

“Spiritual But Not Religious” -- What does it mean?

According to polls, people who view themselves as “spiritual but not religious” are a fast-growing segment in a religious landscape where mainline churches are losing congregants. Can religion interfere with spiritual development?

Chalice lighting:

Today’s talk is about the meaning of people who call themselves “spiritual but not religious.” Our beautiful prelude -- the Shaker hymn, “Simple Gifts” is a clue to the essence of my talk. The key to spirituality may be simplicity.

As we light the Chalice, symbol of Unitarian Universalist search for truth and wisdom, I offer a welcoming that was written by the Reverend John M Higgins:

“Welcome to this place. This is a home where no scripture or human being is accepted as infallible, and no revealed truths are promoted. This is a place for searching for truth.

“We are believers. We believe in intellectual freedom; we believe in justice; we believe in compassion and concern for each other and the whole world. We believe in commitment to those ideals which make us caring and active in the struggles for human dignity. We are Unitarian Universalists.”

We are a caring community, dedicated to spiritual exploration, critical thinking, and social service.

Spiritual But Not Religious

The worst way to start this talk would be to offer you definitions of “religious” and “spiritual.” We would spend the rest of the time unproductively arguing about the definitions themselves. So I would like to talk about religion and spirituality and let the meaning of spiritual kind of bubble up through the mud. Then we might try a definition on for size.

Rick Kamet, a UU minister in California, proposed an interesting exercise for our imaginations. Imagine that we could line up a representative of every religion in the world, side by side. It would be a long line because there literally are thousands of religions that have been invented on every populated continent and island. Some are very old, some are rather new. Then let us imagine that we could ask each representative of these thousands of religions if their’s is the *true* religion. The answer, of course, would be emphatically, “yes,” or they would not be the representative of their religion. Next we ask each of the representatives how they know that their’s is the true religion. Each might say because that is their belief -- a tautology -- “I believe in it because I believe in it.” Each might say that they feel it is true, or that they feel that God has revealed that it is the one true way.

Now what are we to make of this. Only three conclusions present themselves. The first would be that perhaps one of these representatives is actually right and all the rest are wrong. That just seems highly unlikely that a great divinity would reveal itself so

selectively to only one of thousands of religions. The second possibility is that they are all right. That god, or gods, or whatever divinity, revealed itself in a different way to each of thousands of religions. I do recognize that there are many common threads between religions but they definitely do not agree on theology; thus, they cannot all be true.. That brings us to the third possible conclusion: that they are all wrong.

What then drives all of this seeking -- here and everywhere, now and down through the ages? Is there some *experience* connected with religion that people everywhere have found and connected it to the practice of their own particular religion? I do believe so. And I believe we can see it as *spiritual practice*. It seems that the way to understand this phenomenon of the proliferation of religions and the common thread among them is in terms of *spiritual practice* as differentiated from *religious practice*.

We know what religious practices are. Every religion has its own practices. Some are in common with other religions. Religious practices may include public prayer; private prayer; public confession; private confession; making sacrifices of animals or foods; snipping the genitals of male children; wearing items of religious garb such a little round hats, or big brimmed black hats, or turbans for men, or head or body coverings for women; reciting sacred words; bringing precious gifts to adorn temples; not eating certain foods; having foods prepared in religiously approved ways; commemorating religious days in prescribed ways; symbolically eating the body and drinking the blood of the prophet; ... we could go on and on with religious practices. Some religious practices have fallen out of fashion such as patronizing temple virgins or sacrificing human beings. (However, killing people of other religions in the name of one's chosen religion still is done.)

Spiritual practices, on the other hand, are often unconnected to religions. And some are. But just as religions have evolved wherever people have existed, so have spiritual practices. Somehow, as the human race developed, people sensed that there was something beyond, something apart from the material world. Some aspects of human existence were more *felt* than defined.

I take a broad view of what constitutes spiritual practice. There are many practices and activities that we might define as spiritual because they involve *feeling* more than *reason*; simplicity more than complexity; insight more than knowledge; play more than work.

Spiritual practice helps us to let go; helps us to get off the endless treadmill, helps us to see things in their essential forms. Spiritual practice recharges our brains.

