A black and white photograph of a group of people gathered around a table, possibly in a meeting or collaborative setting. The image is partially obscured by a large, semi-transparent green circle in the center. The background shows people's hands and arms, some holding papers or devices. The overall mood is professional and collaborative.

*how we  
gather*



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## America is changing.

Millennials are less religiously affiliated than ever before. Churches are just one of many institutional casualties of the internet age, in which young people are both more globally connected and more locally isolated than ever before.

Against this bleak backdrop, a hopeful landscape is emerging. Millennials are flocking to a host of new organizations that deepen community in ways that are powerful, surprising, and perhaps even religious.

After two years of noticing this happen, we're sharing our findings in order to start a conversation. Primarily, we're speaking to three groups of people:

- *Those leading the organizations mentioned in this report and others like them*
- *Those interested in supporting such organizations and their growth*
- *Those interested in America's changing religious landscape*

There are dozens of organizations from which we could choose to illustrate what's happening. We've chosen ten. Each epitomizes a combination of six themes that we see again and again:



Community



Personal  
Transformation



Social  
Transformation



Purpose  
Finding



Creativity



Accountability

These organizations have a shared ethos. To try to understand it, we map out their ancestry, sibling projects, and cousins in corporate America. Lastly, because we care about the efficacy and longevity of this work, we close the report with a few considerations for the organizations and others invested in their success:

- *Who are we serving?*
- *How are we leading?*
- *What about God?*

We hope that these organizations begin to see themselves as part of a broader cultural shift toward deeper community. By consciously coming together, we think they could form the DNA of a fruitful movement for personal spiritual growth and social transformation. We invite you to join us in considering how millennials are changing the way we gather.

Thank you for reading, and please let us know what you think!

Angie & Casper

# THE RISE OF UNAFFILIATED MILLENNIALS

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## **America is changing.**

Millennials are less religiously affiliated than ever before. According to the 2012 Pew Research Center report, “Nones on the Rise,” nearly one in three do not belong to a faith community and of those, only 10% are looking for one. Though many millennials are atheists or agnostics, the majority are less able to articulate their sense of spirituality, with many falling back on the label, ‘spiritual-but-not-religious’. The General Social Survey of 2014 shows that the disaffiliation trend is only growing.<sup>2</sup>

Ever greater numbers do not attend church, but two-thirds of unaffiliated Americans still believe in God or a universal spirit. (Notably, though, fewer than half say they are absolutely certain of God’s existence.) As sociologists Robert Putnam and David Campbell explain, those in this group “reject conventional religious affiliation, while not entirely giving up their religious feelings.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, one in five prays daily and one in three says that religion is at least somewhat important in her life. This looks less like a process of secularization and more like a paradigmatic shift from an institutional to a personal understanding of spirituality.

In a qualitative study of a 100 teenagers in five major cities, Richard Flory and Donald Miller found that millennials are not “the spiritual consumers of their parents’ generation, rather they are seeking both a deep spiritual experience and a community experience, each of which provides them with meaning in their lives, and is meaningless without the other.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, when they say they are not looking for a faith community, millennials might mean they are not interested in belonging to an institution with religious creed as the threshold. However, they are decidedly looking for spirituality and community in combination, and feel they can’t lead a meaningful life without it.

The lack of deep community is indeed keenly felt. Suicide is the third-leading cause of death among youth.<sup>5</sup> Rates of isolation, loneliness and depression continue to rise.<sup>6</sup> As traditional religion struggles to attract young people, millennials are looking elsewhere with increasing urgency. And in some cases, they are creating what they don’t find.

# A CHANGING CULTURE

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Among millennials, who are loosely defined as those aged 18-34 in 2015, only the elders remember life before the internet.<sup>7</sup> We were all under 21 when the Twin Towers went down in 2001, and we came of age through the Great Recession and bank bailouts of 2008. Whereas our older siblings distrust big institutions, millennials assume that the model must change or die. Whereas our parents bucked authority, millennials assume that impractical idealism is just as disappointing. And whereas our grandparents pursued the American Dream, millennials assume that success is more like *Choose Your Own Adventure*.

