

Speaking of the Spiritual and the Religious
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The Unitarian Church in Summit
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Last year my sermon discussed faith. The spiritual experience is an aspect of faith. We regularly hear mention of the spiritual and the religious in Unitarian Universalism, but I do not understand what these words mean to us, what meaning we have in common when we use them or how they relate to a religion without a creed that requires a belief in a higher power. Like the concept of faith, I am troubled by the use of such belief-laden words without an understanding of what they mean when I utter them or when I hear them repeated in our services.

For example, let's consider the UUA Principles, as printed in your Order of Service:

Number 3: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; and

Number 7: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

And consider the "Living Tradition" identifying our UU sources:

Number 1: Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;

Number 3: Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life; and

Number 6: Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

And our welcome identifies us as a "religious fellowship."

So – what are we talking about? We do not have a creed – we do not have any required beliefs, yet we affirm each week that we are part of a religious fellowship engaged in a spiritual journey. What is this "spirit" and this "spiritual" experience? What is the "religious fellowship"?

I had thought until Friday that I could involve all of us in this exploration by relating a spiritual experience to an out-of-body experience, to the transcendence of the physical, to those occasions when we feel as if we have had a conversation or at least an encounter with a power outside and greater than ourselves, with the eternal mysteries. But, as you may have read in the Times, that's no longer possible. Apparently, the much-vaunted out-of-body experience, such as when death is but a missing heartbeat away, is but the result of a chemical process in the brain. We are not encountering God when we see the bright light or seem to float above the room, we are but responding to a chemical reaction. Like the Shroud of Turin, the vision of the nearly dead is neither a proof of God nor a confirmation of life after death.

But that is not the transcendence I am talking about. I am more focused on an emotional connection with the life that surrounds us, not so much with a revelation as with a moment or a series of moments when we are more than an individual, when we are sharing with the world or with each other or with what all of the lives that preceded us have left us, but more than sharing, we are transcending our five senses, our physical world, experiencing something that we intuitively recognize as beyond our intellect.

I recall a story about a young woman who had an encounter with God in response to her prayers. She felt transformed by the event, a conversation with God that was so sweet, so powerful and so wondrous that she was compelled to find a way to have another conversation. She became a contemplative nun, praying to God each day, all day, trying for the rest of her life to have another personal connection with God, but it never happened. She had had a spiritual experience, a religious experience, that was so transformative, so transcendent that she devoted her life to that event. It is that type of spirituality of which I speak and, usually in a less intensive form, that I believe our UU principles and sources describe.

Long ago, I heard that at a Pete Seeger concert, he would always make the concertgoers sing along – so I never went to a Pete Seeger concert. I attended concerts for a transcendent experience, by which I would escape the confines of my physical world. Singing along was, for me, about as far from the transcendent as I could experience. I was entirely self-conscious, aware of my limitations, aware of what everyone else might be thinking. Consequently, I now feel estopped from asking you to participate in this sermon, from asking you about your sense of the spiritual and the religious. Instead, I will presume to tell you what I think about what you have experienced.

Most of my life, I have believed myself to be what I would now call a secular humanist. Nothing about God that I had learned made enough sense for me to commit to it.

In the past few years, I've decided that I was wrong. Not wrong about my beliefs, because I do not conceive that my beliefs have changed. What has changed is my appreciation of what I believe.

As I discussed in my sermon last year, I now realize that I believe and always have believed in something more than myself, something beyond my senses, something that binds all of life together, something that, if we only knew what it was, might allow us to understand why life exists, if not why we exist. To me, this transcendence is what we call the spiritual, by which I mean that which is not physical or in the world but is beyond our senses and beyond our ken. What I am talking about is the religious experience – the “transcending mystery and wonder” identified in our tradition's sources.

