

Gatekeeper of the Temple of the Heart

Juliet Hollister, founder of the Temple of Understanding, mourned

By Michael O. Schwager
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My dear friend Juliet Hollister passed away in November. When I heard the news, I wept. She was 84, going on 24. I never really dwelt on her age, for to know her was to know a youthful spirit, though more than likely a very old soul. Forty years ago, from her kitchen in Greenwich, Connecticut, this then housewife and mother gave birth to a vision that became The Temple of Understanding, a United Nations sanctioned forum for the promotion of dialogue and understanding among and between the great religions of the world. Juliet's friend Eleanor Roosevelt called it, The Spiritual United Nations.'

Born in Forest Hills, New York, Juliet studied comparative religion at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary, but as she once told me, It was not an easy matter at the time for a woman to pursue a career in theology.' After devouring books on the major religions of the world, she became convinced that there was much more that united the great faiths than divided them. She became a living testament to this conviction.

Juliet carried a natural dignity and patrician-like quality, yet was devoid of the all-too-well known nuisances of the ego. She was truly a person without guile, pretense, or condescension. Her personality exuded a great big huggable charm; she had a passion and kindness that combined with a keen intelligence and unusually intense interest in people. She was a kind of magnet, and her presence was felt the moment one found oneself in her company.

Juliet's life and her magnificent vision were, in a word, simple.' I use this word in the highest complimentary sense. The same word comes to mind as I think about one of her dearest friends' His Holiness The Dalai Lama. Ask the Dalai Lama who he is, and he will quickly reply, I'm just a simple Tibetan monk, nothing more.' Ask the same of Juliet Hollister, and she would respond, I'm just a simple little mother from Greenwich, Connecticut.' They shared the quality of authenticity. The privilege of meeting authentic persons is truly sweet and illuminating.

The first words I ever heard Juliet say were, How can I help you?' She had just telephoned me after learning about an idea for a spiritual, human potential television channel I had been trying to generate support for. Before I knew it, she invited me to come to her cottage-like home in Greenwich for tea' and to share my vision. She was herself a great storyteller. And the story she loved to tell the most was about her beloved Temple of Understanding, and how that vision became reality.

As she would tell it, It all began on a day in 1960, sitting in the kitchen of my Greenwich home with a friend, snacking on peanut butter sandwiches, talking about what a mess the world was in, with the spectre of nuclear Armageddon not a remote possibility, when as if out of nowhere, a light turned on in my mind and I excitedly saw an antidote' an ongoing forum where dialogue and understanding could be promoted by bringing all the world's

religions together under one roof.' Juliet would later say that the energy of this idea was enormous, and I was convinced that I had to do something to bring it into the world.'

She brought the idea to her husband, Dickerman Hollister, a well-networked partner in a Manhattan law firm. After fruitless meetings with foundation executives, Dickerman arranged for his wife to meet Eleanor Roosevelt, at one of the former First Lady's well-known salons. When approached with the idea, Mrs. Roosevelt immediately became excited, and arranged for Juliet to share her vision with some of the great political, religious, and citizen leaders on a whirlwind 'round-the-world trip. Joined by her youngest son, Dickie, the Connecticut housewife and mother met privately with U Thant, secretary general of the United Nations; Pope John XXIII; President Nasser of Egypt and his vice president, a young Anwar el-Sadat; Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister; Dr. Albert Schweitzer; and the Dalai Lama.

Juliet recounts that every leader greeted her idea with resounding and enthusiastic support,' except for President Nasser. Though he wasn't a very pleasant man, he was willing to hear about the idea, and I remember Mr. Sadat, in an earlier meeting, a much more sympathetic person, as having liked the idea very much,' she recalled. But in the President's office, when I actually had the gall to suggest to Mr. Nasser, a vehement enemy of Israel, that it would be a feather in his cap if he initiated peace with that country, he immediately yelled for his security guards to put me and my little boy under arrest, and we were actually thrown into prison!' The situation looked very bleak, she said, until her son Dickie, when asked by some guards why they were arrested, drew a circle on the dirt floor of the prison cell with his finger, with the symbols of the world's great religions inscribed inside the circle. See,' said Dickie, we want to help bring all the religions together in peace and harmony.' Within the hour, sympathetic guards got word to Mr. Sadat, who gave permission to free Juliet and her son. They were quietly put on the next plane out of the country, unbeknownst to Mr. Nasser.