These generalities are crude and rife with exceptions, but they set the stage for some assumptions made by organizational leaders in this report. For instance, they assume that for institutions to work, they must become values-led, sustainable networks; that for idealism to work, it must yield measurable and scalable results; that for success to work, it must affect some kind of transformation, beginning with the inner life of the individual and radiating out to touch the world.

What does it mean to touch the world in 2015? This is a moment when Brené Brown's TED Talks on vulnerability and Taylor Swift's random acts of kindness go viral. It's a moment when virtual interconnectivity is more immediate than the 'real' world, so that an American millennial feels more comfortable setting up a Kiva loan to a farmer in Kenya than bringing chicken soup to a neighbor. Is it possible to harness these new tools of global engagement to deepen our everyday experience of community as well?

The innovators in our report say yes, not just possible, but necessary. They speak to millennials as friends, offering positive and practical advice through clean and personable websites. They encourage an ethos of care for self and others and a mindset of abundance. They argue, explicitly or implicitly, that each person is a change maker with the opportunity—if not the responsibility—to make change for the better. And making change means making connection, both broadly in the world and deeply at home.

Overwhelmingly, these organizations use secular language while mirroring many of the functions fulfilled by religious community. Examples include fellowship, personal reflection, pilgrimage, aesthetic discipline, liturgy, confession, and worship. Together, there is a sense that these groups could encourage friendship, promote neighborhood welfare, and spread messages for the betterment of individuals and society.

This analysis may be uncomfortable for some of the organizations mapped in this study. Many leaders are resistant to any public use of spiritual or religious language about their work, even when those words are important for them personally and are used by their constituents. We invite them to consider themselves as part of an exciting cultural shift. Whether it is the November Project running stadium steps or the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture inviting social imagination, these organizations are making life more meaningful for young people. By examining their work through the themes outlined here, we hope to open a conversation about how such disparate groups might come together to contribute to the well-being and spiritual growth of the rising generation.



# SIX THEMES

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We map six recurring themes in this report. They are found in mission statements, blog posts, and manifestos, and on the lips of leaders and participants. We highlight these themes not because there are no others, but because they best reveal the cultural DNA of these diverse initiatives, from which more can grow.



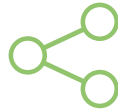
## Community

Valuing and fostering deep relationships that center on service to others



## Personal transformation

Making a conscious and dedicated effort to develop one's own body, mind and spirit



## Social transformation

Pursuing justice and beauty in the world through the creation of networks for good



## Purpose finding

Clarifying, articulating, and acting on one's personal mission in life



## Creativity

Allowing time and space to activate the imagination and engage in play



## Accountability

Holding oneself and others responsible for working toward defined goals

# TEN CASE STUDIES

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We have chosen to shine light on ten organizations. Whether consciously or unconsciously, each one descends from a lineage of ancestors and resembles siblings in the field, which are listed alongside it. These organizations also have cousins in the corporate world. We can only assume that brand consultants have long since monetized the millennial appreciation for values, empathy, and social responsibility. This ethos is marketable and, in a profit-driven context, shallow. But in the hands of these ten organizations, it is starting to go deep. We invite you to peruse the following cases and consider them for yourself.

# THE DINNER PARTY



Personal transformation



Community

## ANCESTORS

Alcoholics Anonymous, Public Conversations Project, support groups

## SIBLINGS

Good People Dinners, deliberateLIFE, The Civil Conversations Project from On Being, HONY For The Holidays, Mend

## CORPORATE COUSINS

Häagen-Dazs Real Questions campaign, Kit and Ace dinners

The Dinner Party is a community of 20- and 30-somethings who all have experienced a significant loss, and who get together over homemade food to talk about it and how it impacts their lives. With a strong belief in the power of candid conversations and community support, they are transforming life after loss in cities across the country. Explicitly building on the AA model, The Dinner Party has recipes and rituals to offer hosts who welcome strangers to their tables, and is investing in developing these hosts to be leaders in their communities.