Almost all, if not all, of us have had a transcendent experience. Maybe we were not having a conversation with a deity, but some form of event where we were beyond our body's physical senses or felt something that did not originate within ourselves, or had an encounter with a power that is outside our understanding. To me, this is the essence of the spiritual and the religious. As I discussed last year, the finest example of this experience in my life is in serendipity, in occurrences

that, viewed retrospectively, seem too unlikely to be ascribed to mere coincidence. A sense that events occur and paths intersect for reasons that we cannot, and will not, ever understand, perhaps because of imperceptible (to us) currents or ripples that move between and among people or causal connections that are too fine for us to appreciate, or because we follow a script that none of us will ever see – that I am part of something that I can never understand or know. All we see is the effect – that something has happened that seems too improbable, or wondrous or mysterious – and that is a spiritual experience. And in this, I have faith; faith that serendipitous moments will occur again and again as long as I live, and that my responsibility is to recognize and to seize whatever those moments present, that the beauty I perceive today cannot have resulted from mere accident, that I share something with each of you that transcends myself, that transcends this place and this time. As some of you may know, the question of what “spiritual” means in the world of the UU has been the subject of much discussion over the past several years, although it seems to have died down a bit. In 2004, the Rev. William Sinkford, the UUA president, offered the view that “my version of what Unitarian Universalism stands for is, ‘One God, no one left behind,’ ” which he sort of attributed to a derivation from a speech delivered by the former minister of this congregation, now minister emeritus, David Bumbaugh.

Now, I had heard many sermons by David Bumbaugh. I knew, as many of you may remember, that he would not have identified the “spiritual” or the “religious” with any god. Indeed, the only times that I can recall him mentioning God (much less Jesus) were when he complained that the Judeo-Christian God had brought death and destruction, prejudice and pain to generation after generation, and that he would not honor such a force with either deification or devotion.

David’s vocalizations of his beliefs were inspirational to many of us, but extremely difficult to accept for many others in our fellowship. Regardless of one’s opinion of David Bumbaugh, however, I believe almost everyone would agree that he was and remains a powerful preacher, with a poetic ability to make words work in combinations the rest of us could never create, and to do so with an economy and a concentration that leaves his listeners both understanding and marveling at the clarity of his vision. While I am on that issue, let me remind our congregation that we have not invited David to return to speak here but once, which was at the dedication of this building. I suggest that the time is now ripe to ask him to speak here again.

As part of my preparation for this sermon, I went back through all the sermons that David Bumbaugh had delivered, to see what he had said about the spiritual and the religious. I found that in January 1997, he had delivered a sermon titled “Feeding the Hungry Soul.” In that sermon, he attempted to articulate his views on how Unitarian Universalists might experience the spiritual and religious without requiring a belief in a traditional deity:

What we need to recover is neither God, nor ritual nor form. What we need to find, if we would be whole, is our lost selves. What we need to discover is who we truly are. [A]nd the job of religion is to help us confront our own brokenness and our own emptiness and our own sense of deep alienation and begin to build integrity in our lives. And it does that, not by trying to find some satisfying experience it can sell us, but by asking hard questions. The job of religion is to ask us what it is in this world that matters so much to us that we

cannot live without it, cannot be whole without it. The job of religion is to call us to integrity in a world full of deception and illusion. In short, religion, if it is to be effective in feeding the hungry soul, is not something one is “into” from time to time. Rather, it offers a constant standard against which life and integrity may be measured.

I am convinced that the key to a true spiritual renewal is to be found in those expressions of faith which root us once more in this natural world, which help us to see ourselves as unique and precious expressions of that same eternal force and drive which shaped the stars and gathered the galaxies, which set the Earth spinning around the sun, which called forth and sustains life on this planet. I am convinced that the key to a creative spiritual renewal will be found in those expressions of faith which call us to community – to peace with ourselves and with all living things, which call us to the broadest understanding of responsibility and relationship, which embrace novelty and invite us to constant renewal. And I am convinced that the key to spiritual renewal is a religious community which is driven not by the market but by a strong sense of commitment to a core of central values open to the future and affirming the other while retaining a strong sense of self.

