitude*, sometimes called "The Merton Prayer": "I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

In sharing these programs and poems, I invite you to consider the varied ways that brave space appears in your own contexts, sometimes carefully planned, at other times sudden and unexpected. As we face the immense suffering on our campuses and in the wider world, I invite us to think together about marshaling creative expression more fully in our work, that we too might encourage each other with the promise that somehow, beauty will save the world.

Alexander Levering Kern is the founding executive director of the [Center for Spirituality, Dialogue, and Service at Northeastern University](#) and founding editor/publisher of [Pensive: A Global Journal of Spirituality & the Arts](#). A chaplain, Quaker educator, interfaith organizer, and poet based in Boston and Chebeague Island, Maine, he is the author of [What an Island Knows: Poems](#) and editor of [Becoming Fire: Spiritual Writing from Rising Generations](#).