The Dinner Party and its siblings focus on bringing people together for conversations that are more intimate and personal than everyday talk. Often built on small groups, these efforts mirror the many new Christian dinner churches, such as St. Lydia's in Brooklyn and Root and Branch Church in Chicago, which are also centered around a meal. For Christian groups, the meal is explicitly sacred. We encourage secular groups to invite spirituality into their gatherings as well, and to train leaders to hold space for the diverse spiritual journeys of their participants.

Taking on difficult subjects like death, racism, and loneliness ensures that connections are made quickly and participants experience the power of being fully 'seen.' There's a real opportunity to connect these groups with efforts to change social norms and policies that make their work necessary in the first place.



*My mom died at the age of 53, my senior year of college. I moved to California a few years later, and within a few months, a friend of mine, Carla, invited a handful of women and me over for dinner one night. All of us had lost parents, and, with rare exceptions, none of us had ever really talked about it. There wasn't an agenda, and we weren't looking for a support group. We wanted a chance to talk about the parents we'd lost without killing the conversation, to connect with other people who got it, and who were navigating the same milestones.*

— Lennon Flowers





# CROSSFIT



Community



Personal transformation



Accountability

## ANCESTORS:

AIDSWalk Community, running clubs

## SIBLINGS:

November Project, Tough Mudder, Spartan Race, StickK, No Meat Athlete

## CORPORATE COUSIN:

MassMutual Society of Grownups

CrossFit's aim is to forge a broad, general and inclusive fitness, which it defines as increased work capacity across broad time and modal domains. However, what makes CrossFit work is as much the community as the fitness approach. With over 10,000 affiliate boxes (gyms), CrossFit has at least 4 million users, some of whom participate in the annual televised CrossFit Games. The leaders see themselves as tending an orchard, not building a skyscraper. That orchard is made up of affiliates committed to a culture of fitness, empathy, and reach. CrossFit's community culture is so important to its leadership, that the company fought ugly court battles to resist external investors. Would-be affiliate owners must first become part of the community and submit a written application that testifies to the life-changing experience of CrossFit.



The two most striking things about CrossFitters are their evangelical enthusiasm and the way they hold one another to account. Much like November Project, CrossFit expects members to call each other out if they don't appear at their usual time and let each other know if they're out of town. November Project even posts pictures of members who don't show up after committing to be there.

As more and more of life happens in the CrossFit box, a growing question will be about the potential for CrossFit to deepen its role in bringing meaning to its members' lives. What would it look like for CrossFit to focus on heart and soul as well as body? Evangelical leader Rick Warren has already taken this step for Christians with CrossFit Faith, which hosts volunteer-led local chapters and offers spiritual Workouts of the Day alongside the usual daily regimen of weights and burpees.



*My CrossFit box is everything to me. I've met my boyfriend and some of my very best friends through CrossFit. When my boyfriend and I started apartment hunting this spring, we immediately zeroed in on the neighborhood closest to our box—even though it would increase our commute to work. We did this because we couldn't bear to leave our community. At our box, we have babies and little kids crawling around everywhere, and it has been an amazing experience to watch those little ones grow up. CrossFit is family, laughter, love, and community. I can't imagine my life without the people I've met through it.*

— Ali Huberliet



# SOULCYCLE



Community



Personal transformation



Creativity

## ANCESTORS

Bikram Yoga, aerobics classes

## SIBLINGS

Pure Barre, Brooklyn Boulders, Zumba, Redisco, Morning Gloryville

## CORPORATE COUSIN

Westin Well-Being Movement

SoulCycle is a spin class where fitness is associated with empowerment, joyful living, and both inner and outer strength. Classes are described as “journeys” and are led by inspirational instructors by candlelight, with a focus on transforming the mind as well as the body. Branded with phrases like “find your soul,” SoulCycle uses a coaching model that is in the business of changing lives. With 37 locations and counting, and 50,000 riders every week, SoulCycle has also launched its own retail clothing line so members can express their identity in what they wear, and curates playlists that become the soundtrack to their members’ lives.