My life has been spent in search of that kind of spiritual renewal. I know, at a level deeper than fact, that our lives – yours and mine – do in truth have significance beyond the ability of any language to express. I know that the yearning deep within each of us is nothing less than the universe itself struggling to self-conscious awareness, the universe itself reaching for purpose and direction. I know that we are called to larger community and greater purpose, and despite all the distractions of our daily lives, that call will not be silenced. It is deep calling to deep and I am convinced that the only appropriate response to that persistent call is a religious commitment to a faith which remains strong, and, in the words of Sophia Fahs, “pliable, like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life.” That is the faith which this place is called to embody, the kind of faith which truly feeds the hungry soul.

Having read and reread the entire sermon, I do not believe that David was satisfied with his analysis, even as he delivered the sermon. He had not answered how we could have this religious experience or be part of the religious community he described if we were nothing but intellectual immanence.

In February 2003, David expanded upon this understanding of the spiritual and the religious in a speech titled “Toward a Humanist Vocabulary of Reverence” – the very speech that inspired Reverend Sinkford to reintroduce “God talk” to UUs:

[T]here is a growing sense ... that younger, smarter, more with-it people are now engaging a new language, the language of spirituality, and to a large degree, the common theistic dialect of the conventionally religious. There is a growing sense that the future belongs to those who can be comfortable with god-

talk and who embrace or at least tolerate the cultural attitudes that language reflects.

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I would submit to you that to some degree ... we have lost the vocabulary of reverence, the ability of speak of that which is sacred, holy, of ultimate importance to us, the language which would allow us to enter into critical dialogue with the rest of the religious community.

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The history of the universe is our history; we are all of us recycled stardust. ... Our very existence is rooted in the fundamental processes of the universe itself. How can we not stand in awe before the fact of our emergence as a consequence of those same vast processes that created galaxies and suns and stars and planets?

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The heat of our bodies is the heat of stars, tempered to the uses of life. The salt in our blood and in our tears is the salt of ancient oceans, encapsulated and carried with us, generation upon generation, into strange and distant places and circumstances. The past is not dead. It lives in us even now. The evolutionary universe, the ancient environment, the emergence of complex life – all are recapitulated in every moment of our existence. ... All that lives or ever has lived derives from a single source.

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A language of reverence for Humanists begins with our understanding of this story as a religious story – a vision of reality that contains within it the sources of a moral, ethical, transcendent self-understanding.

It is a religious story in that it calls us out of our little local universes and invites us to see ourselves in terms of the largest self we can imagine – a self which was present, in some sense, in the singularity which produced the emergent universe, a self which was present, in some sense, at the birth of the stars, a self which, in some sense, is related through time to every living thing on this planet, a self which contains within itself the seeds of a future we cannot imagine in our wildest flights of fancy.

It is a religious story in that it whispers of a larger meaning to our existence – a suggestion that in us the universe is grasping for self-knowledge, for self-understanding, for insight. How we participate in this process, or what the ultimate consequence of this process may be, we cannot know. [O]ur endless search for insight and understanding cannot be limited in their significance or consequence to the human enterprise alone, but must be part of the emergence of the universe itself.

It is a religious story in that it implies a broader ethic for our lives. To understand ... the earth not as the platform on which life exists, but as itself a living being, regulating its complex systems in such a way as to sustain ongoing life; to understand our own physical beings as a congeries of ancient living forms, quietly and unobtrusively contributing to our ongoing existence while pursuing their own mysterious imperatives; to understand ourselves as the incarnation of

those same forces and substances and circumstances which produced galaxies and stars and planets is to enlarge our sense of responsibility and our definition of moral living.

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We are not encapsulated, separated, isolated beings. ... The reality inside of us and the reality outside of us are ultimately one reality. In us the universe dreams its dreams. In us the universe struggles for a moral vision. In us the universe hopes for new possibilities. In us the universe strives for self-understanding. In us the universe seeks the meaning of existence.

