

Unitarian Universalism offers man a new path

By KATHERINE MAYFIELD

There comes a time in the lives of all adults when we must choose our own spiritual road to travel. Part of the journey involves finding a way to reconcile the faith and beliefs of our families of origin with a personal spirituality that offers us strength, hope, and community. For some, the faith they were brought up with is a good fit, and they continue on the path their parents carved out for them. For Manish Mishra, a student at Harvard Divinity School and intern minister at All Souls Unitarian-Universalist Church in Greenfield this past year, the journey has been a difficult one, demanding that he come to terms with a fundamental component of his identity.

Born in Pittsburgh of parents who emigrated from India, Mishra was raised as a Hindu, steeped in the roots and beliefs of Hinduism. As many immigrants do, Mishra's parents sought to instill in their children a respect for the values of the faith they followed and the culture they came from; but as immigrant children often do, he grew up with contradictory influences at every turn. He lived in a Jewish community in a predominantly Christian country, studied Islam, and has always been attracted to Buddhism. He is the eldest son in his family — a significant responsibility in the Hindu culture — and though he wanted to retain the values of his parents and be true to his roots, he says, he also felt the need to be true to himself.

As part of his quest to reconcile his heritage with his sense of self, Mishra majored in international affairs in college, and went to work for the U.S. Foreign Service shortly thereafter. He looked forward to this career as

a "noble calling." Though he was pleased with the values on which the Clinton administration was based, he eventually became aware of the compromises that had to be made in order to keep the system running. "I found that values in governmental decision-making were often sadly compromised by economic realities," he says. "I began asking myself, 'Are my values playing out in my work?'," and as I looked ahead, I began to realize that I would always find the same contradictions in the work I was doing." Shortly thereafter, he began to increasingly focus on human rights work because, as he says, "It spoke to my soul."

This struggle for vocational meaning mirrored Mishra's efforts to bring greater wholeness to his own sense of identity. With the hope of living up to his family's ideals, while in college he nearly became engaged to a woman of similar Asian background, but discovered that his heart was not in the relationship. For several years he had resisted the idea that he might be gay, especially in light of his roots: the eldest son of a Hindu family is responsible for continuing the family lineage. Unwilling to break from his family's beliefs and values, he contemplated suicide because he felt unable to be true to both his family and himself.

Acknowledging that he was gay, Mishra says, would have meant a loss of his religious

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 All Souls intern minister



and cultural roots. He still resisted accepting this part of his identity, and went into international service in the Middle East, and later in Finland. Spending some time in different cultures, his perspective widened. When he moved back to the U.S., he realized that he couldn't return to a life of self-denial. He increasingly began to understand his gay identity in positive terms, and subsequently became estranged from his family for a time after coming out to them. In 1996, he and his partner happened to go to a Unitarian Universalist service, and felt immediately and warmly welcomed by the congregation.

Though its historical roots reside in the

Jewish and Christian traditions, Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religion. UU congregations are self-governing, and members believe that religious authority resides in the individual, based on each person's experience, conscience, and reason. The Web page of the Unitarian Universalist Association (www.uua.org) states, "Liberal Christians believe that human beings are free to heed an inner summons of conscience and character. To deny human freedom is to make God a tyrant and to undermine God-given human dignity." UU congregations embrace tolerance as a central principle, both inside and outside their churches. In discussing the Unitarian Universalist Association, Mishra found the freedom to share his spirituality with others, yet still maintain the whole of his identity.

Our country was founded by independent thinkers, who came to this New Land in the hopes of finding religious liberty. Some of the churches established by these seekers of freedom developed increasingly liberal theological beliefs after 1750, and in the early 19th century, many of them added the word "Unitarian" to their parish names. Some of the oldest churches in the U.S., including the First Parish of Plymouth, became Unitarian. Eventually, separate Universalist congregations were also organized. In the late 1700s, one of the earliest New England Universalist

preachers, Caleb Rich, headed a small religious society in northern Franklin County. Stephen Marini, author of "Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England" (1982), described Rich as the founder and early leader of mainstream New England Universalists.

Mishra says that at first he believed Unitarian Universalism was too good to be true. Of his background, he says, "I'll always consider myself a Hindu, in terms of my cultural heritage and world view, and I'll never give up that part of my identity. But Unitarian Universalism can include all aspects of our identities." In fact, it wasn't until some members of his UU congregation asked him to preach about his Hindu background that he began to reclaim his roots and reconnect with his heritage. As he reconciled the history that he never believed would dovetail with the self he had grown into as an adult, he realized that he had found a true home that accepts and encourages every aspect of his identity, and that he could inspire others with his story.

In 2001, Mishra resigned from the State Department and enrolled shortly thereafter in Harvard Divinity School. This past year, he has interned at All Souls Church and taught religious studies at Northfield Mount Hermon School. He hopes to be ordained in 2006, and plans on working in a parish setting. Of his newfound spiritual path, he says, "It's given so much richness to my life. I've found a way to work from within myself, to share every aspect of myself freely, and finally I have a way to utilize my values in my work."

For those who are still seeking their own spiritual path, Mishra's story offers hope and inspiration that the way can be found - that by looking within, we can each find a spiritual home that is truly our own.