Strikingly, spaces traditionally meant for exercise have become the locations of shared, transformative experience. This raises a question about the responsibility of class instructors, and how they can best prepare for the increasingly pastoral role they may be asked to take on. As with CrossFit, many participants joke about the cult-like loyalty they have for SoulCycle, which illustrates both the depth of participant commitment and the hope for these organizations to fulfill brand promises like “find your soul.” We’re excited to see how Brooklyn Boulders has created an environment for intentional community that goes beyond the core activity of climbing. What would it look like for Soul Cycle to mirror this effort through, for instance, small circles of reflection for participants to share the journeys of their souls alongside body and mind?



*SoulCycle became my community without me even knowing it. I always thought communities were constructs you actively engaged with, chose for yourself, and worked on. SoulCycle surprised me. What we share is a passion for personal improvement—be that physical, mental, or emotional—that we express through music, syncopation, and shared experiences. Strengthening our minds and bodies in sync is a powerful experience that is constantly reiterated and orchestrated by the instructors (“emotional DJs,” I call them). It has been a pleasure to discover I have become part of this community without effort and I constantly invite friends and family to join me.*

— Nick White





# CTZNWELL



Personal Transformation



Purpose



Social Transformation

## ANCESTORS

LIVESTRONG Movement, Ashoka

## SIBLINGS

The Feast, Junto, Off the Mat, Into the World, Relational Center, The Catalyst Collective

## CORPORATE COUSINS

Success 3.0, Uber campaign for gender equality (now defunct)

CTZNWELL is mobilizing the well-being industry to change the world from the inside out. Building on increasing interest in practices of personal transformation, CTZNWELL is connecting the dots between these practices and the politics of social and environmental well-being. Think meditation for activists and Get Out The Vote for yoga classes.



CTZNWELL, The Feast, Junto, and others, are building social capital through communal activities in order to impact structural injustices. Tapping into millennials' growing desire to do meaningful work that has a positive impact on the world, these organizations play convening roles, building networks of advisors and co-creators across sectors. We applaud preliminary engagement with electoral politics, such as the nonpartisan "YogaVotes" campaign, given that millennials are as disillusioned with the political system as with organized religion. A recent study by Harvard's Institute of Politics found that only 18 percent of young adults believe the way to address important issues is through the political system.<sup>8</sup> And, as David Campbell explains, many people have pulled away from the religious label due to its mingling with the political, resulting in "considerable evidence suggesting that the 'nones' have actually been caused by politics."<sup>9</sup>

As CTZNWELL and its siblings grow, we encourage them to hold themselves and others to account in pursuing the full rigor and depth of what wellness entails. This goes far beyond the 'spirituality lite' promoted in corporate slogans about well-being, mindfulness, and productivity. It is what theologian Emilie Townes calls the "everydayness" of practices, moral acts, and relationships by which we each contribute to the common good.<sup>10</sup> If they bear this mind, CTZNWELL and its siblings could create the infrastructure to facilitate a fruitful movement for personal spiritual growth and social transformation.



*We're uncovering three needs that are playing out for people that they're not quite conscious of. 1) Making meaning/finding purpose in one's life - that's playing out clearly on the mat and in the spiritual convening places like meditation retreat centers. 2) Community - the desire to be in relationship. People are just craving it, often without being able to articulate it. 3) Making a difference - people know there's something broken there and they want to know whether and how they can make a difference.*

— Kerri Kelly



# U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ARTS AND CULTURE



Community



Social Transformation



Creativity

## ANCESTORS

TED, BIL

## SIBLINGS

The Harry Potter Alliance, Thread, The Moth, Couchsurfing, StoryCorps

## CORPORATE COUSINS

Airbnb, Lyft, Chipotle Cultivating Thought Author Series

The U.S. Department of Arts and Culture (USDAC) is an action network of artists and cultural workers mobilizing creativity in the service of social justice. (The name is a play on the fact the United States doesn't have a Department of Arts and Culture.) The organization supports citizens in hosting events that use the arts to explore and tackle social injustices. Grounded in relationships at the local level, the work of smaller groups is amplified by national events that bring them together for a common cause.



