How millennials gather

Peer-led discussions among young Muslims, Christian experiments in communal living, and pop-up Shabbat meals embody common yearnings.

by Stephanie Paulsell in the May 9, 2018 issue

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Four years ago, two former students of mine began writing and publishing dispatches from the spiritual landscape of religiously unaffiliated millennials. Casper ter Kuile and Angela Thurston, neither of whom grew up in the pews of a church, have a gift for seeing communities of belonging, practice, accountability, and service emerging in the cracks in our culture—communities that those who did grow up in the pews might miss. (You can read their reports at howwegather.org.)

Casper and Angie were led by their interest in the new ways members of their generation have found to accompany each other through their significant losses, cultivate new spiritual disciplines, and be of use to others. They described communities forming around dinner tables, in gyms, and on trains whose members listened closely to each other and pursued personal and social transformation together. Were these communities “religious”? Were they “secular”? They did not

easily map onto the usual divide.

What Angie and Casper did see were patterns shared across a diverse range of communities: a desire to belong to something larger than oneself, a yearning for “something more.” Rather than defining these communities as religious or not, they began looking for the family resemblances among them and tracing their genealogies. They asked, Who are the ancestors of these communities, and who are their siblings? How have they drawn from the practices of 12-step meetings and block parties and church services and running clubs? How are they related to yoga studios or the AIDSWalk community or programs like *On Being*?

Feeling their way along these family trees, Casper and Angie soon encountered other communities forming at the edges of established religious traditions, with similarly diverse resemblances to a range of ancestors and siblings. Peer-led groups of young Muslims reflecting on their lived experience of Islam, Christian experiments in communal living, pop-up Shabbat meals and dinner churches are all distinctive in their own ways, but they all also share a commitment to creating a space for belonging, service, and spiritual practice. They all invite their participants to see themselves within a greater whole and to devote themselves to the common good.

Struck by the shared yearnings animating these diverse communities, Angie and Casper have beckoned them toward each other. They’ve noticed that many of the communities they’ve studied are often surprised by the unexpected power and gravity of what happens when people try to make meaning out of what is happening in their lives, to offer themselves in service to others, and to shape communities of belonging. They believe that the long histories of religious practice and accumulated wisdom about what it means to be human could help integrate reflective practice into communities built around fitness, or invite a deeper consideration of spiritual resources for transformation for communities built around activism, or train the leaders and members of these groups in the practices of pastoral care. They also believe that traditional religious groups can learn from unaffiliated communities about the yearning for authentic engagement with each other and the world that has drawn young people together in unexpected places.

In their most recent report, *Care of Souls*, Angie and Casper, along with their colleague Sue Phillips, move beyond offering us their observations from the field. This time, they recommend a path forward.

Our divided country, they argue, has an urgent need for spiritual leaders who can gather communities of real depth, seers who can teach us to be present to the sacred in our midst, healers who can interrupt cycles of violence and address individual and societal trauma, stewards who create the scaffolding that can sustain the spiritual life of a community, elders who can share their history and experience, venturers eager to invest in the flourishing of human life, and makers who reconnect us to the most profound possibilities our humanity holds. We see such people within our national landscape—activists, religious leaders, and artists who inspire us and whose work and witness help reconnect us to ourselves, our society, the natural world, and the divine mystery that draws us beyond the boundaries of our own lives.

What would it take, the researchers ask, for our society to make a deliberate investment in the formation and support of gatherers, seers, healers, stewards, elders, venturers, and makers? What would it take for these roles to become vocations to aspire to? They note that many sought-after careers in computer programming, digital content creation, and social media management didn’t exist mere decades ago. Could the care of souls become a career path that one begins preparing for in high school? It would take a transformed society, they recognize, one that valued the care of souls over the accumulation of wealth, one that believed that every soul was worthy of care and that—as all our great spiritual teachers have taught—no one is free until all are free.

Casper and Angie and their colleagues are at work on a novitiate for spiritual leaders: a long-term, theologically rich, high-commitment program of formation. This seems to me an act of faith, given that the society that would support such an effort seems distant. But I am always learning about faith from Angie and Casper, whose joyful confidence in the power and potential of my religious inheritance sometimes puts me to shame.

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