“Transforming the Paradigm of Spiritual Leadership": Jac O’Keeffe

Jac O’Keeffe is a co-founder and board member of the Association for Spiritual Integrity (ASI), dedicated to fostering ethical standards and accountability within the spiritual teaching community. With a background in theology and adult education, she spent over 15 years as an independent spiritual teacher before shifting her focus to supporting spiritual leaders. Through ASI, she advocates for education, transparency, and integrity in spiritual guidance, drawing from her extensive experience, academic training, and professional certifications in ethical leadership and coaching. MysticMag offers you an exclusive interview.

Jac, how does the Association for Spiritual Integrity aim to transform the paradigm of spiritual leadership, and what role does ethical education play in this mission?

The idea of transforming the paradigm of spiritual leadership arose from recognizing the need for contemporary reflection on the cultural foundations that influence spiritual leadership today. Spiritual leadership has been shaped by sacred traditions and revered lineages, yet it has also been influenced by male-dominance and hierarchical institutions that can exert control and abuse power without accountability or oversight. At ASI, we ask: Where is collective spiritual leadership headed? If we can shift the cultural narrative, even slightly, alongside others who recognize this need for change, then we can initiate meaningful impact. I believe in the butterfly effect—small actions can create ripples that extend far beyond our immediate influence, perhaps coming to fruition beyond our lifetime. Cultural shifts have their own momentum, inspiring others to show up in ways we cannot predict.

Having served as a spiritual leader myself for 15 years, I have firsthand experience of how spiritual attainment—no matter how deep, abiding, or embodied—does not automatically redress or reset one’s ethical compass. Without guidance, education, training and self-reflection, unconscious habits from our cultural conditioning can persist, shaping how we relate to our students and followers. While there is little scientific research validating the connection between ethical behavior and spiritual awakening, a forthcoming study (Penn State University, summer 2025) will soon lend empirical support to this perspective, affirming what I have observed for over a decade.

If we, as spiritual leaders, do not take responsibility for our own ethical integrity, external regulation may eventually be imposed upon us—potentially through a licensing system akin to what exists in professions such as psychotherapy. While licensing serves a protective function in many fields, I believe it would compromise the essence of spiritual leadership, which is inherently intimate and transcendent. Rather than allowing an external control to dictate our evolution, we have created a community where anyone can join freely, who has a shared commitment to ethical integrity. Our focus is not on measuring the depth of one’s awakening—that remains personal and sacred—but on refining how our human selves show up in the world.

Until individuals awaken to their own inner sovereignty, their spiritual teachers play a pivotal role. This dynamic of power—one that inevitably shifts away from teachers as students evolve and become more sovereign—can be easily misused or abused.

Our mission (at the ASI) is to elevate ethical standards, promote ethical responsibility, and ensure that power is exercised humbly with awareness, integrity, and a commitment to the highest good.

What inspired the founding members to create ASI, and how have the organization's goals evolved since its inception in 2018?

The idea for ASI emerged unexpectedly during a lunch meeting at a conference, where three of us delegates discovered we were independently addressing the same issue in our presentations: the troublingly low standard of ethical behavior among spiritual leaders. This wasn’t the theme of the conference, yet we each found ourselves drawn to the topic from different perspectives. I suggested that we should talk. It seemed significant—perhaps even synchronistic—that three people, coming from distinct backgrounds, were independently grappling with the same concern. By the end of our lunch, we had committed to doing something about it, and ASI was born.

Two of us remain actively involved in leading and shaping the organization. Our first major project was developing a comprehensive code of ethics—one designed to be as applicable to a Catholic priest as it would be to a coven of witches, both of which are equally suitable members of the ASI. (Although, to be precise, we don’t yet have a Catholic priest in our ranks despite my best efforts, even within the tradition I was born into and later abandoned.)

Creating this code of ethics was a meticulous, three-year process. We engaged in ongoing community consultations, holding open meetings to discuss and refine each principle. Every tenet was scrutinized—what does it mean, how is it interpreted, and how does it apply across different spiritual traditions? This consultative approach remains central to ASI’s identity. The code is not a rigid, static document but a living framework guiding good practices, evolving as new challenges and perspectives emerge.

When an organization approaches us saying they align with ASI’s principles but take issue with a specific tenet, we take it seriously. Sometimes, we allow an exemption from one tenet because of how an organisation is structured; other times, we bring the issue back to our community for deeper exploration.