USDAC and its sibling organizations are moving toward a new social fabric based on sharing—be it stories, ideas, resources, or experiences. The network structure of USDAC responds perfectly to the millennial suspicion of institutions and offers local leaders the chance to shape their own projects, much like CrossFit box owners have total control of their affiliate businesses. By offering participants a chance to become part of something bigger than themselves, USDAC gives a sense of import and impact to the work that would be impossible for a local group operating alone. As it continues to organize events like the People's State of the Union—where 150 hosts around the country organized local “story circles” to collect people's experiences of dis/union—USDAC could become a powerful democratic meeting ground across lines of difference. Training and resourcing local leaders to do this work skillfully and ethically will be of the highest importance.



*Story circles work because they bring people who are different from each other closer through the experience of sharing and listening. They are the most amazingly powerful democratic modality I've seen. When corporate leaders and 11-year old children are forced into a situation of total equality by the structure of the interaction...Everybody's expectations are confounded.*

— Arlene Goldbard





# MILLENNIAL TRAINS PROJECT



Personal Transformation



Purpose



Accountability

## ANCESTOR

The Landmark Forum

## SIBLINGS

Mycelium, Wisdom Hackers, Open Master's, The Unreasonable Institute

## CORPORATE COUSIN

Whole Foods Values Matter campaign

Millennial Trains Project (MTP) leads crowd-funded train journeys across America for diverse groups of young innovators who are thrown together for 10 days and 3,000 miles. Each learning journey combines personal development and shared discovery through mentor-led seminars and participant-led projects. Applicants get on board by pitching a project they want to advance in one of the communities where the train stops, and then racing to crowdfund the cost of their ticket. The goal is for participants to advance projects that benefit, serve, and inspire others, and to come together to explore new frontiers for America's future.

Millennial Trains Project reminds us of the ancient religious practice of pilgrimage, in which the journey is as important as the destination. The Project's founder, Patrick Dowd, describes participants as "new pioneers" and their ride as "an inner journey and an outer journey."<sup>11</sup> As a time of communal travelling, pilgrimages break down some of the social barriers between participants and form a temporary 'communitas'.<sup>12</sup> MTP and its sibling organizations are invested in forming such learning communities and propelling self-directed learning journeys. In their work, education starts with big questions and continues through personal investigation in relationship with like-minded peers. Wisdom is available from coaches and mentors, but the peer group provides accountability. There are no institutional authorities.

Much like CTZNWELL and the political system, we are curious as to how MTP and other learning journeys will relate to the education system as they grow. As public conversations continue about the role of values and character in education, what might these independent organizations do to more deeply engage the "inner" part of a journey toward a more ideal society?



*One of the ideas that was critical for me on this journey was the idea of creating a transitory environment and a 'third space' that can foster creativity and be used in very productive ways. Third spaces are where culture gets created and that culture ends up shaping the first and second spaces of home and workplace. We see the train as a mobile third space which is truly exceptional in the way that it is confined but also open to different ideas that we interact with along the way that are inspired by the landscape through which we are moving.*

— Patrick Dowd



# LIVE IN THE GREY



Community



Purpose



Accountability

## ANCESTORS

True North Groups, Big Brothers Big Sisters

## SIBLINGS

The Bold Academy, Coach.me, Kindly App, 7 Cups of Tea, Lantern, ImpactHUB

## CORPORATE COUSINS

Next Door by State Farm, Accomplishment Coaching, Handel Group, InspireCorps

Live In The Grey inspires and challenges people to get the most out of their work. The idea is to blur the lines between work/life, personal/professional, and black/white, and to live in the grey in between. Work should be purposeful, meaningful and fun so that people love their whole lives and understand success as the fulfillment of passion. Live In The Grey offers advice to individuals that encourages risk-taking, community building, and self-improvement. It also advises companies on how to adapt their cultures so as to attract and retain top millennial talent, knowing that 91% of millennials expect to stay at a job for fewer than three years.<sup>13</sup> In both cases, the team helps people find the courage to make big changes.

