

HOLY HYBRID

BY KAREN ERLICHMAN

Cambridge Dictionary definition of a hybrid:

1. A plant or animal that has been produced from two different types of plant or animal.
2. A hybrid is also anything that is a mixture of two or more things.
3. A hybrid vehicle is one that is able to operate using either of two fuels.

I have a complicated relationship with the word *hybrid* to describe my work. I love the word *hybrid* because it invites me to inhabit the in-between spaces where connection happens. Being a hybrid honors the legacy and lineage from which I have come, the diverse teachers who have shaped my heart, body, mind and spirit, and lifts up intersectionality as a layered blessing, not a liability.

Yet I also bristle at the word *hybrid* because we live in a dualistic culture that values things as all or nothing, good or bad, scientific or spiritual. You are either a This or a That. Over the course of my life, I have consistently lived in the *both/and*: privileged and oppressed, included and excluded, cisgender and queer, secular/cultural and religious, activist and spiritualist.

Professionally, the word *hybrid* often implies a lack of substance and legitimacy, or a perceived shallowness, rather than the multiple deep roots planted in trustworthy soil. One plant with many roots, many shoots, and many branches.

Yet a hybrid car is energy-efficient and conscientious. "A [hybrid plant](#) is the result of cross pollinating two different plant varieties and growing the seed the mix produces. The plant that grows from that seed combination is called a hybrid."

A physician who is a board certified as a family medicine doctor and as a psychiatrist is typically seen as having multiple specialties. Singers like Joni Mitchell or Tony Bennett, who also paint, are generally viewed as multi-talented and multifaceted. Rarely do people question the integrity of your art if you express yourself in multiple modalities.

I am a poet, a lover of words--and the daughter of two teachers for whom precise, intentional



Transitions, by Karen Erlichman

language has always mattered. So, what I call myself matters. I long for words that describe my practice as a hybrid in ways that convey the full sense of depth, breadth and integrity of work, training, and accountability. Some of those words are: *alchemy, hybrid, integrative, intersectional, wholeness, living undivided*. The lexicon is still evolving.

I actually love the Jewish word in Hebrew for spiritual companion or mentor, *mashpi'ah*. Its grammatical root is the word *Shefa*, which means divine flow. Hence a *mashpi'ah* is one who witnesses and nurtures the divine flow in another person. While I resonate deeply with this, my commitment to serving diverse communities necessitates finding or creating a title that is more accessible.

For example, decades ago I began my career as a social worker. Those core values and skills from the social work profession extended into my work as a psychotherapist, and also resonate beautifully with the ethical underpinnings of the ministry of spiritual direction. And more recently, somatic coaching has further amplified the mind/body/spirit integration of my work. My spiritual tradition and practice is

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Jewish, and I am also strongly influenced by various mystical traditions, Buddhism and African American/womanist theology.

I experience being a holy hybrid as a *felt sense of wholeness* that continues to be grafted from these various traditions, identities, practices and lived experiences.

What I call my work is genuinely connected to the experience of calling. *What am I called to do and who am I called to be/become?* My own teachers at Mercy Center said that as spiritual directors, we never stop discerning the call to this ministry. We are always asking questions like: *What is the internal felt sense of being called? What is mine to do in the world? What has my name on it? What is God asking of me now?*

I'd like to invite a conversation with other hybrid spiritual care practitioners about best practices. Here are some sample questions for exploration:

- What language do you use to describe yourself and your work? How does that language capture both your essence and your practice?
- What is your network of support and how does it support you?
- How do you align the qualities of ministry and right livelihood?
- How do you honor the tradition from which your work comes while also embodying creativity, innovation and freshness?
- What ongoing business, spiritual, relational and embodied practices help you thrive in your work and ministry?

- What long-held beliefs and behaviors might be limiting you right now?

- How does your relationship with the Divine nourish your growth and thriving? What practices sustain and nurture that relationship?

Blessed is the Source of All that Is, Divine Shechinah, who has given us life, sustained us, and allowed us to reach this day.

Brukha At Yah Shechinah Eloheinu Ruach ha'olam, shehechiyatnu v'kiyatnu v'higiyatnu la-z'man ha'zeh.



Photo: Jonny Lindner

ברוכה את יה שכינה אלהינו רוח העולם שהחיתנו וקיימתנו והגיימתנו לזמן הזה

May we live fully into our birthright gifts and thrive together.



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provides psychotherapy, spiritual direction, supervision and So(U)L coaching in San Francisco. She also serves as a Professor of Jewish Spirituality at the Graduate Theological Foundation. Most recently, she has been exploring

embodied leadership and transformation, and is currently fulfilling a lifelong dream of writing her first book. She has been especially inspired by the learning she's experienced at the Strozzi Institute, as well as the Center for Courage and Renewal.

(Editor's note: please e-mail Steven Crandell at stevenc@sdiworld.org with any responses to this post and he will pass the emails on to Karen. Thanks.)