Seven years in, we continue to engage in consultation and refinement. However, I’ve observed a distinct gap between those who intellectually agree with ASI’s principles and those willing to truly embody them. Many resonate with the ethical framework in theory but resist the changes in behavior and personal transformation it specifies. Deep self-inquiry, confronting uncomfortable truths, and working through conflict require a level of commitment that many ultimately shy away from. Instead of engaging in the difficult but necessary work of ethical evolution, some have opted to dismiss ASI entirely, avoiding the introspection and accountability we advocate.

At the heart of our work is a commitment to "walking our talk"—returning to dialogue, relationship, and connection even when it is difficult. Yet, contemporary culture often resists this. Increasingly, people default to a polarized stance: "You’re wrong, I’m right, and I’m going to denounce you publicly," often with no real engagement, no evidence, and no willingness to work through differences. This dynamic extends far beyond the spiritual realm; it’s a broader cultural norm now that we find ourselves pushing against.

Given this landscape, I try to keep ASI’s focus clear: let’s not take on too much; let’s do a few things exceptionally well. Above all, we must personally model what we advocate. Yet, we’ve found that even those who claim to share this commitment often fall short when faced with real conflict. When we suggest mediation, consultation, or dialogue, the reaction is often one of avoidance or mistrust. Some assume bias even when we ask them to choose an impartial third party. The real challenge here isn’t just ethical leadership; it’s confronting our own human nature.

The promise of ASI is that we will learn and grow together, that we will hold space for our collective humanness while striving for ethical integrity. But this understanding—that true growth and evolution requires returning to relationship again and again—is still far from being widely embraced. Until it is, we remain committed to holding that space and leading by example.

The Honor Code of Ethics and Good Practice is central to ASI's mission.

Could you elaborate on how this code shapes the responsibilities of spiritual leaders within the ASI community?

Over the years, we’ve seen a pattern. For example spiritual leaders can say, "Of course, I would never exploit anyone or have them work for free," and, "Of course, if I don’t know the answer for a student, I’d refer them to a professional (e.g. psychotherapist or trauma therapist)." But in reality, that’s not what always happens.

For some reason, many spiritual practitioners resist referring their clients to another professional. On paper, they agree that if they are out of their depth, they should refer out—but the problem is, they don’t actually recognize when they are out of their depth. They think they are following the code of ethics, but in practice, they aren't. It’s easy to agree with a code of ethics in principle, but it takes self-reflection and change in behavior to truly uphold it.

When we realized that this was quite a widespread issue among our members, we knew something was wrong with our onboarding process. People were signing the code of ethics, believing they were committing to a higher standard, but they weren’t actually modifying their behavior. So, we asked ourselves: how do we improve onboarding?

This year, we’re launching a series of 18 videos covering the trickiest aspects of the code of ethics. Each video explains, "This is what this code tenet actually means. This is how it applies in real-life situations." Will everyone watch them? I don’t know. But at the very least, it will highlight how much we all need to learn in order to truly understand what we’ve signed up to.

I’ve found that many members don’t fully internalize the code of ethics. They agree to it in theory but don’t follow through in practice. And that raises a bigger question—why are we so resistant to education?

For example, last year, a former member publicly attacked me online. He took something from one of my teachings, stripped it of its context, and twisted it into something else entirely. He didn’t bother to understand the full conversation—he just pulled a quote, misrepresented it, and accused me of being unethical.

The irony? The very last point in the code of ethics he had agreed to abide by (when becoming an ASI member) states that if you see another member falling short, you should reach out to them and start a conversation. It reads: *Offering support to our colleagues and fellow ASI members, to the extent that we are able and available.* Instead of doing that, he went straight to attack mode. Why not reach out to me and ask, "What did you mean by this? Why did you recommend that to a student?" That could have opened up a real discussion. If I was out of line, I want to know. And it would have taken much less of his time also!

The shift we’re trying to create is a movement away from power struggles and fear-based attacks toward mutual support. Spiritual leadership, in many traditions, has historically included guidance on ethical human interaction. But in modern, non-lineage-based spiritual teaching, this is often absent. That’s one reason why we see so much misuse of power.

We need to be honest with ourselves: Are we truly embodying the ethics we claim to uphold? Or are we just agreeing with them in theory? Change requires slowing down, self-reflection, and a willingness to do both the inner and outer behavioral work. And that’s what we’re here to support.

Can you share some insights from the ASI Peer Support Program and how it has impacted the professional and personal growth of spiritual leaders involved?