Live In The Grey is part of a growing trend of millennials exploring ideas of success focused on actualizing personal potential. In many cases, this means a change in mindset. Organizations in this group center on harnessing the mind to define one's purpose and overcome obstacles in working toward it. Coaching, often on a peer-to-peer basis, is the primary format for this process. Many coaching concepts rely on articulating values and striving toward greater balance and well-being. To promote sustainability and prevent narcissism in this work, we recommend a deeper examination of values: what they are, where they come from, and how they inform both the work one does and the way one does it. Training in religious wisdom regarding values, as well as pastoral care, could be useful to this end.



“

*Programs are not explicitly spiritual, but definitely about how to live in your life. We lead meditations, work with artists and are really working on changing the culture of work. We definitely see ourselves as part of a movement.*

— Kirsten Kesicki

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# JUNIPER PATH



Personal Transformation



Accountability

## ANCESTORS

Esalen Institute, Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health

## SIBLINGS

Headspace, Global Spiritual Life at NYU, Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute

## CORPORATE COUSINS

Wisdom 2.0, Arianna Huffington's Thrive

Juniper



Juniper Path brings the tradition of meditation to modern life. With a founding team that includes the former CFO of Pixar and a Tibetan Buddhist monk, its emphasis is on the rigor of ancient practices in new cultural packaging. Meditation and integrative care are offered in person, along with a set of resources online. Juniper Path is committed to providing the wisdom and experience of a long-standing meditation tradition in secular form, tailored to contemporary culture, knowledge, sensibility, and psychology. The organization seeks to uphold the heart of the practice, which it describes as unlocking the mind's potential to soar joyfully and freely in an ever changing world.

The strength of Juniper's programming is the rigor and depth of the practice and the role of teaching relationships. Meditation apps and other introductory programs are a great way for people to discover meditation, but as ever more flood the market, the role of a personal teacher who responds to individual questions and needs becomes increasingly important. Further, being rooted in a tradition means that the wisdom from a long history of others' practice is built upon, rather than swept aside. Lastly, with Headspace offering a gym membership for the mind and Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute pitching the tools to train your brain, we wonder about potential partnerships among these organizations and those like SoulCycle and CrossFit that promote physical discipline.



*We need a path - spiritual teachings, a spiritual way of life that is not an affront to what we're learning in science and to our social norms like gender equality and marriage equality and all of that. It has to blend and fit with who we are, because this is a path to make us the very best that we can be in our world - right here where we're sitting. Our feeling is that if we can bring these three things together: a path, a connection to something beyond ourselves through a historic lineage, and the right level of accessibility, then individuals will be able to grab hold of this and take it and grow.*

— Lawrence Levy





# CAMP GROUNDED



Creativity



Community

## ANCESTORS

Burning Man, Woodstock, summer camp

## SIBLINGS

Awesomeness Fest, Summit Series, TheGlint, Groupmuse, Artisan's Asylum, The Go Game, Mousai, Movies and Meaning

## CORPORATE COUSINS

Oprah's The Life You Want Weekend, Life at Google, Life at Palantir

Camp Grounded is a summer camp for adults. Offered as a time for play, creativity and community, Camp Grounded caters to millennials who want to turn off their cell phones and be their true selves in the outdoors. 'Disconnect to reconnect' is the motto, and work talk is explicitly prohibited. Instead, the focus is on making space for being human: personal freedom, creative thinking, and making friends based on laughs, competition, and random conversations. The average age at Camp Grounded is 34, and elements like the gourmet, sustainable food and wellness programming speak the language of millennials, but the organization promotes its inclusivity in being a place for people of all ages and demographics to come celebrate what it means to be alive.



The success of Camp Grounded indicates a strong desire for childlike creativity, play, and fun among a generation of tech-savvy young adults who were tightly-scheduled as kids and grew into a hookup culture by middle school. Located within easy driving distance of Silicon Valley, Camp Grounded is most accessible, geographically and conceptually, to those for whom a "detox" from online personas and networking represents a radical, challenging lifestyle shift. An article in Forbes puts it well: "As more young professionals seek deep fulfillment from their careers, a job title becomes a point of pride and a reflection of values. The type of people Camp Grounded attracts are the most likely to pursue a career that's driven by passion – which means, ironically, they're the least equipped to talk about themselves outside of [work]."<sup>14</sup> How might such findings inform the success model promoted by Live In The Grey?