With the support and blessings of many of the world's top leaders, Mrs. Hollister's vision became The Temple of Understanding, which grew into an international educational group recognized by the United Nations as a non-governmental organization. From its Manhattan headquarters, and guided by her leadership and moving spirit, the group organizes symposiums, round-table discussions, educational projects, global forums, and spiritual summit meetings abroad. These summits, which became a meeting ground for the world's major spiritual leaders, convened in Calcutta in 1968, Geneva in 1970, Harvard University in 1971, Princeton University in 1971, Cornell University in 1974, the United Nations in 1975, and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in 1984. In 1988, The Temple of Understanding joined with the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders for Human Survival, holding a conference in Oxford, England, which for the first time brought together parliamentarians, scientists, and spiritual leaders from around the world. The Global Forum reconvened in Moscow in 1990 and in Tokyo in 1993.

The Temple of Understanding also played a key role in developing the North American Interfaith Network, an association of local, regional, national and international interfaith organizations, faith communities, and educational institutions. Conferences are now held annually.

In 1997, the board of directors of The Temple of Understanding created the annual Juliet Hollister Awards. The Award has been given in two categories: one for religious figures who have brought interfaith values into churches, temples, and mosques, and the other for secular figures who have promoted greater understanding of spiritual values in the arts, media,

government, science, and law. The award recipients have thus far been: Her Majesty Queen Noor of Jordan; The Very Reverend James Morton; His Holiness Sri Swami Satchidananda; Maestro Ravi Shankar; Mary Robinson, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights; and His Holiness the XIVth Dalai Lama. In 1999, the Award was given to Nelson Mandela at the Parliament of the World's Religions gathering in Cape Town, South Africa.

I attended the 1997 event, the first Juliet Hollister Awards banquet, at the United Nations. There was Juliet, beaming and resplendent in a blue and gold Indian sari, entering the ballroom to the wild and affectionate acclaim of the 1,000 guests. In 1998, in the magnificent palatial-like hall of the Cipriani Restaurant in Manhattan, sitting next to her beloved friend, the Dalai Lama, more than 2,000 guests stood to give her a long rousing ovation.

If you love an idea, an idea that is larger than yourself, then love it with all your heart; love it enough to act on it,' she once told me. Love it enough to put it into the world,' she said. Don't give up until you do.'

Juliet succeeded in making her overarching dream a reality. One unfulfilled dream that I must leave to those who follow me to fulfill,' she said, is to build and erect the physical Temple of Understanding on the land we purchased years ago in Washington, D.C. The architectural blueprint of the plans for the Temple, executed as well, are also awaiting the hands of the builders when the proper funding comes in,' she said.

After an appearance on The God Squad,' the television show co-hosted by a rabbi and a priest on the Telicare Television Network of Long Island, Juliet began to soulfully reflect on the state of the world. There is so much work yet to be done,' she said. It is so clear to me that all we have to do is awaken to the fact that we are all ONE, or as my friend Father Thomas Merton has so rightly said, 'We are already ONE . . . what we have to become is what we already are.' It seems so simple, doesn't it? Yet so much more work to do. So much more work.'

Above all other places, Juliet loved Kashmir, the most beautiful spot in all the planet.' She owned a houseboat there, and whenever she could, she would go there to rest and luxuriate my soul in the sheer beauty of its sacred mountains and skies.' She knew that Kashmir was a place of political conflict and potential danger, yet it would never stop her from making her trips. I feel the angels are protecting me, and when I go to visit, I always pray that the physical beauty of this God's world will transform into a beauty experienced on a more ethereal level, penetrating into the hearts and minds of every human being, so that there is beauty too in all our dealings with one another.'

Juliet believed she could see through the veil between life on this side and life in the hereafter and that there was a continuity of consciousness that moved into another plane of existence.

It's so clear to me,' she often said, and she firmly believed that one day science would validate and confirm the existence of another side.' Juliet was a member of an organization called INIT, comprising a number of leading scientists from around the world, some of them Nobel Laureates, who were conducting technical experiments to secure contact and verify communication from conscious entities who had departed the earthly plane. She claimed that in one of these experiments, she had actually received a visual and audio communication

from her beloved husband, Dickerman, who died in 1983.

Bill Moyers, a member of The Temple of Understanding, once said, I used to think that The Temple of Understanding was an act of sentiment. Now I believe it is an essential strategy for survival.' And for Juliet Garretson Hollister, it has also become her living legacy to a world so very much in need of it.