When we first recognized the need for a Peer Support program, it had become clear that spiritual teachers, guides, and coaches—essentially, anyone guiding others on a spiritual path—needed a confidential space where they could connect with their peers. Many of our ASI members lacked close friends with whom they could truly let their guard down, step out of the role of "teacher," and speak vulnerably about their own human experiences. We set out to find a model that would facilitate and help normalize this within spiritual leadership.

However, I struggled to find an existing framework that was truly suitable. Peer support models from nonprofit and corporate alike didn’t sufficiently align with the deep inner awareness that many of our members bring to their work. Nothing felt quite right. So, we decided to run a series of pilot programs, as research models to create and refine a peer support structure that would serve our unique community.

The results were remarkable. Each group consisted of four to six people, and a fundamental aspect of the model was uninterrupted speaking time for every participant. That alone created a profound shift for those who are accustomed to lecturing, guiding, or holding space for others but rarely have the opportunity to simply be heard. We found that when spiritual leaders are placed in a setting where they cannot immediately offer advice or solutions—where they are simply present with their peers—they can develop a greater ability to truly listen, to suspend judgment, and most importantly to relax their nervous systems into a state of vulnerability. The role of teacher is dropped.

This is the magic of the Peer Support model: it facilitates a nervous system shift that grants permission to explore aspects of one's own shadow that may have been neglected in the perpetual role of "teacher." I experienced this firsthand during our initial pilot. One day, when it was my turn to speak, I thought, *I don’t think I have anything to share.* So, we sat in silence. After three minutes, something shifted within me, and I realized, *Actually, I do need to talk about something.* What followed was one of the deepest, most personal shares I have ever had in a group context. In that stillness—not the stillness of meditation, but the stillness of being held in a safe, nonjudgmental container—I was able to connect with my own humanity in a way I hadn't before, with others.

A key element of our model is the option to request or decline feedback. Sometimes, a person may want reflections from the group, while other times, they simply need to sit with what they have expressed without external input. This flexibility ensures that the process remains centered on individual needs.

The success of the pilot programs was undeniable. One of our earlier groups has continued meeting for four years now, unwilling to stop because they find the experience invaluable. A group from our 2023 pilot has also chosen to continue independently, also meeting every two weeks to this day. Given this overwhelming positive response, we have refined the model further and are now preparing to offer it as an ongoing, well-structured service.

Our goal for this year is to establish a service where anyone interested can join a peer group based on their time zone and availability. We hope to have enough participants to form multiple groups, train them into the process, and allow them to operate with autonomy. I’m interested in assessing whether participants feel heard, respected, and supported—whether the experience influences how they show up as spiritual leaders…

For many, engaging in this kind of deep sharing initially feels like an act of exposure. It is rare nowadays to have a space where we can fully express our human concerns without the need to perform, perfect, or uphold an image of spiritual mastery. Yet, we all have shadow work to do, and we all have aspects of our humanness that require attention and refinement. The peer support program creates a space for that work to unfold, and the impact on participants has been very positive.

The full analysis of our pilot findings is available on our website, and we are now moving toward making this an ongoing, structured offering. Our hope is that any ASI member who wishes to participate can find a group that fits their schedule, receive training in the methodology, and experience the profound benefits of this unique support system.

What challenges do spiritual leaders typically face when it comes to maintaining integrity, and how does ASI's Peer Support system help address these challenges?

Some spiritual leaders lack awareness of how their behavior impacts others, believing they bear no responsibility for the effects of their words and actions. I have encountered individuals who say, *"God spoke through me; I am not responsible for the impact—God is."* That is absolute nonsense. This mindset allows spiritual leaders to evade accountability, often for years, because confronting their own influence makes them uncomfortable. As a result, they elevate themselves onto a pedestal, adopting a guru-like persona to insulate themselves from their own shadow.

Peer Support provides a crucial training ground, demonstrating that not only is it safe to acknowledge our humanness, but it is essential. True growth requires space for reflection, evolution, and transformation.

We are part of a larger ecosystem—just as the Earth is in a constant state of change, so too must we embrace continuous personal growth. Old conditioning must fall away to make space for new ways of being, which, in time, will also evolve.

Accountability is not optional; it is a fundamental value requiring a skillset that every spiritual leader must develop. Without it, we remain blind to aspects of ourselves that need attention and transformation. Peer support is one of the most effective tools for this work, offering a space where we can unravel unconscious habits and behaviors that we may otherwise struggle to see. Only by becoming truly aware of our humanness—and by taking responsibility for our impact—can we grow into authentic and ethical leaders.

If you would like to find out more about the Association for Spiritual Integrity, please visit https://www.spiritual-integrity.org/