Camp Grounded and its siblings argue for a different way of being in the world, one born of unadulterated self-expression. They coalesce around the tagline of Artisan's Asylum, which is to make creativity a way of life. While these organizations promote individual originality, we are heartened that they also have a strong focus on working together as a group or team. In a culture that uses "creative" as a noun (see TheGlint: a society that accelerates and celebrates creatives), we hope the reverence for innovation is accompanied by awareness of the spiritual and structural resources a person needs to sustain creativity in service of a better world.



*Summer camp was the place we went to get away from everyday life. The place where it didn't matter where you were from, who you were or what school you went to. The geeks became the cool kids, the days lasted forever and life inside the woods was all that mattered. It was where you were given permission to be completely yourself and unique, the place to play, learn and become the person you'd grow up to be. When we were planning the first Camp Grounded, it hit me - play is just as important as meditation, community is all about meeting people outside their titles, disconnecting is about connecting, and not talking about work is hard and powerful. This feels like summer camp and it's amazing.*

— Levi Felix



# THE SANCTUARIES



Personal Transformation



Community



Social Transformation

## ANCESTORS

Church, Interfaith work

## SIBLINGS

Bodhi Spiritual Center, Sunday Assembly

## CORPORATE COUSIN

Oprah's Super Soul Sunday

The Sanctuaries is a diverse arts community with soul in Washington, D.C. Bringing together a multi-spiritual and multi-racial community of citizen artists, it promotes spiritual growth and social change through the creative arts. Events like Soul Slams, Open Studies, and Community Huddles allow people of diverse spiritual and artistic backgrounds to share their perspectives, do creative projects, and engage in honest conversation. Collaborations across media lead to new friendships. The community also offers its creative skills to social justice efforts in the city, building a wide network of organizational partnerships. Almost completely volunteer-led, the Sanctuaries has gone deep instead of wide, investing in building a strong cohort of leaders to help transform the diverse but segregated city of D.C. into a vibrant community where differences unite instead of divide.

Like other new communities that are building on the assumption of diverse spiritual (and non-spiritual) expressions, the Sanctuaries had to spend a lot of time working out its model. Its focus on the arts as unifier differs from Sunday Assembly, which unites around godlessness, and Bodhi Spiritual Center, which gathers around spirituality without creed. The missions of all three organizations have a similar underpinning: The Sanctuaries calls it promoting spiritual growth; Sunday Assembly calls it helping people find and fulfill their full potential; Bodhi Spiritual Center calls it awakening individuals to live their inherent power and purpose. In the latter two cases, however, this work takes an explicitly religious shape, including congregational gatherings on Sundays and God talk—whether that is to exclude or include the divine.

The Sanctuaries, by contrast, assumes a spectrum of spiritual and religious inclination and builds from there, with loyalty to fostering spiritual growth but not necessarily to a church-like community format. Being led by an ordained minister, resident seminarians, and other spiritual leaders in formation, has given The Sanctuaries a maturity of spirit and sensitivity to social and religious context that allow it to flourish. Over time, we wonder if the community might expand its concept of creativity to reach beyond the arts. Given the millennial ethos of entrepreneurship, many stand to gain by a richer understanding of individual creative potential, and The Sanctuaries could thrive by inviting and harnessing creativity in all its forms.



*I definitely appreciate the love that I get from everybody - from all walks of life. To just be able to come and be themselves and be genuine. [The Sanctuaries] allows people to open up and there's probably no other place where people could do it, just given how life has become.*

*Everything is hustle and grind, no time, no money, stress. The Sanctuaries is a safe place that I can go to and share what I do, creatively.*

— Sanctuaries participant



# A FEW CONSIDERATIONS

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By examining these cases through the lens of six themes, we see how they might provide a foundation for a culture of connection and meaning. But we also see real pitfalls in the landscape as it stands. Here we've identified a few questions we hope will be considered as this movement unfolds.