Still, what I am unable to tease out of David's eloquence is how we can have a spiritual and a religious experience if there is nothing but this physical existence, nothing but this physical universe, whether it be made of stardust or of something else. Certainly, what he has written describes an intellectual form of spirituality, one that may even produce awe and incomprehension, and which may evoke a sense of reverence for the world that we are a part of, but not one that, at least to me, allows for an emotion-laden spiritual experience of transcendence, the sense that existence cannot be explained by that which can be known, that religious experience involves more than the appreciation of recycled atoms.

Consider if you will that the root of *spiritual* is *spirit*, which is defined as "of or pertaining to the spirit or soul." The now-indispensable Wikipedia definition includes:

The spiritual, involving (as it may) perceived non-physical eternal verities (or even abilities) involving humankind's ultimate nature, often contrasts with the earthly, with the material, or with the worldly. A sense of connection forms a central defining characteristic of spirituality – connection to something "greater" than oneself, which includes an emotional experience of religious awe and reverence.

The term *spiritual* is as laden with cultural baggage as the concept of God that David Bumbaugh declines to accept. Nevertheless, by choosing to use this word, we UUs confirm that the spiritual is something other than, something more than the physical universe. For those who believe in an active God, a God who is involved in human life, such as the angry God described in the Hebrew Bible, the impulsive gods described in the Greek myths, or the loving God known by our Universalist forebears, none of this would seem particularly novel or informative. But for those, like myself, who are unable to find such a relationship with a God, or for those who believe that a God is not involved in human life or available to human petition, the choice of *spiritual* and *religious* to describe our community reflects a momentous choice.

For, indeed, we are surrounded by spirits. Not the ghosts that figure in the stories we have heard, but the spirits of all of those beings that have come before us. Each of whom, no matter how long the life, created consequences and effects for everyone who came in contact with them or with the people who knew them. Each life causes a ripple in the lives of all others, which, as ripples do, widens as it moves, in this case as it moves through time, even as it becomes confluent with the ripples of others.

Look at this building. As we sit here, we are surrounded by spirits. I think of them each time I enter this room, even though I have no idea who most of them may be. Look at the sconces that someone decided would light our services; at the ornate chairs in the apse that someone chose probably long before our longest-serving member came to this place; the dumbwaiter adjacent to the fireplace that serviced church volunteers working in the kitchen in the old basement, now gone for enough years that few remember it. This pulpit, the Flentrop organ, the Steinway – all now of known origin but over time to lose that definition. The church building itself, erected by workers now long dead, but living on through the work they left for us. The town of Summit, and every other place of human population, laid out, constructed, inhabited and given a personality by those spirits.

It is not merely the physical objects that our predecessors left behind that these spirits inhabit, but the thoughts they had, the emotions they expressed, the actions they undertook, and the effects they had on parents, children, neighbors, friends and even people they never met, all of which we cannot even imagine except that we treat with these spirits in everything we do. By their mere existence, these spirits invested the people and objects around them, and the physical world outside these doors, with values, meanings and purposes that will continue to affect all of us and all who come after us, for the rest of humanity's time. Spirits are not merely memories, they are the continuing consequences of each life that has occurred.

Spirits, however, are only part of the spiritual.

Why do we come here to celebrate together? We come together because we find comfort in community, in filling this room with hopes, needs and sorrows. Our collective participation in the services adds a spiritual dimension to it that would not be present without this community. We are not merely a crowd gathered together, but a congregation; people sharing a religious experience that we create through the forms and rituals that we practice. We embrace the spiritual by coming together because it is our community that creates the spiritual experience that we seek here.

We may each take away something different from the collective experience – indeed, we should or must do so because we also celebrate our individuality. But we share the experience that we are a part of something more than our own selves. We take from this a small sliver of something more than who we are, something that we call spiritual and religious, something that lends meaning and purpose to all that we do.

Amen.