## WHO ARE WE SERVING?

From our initial—and admittedly anecdotal—inquiry, it appears that these organizations serve disproportionately affluent, urban, educated, and white populations. Some groups, such as SoulCycle and Camp Grounded, simply have a high price tag. Others, like Live In The Grey and Millennial Trains Project, presume the privilege to take big risks in following a passion. And still others, like The Dinner Party and Sunday Assembly, started with their founders' social circles and are actively trying to scale to other demographics.

At the moment, the religiously unaffiliated population skews affluent, urban, educated, and white.<sup>15</sup> We do not know, statistically, if these organizations attract the unaffiliated more than other groups, but we encourage that research. Either way, they have the responsibility to ensure that transformation is open to all. By engaging with the reality of diversity at a structural level, they have the power to undo systems of oppression and truly contribute to the common good. This means opening conversations and fostering relationships that cross lines of difference. Organizations like The Sanctuaries and the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture provide models for how to build multi-racial community, and the success of this depends on the commitment and skill of the leadership.

## HOW ARE WE LEADING?

Many of these organizations started because the founders saw a need and dared to address it. As their communities develop, members are bringing more and more of their lives to the table. A CrossFit box organizes a meal plan for a member in chemo, while a SoulCycle instructor eulogizes her step-father to riders over a Neil Young song. In a landscape where young people are less and less likely to have a religious home, the sayings of yoga teachers and dinner party hosts may be treated like pastoral wisdom, even if they are not intended to have such gravity. These kinds of developments necessitate skillful, sensitive, and ethical leadership that goes beyond organizational savvy.

As divinity school students, we have firsthand experience with the training ministers undergo. While it might be excessive to train a career coach or a climbing instructor in pastoral care, there might also be concrete skills that religious leaders can share with those who find themselves filling unexpected roles. Holding space for vulnerability, mediating conflict, facilitating small groups, sacred listening, and spiritual accompaniment are just a few. As it becomes increasingly popular to build mindful, values-driven, socially responsible organizations, we hope leaders recognize the importance of striving to master these qualities in themselves.

## WHAT ABOUT GOD?

The two of us are emblematic of the unaffiliated millennial population. One is personally religious but unaffiliated and the other loves aspects of religious community but doesn't experience a personal God. Language of religion and spirituality, and especially of God, would resonate, or not resonate, with each of us differently. But community would ultimately be unsatisfying for us both if it did not encompass the spiritual dimensions of existence.



# WHAT WE WISH FOR

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We wish for these organizations, and others, to come together and mature into a community-grounded culture where spirituality, in all its forms, can find a home. We suspect that something will fill the opening left by struggling faith institutions, and we wish for it to be a network of organizations that meet millennials with love, depth, and rigor.

As these organizations grow, we wish for them to keep clear about what they are aiming toward and why. What are the goals of each organization's growth, and how might they shift if undertaken as part of a nationwide (or worldwide) conversation? How might various groups support each other, and how might the rest of us support them?

We wish for the leaders to recognize the size and stake of what is happening. We also wish for them to be cared for, learn from one another, and have access to the resources they need. And we wish to play a useful role by convening, connecting, and encouraging them as they do the hard work of building and scaling their organizations.

As millennials grow into adulthood, we wish to see family enter more fully into the ethos of these organizations. Most of them currently reflect a young adult mentality that jumps straight from the individual to society. Yet family, in all its forms, can be where we find our richest experience of love and belonging. What can these organizations learn about deep community from the institution of family? And how might strengthening communities actually strengthen families along the way?

Lastly, it is worth noting that traditional faith communities are valuable partners in this work. They offer immeasurable spiritual wisdom for a changing world, and also know, better than anyone, how the world is changing. Some explicitly religious groups like Reboot (Jewish), Buddhist Geeks (Buddhist) and Forefront NYC (Christian) look and feel more similar to this generational landscape than they do their own tradition's mainstream web presence and culture. But it may be more difficult for them to innovate within a system that is struggling. The organizations we've identified, and the many others like them, are innovators at the margins who can reimagine community for the twenty-first century.

If you would like to be involved in this project, please contact us directly. We'd be delighted to hear from you.

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