Children are born with a spiritual nature intact. A child can do things just because their body wants to express itself and they *feel* right -- without thinking about why they do it. They can run, play, skip, repeat funny words, invent dances and songs, draw what they feel. In their natural play they can ignore the cold and the rain and they are not worried about getting dirty. They can do what our hymn called for today -- take time to "stand and stare as long as sheep or cows..." or to stare at clouds in wonder.

After we "grow up" we become "educated," busy, ambitious, and we lose that ability to "stand and stare." But at some point many people begin to realize that they are missing something important in their lives. They yearn reclaim some of that spiritual experience, that feeling of freedom. People find it in dance, in singing and playing

musical instruments, in poetry, in artistic expression, in meditation, -- all those activities where they lose themselves in the *experience* rather than in *reason*. They let go -- let go of self consciousness, let go of trying to explain it, let go of acting out their roles. They become authentic. They relearn the need for pausing in the constant planning and analyzing, and they learn to quiet their minds in many different ways.

The universality of this phenomenon is striking. Even stone age people took time from survival activities to paint beautiful and poignant scenes in deep caves. All cultures I know of invented ritual dancing and music. When Elaine and I were in the high and remote mountains of Burma, the dancing and drumming around the bonfire continued through the night. In the Middle East we have watched the Sufi ritual dances -- the slow, mesmerizing turning, round and round, on and on. After visiting Shakertown, the preserved Shaker community in Kentucky, and listening to recordings of their music, I could visualize, and almost feel, those endless dances, shuffling and turning, sexes facing each other across the room, dancing and singing late into the night. Their haunting song and dancing cadence remain with us:

*Sing: When true simplicity is gained, to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed.
To turn, turn will be our delight, 'till by turning, turning, we come 'round right.*

We have listened to the Buddhist monks in southeast asia chanting their beautiful and ancient prayers in a seemingly endless drone. Somehow people of all cultures, and of all religions, or of no religion, have discovered these practices that engage our *feelings* more than our *reason*.

But it's not all about meditation, singing, chanting, and dancing. These are other practices, or exercises, that can help us refocus on the *here* and the *now*. When the reasoning brain is turning at full speed, planning, analyzing, worrying, comparing, remembering, regretting, ... we are not in the *here* and *now*. We are missing the very *moment* that we are living because we are in the past or future. And if we miss enough of those moments, we are missing our whole lives.

Sometimes it is not just being here and now with ourselves that creates the spiritual moment -- it is being here and now with someone else. Just sitting with a friend, even without words, can provide an undefined sense of comfort and peace. One of the most spiritual moments I ever experienced came while sitting with my brother, each of us holding one hand of our dying mother, and sitting for hours, still holding her hand long after her spirit had departed her body. There was no reasoning involved. It was just *being there*, being there in intense mindfulness.

During a recent service here at the Fellowship I looked inside the cover of my hymnal. I enjoy reading words that members of our congregation have left there for us. That morning I read the words of a dear member who has since died, Maria Parrish. Her gift to me that morning was:

"The heart has its reason, which reason will never understand."

Many here are boaters, sailors and cruisers. Why do people become so fanatically dedicated to just going from point A to point B, or going to no point at all, taking all that time to just get there. I think it is because it slows them down. In a sailboat they can only go at the speed that the wind and the water will allow. They will get there when they get there. So they let go, they become conscious of the eternal variation of the

waves and ripples, the smell of the air, the clouds, and it all moves by at a slow, mesmerizing pace that makes them slow down with it. They are truly in the here and now.

In yoga and other meditational exercises we practice techniques for slowing ourselves down and getting ourselves in the *here* and the *now*. I have found myself slide into that state on a long distance run (back when I was a marathon runner) or even on a long bicycle ride where the physical repetition and constant focus on the *here* and *now* clears the mind of planning, analyzing, worrying, and buzzing. You will arrive when you arrive.

It might be surprising that a 600 mile bike ride, riding from dawn to dark for 11 days, can be a spiritual experience. On my long bike ride to New York two years ago I wrote some of my reflections:

Now the tires sing softly on the road,
Birds and frogs call as I pass by;
Tumbling streams fill the air of their courses
With their susurrous.

On a long, solo bike ride
You let go of time;
You will arrive when you arrive;
Watching the time stops its flow.
Ride -- and live -- only in the moment.
The top of the hill only arrives
When you don't watch it.
Eyes only on the road ahead,
Pedal to the road at your wheel,
Pedal in the moment.
This road, this hill, this bike, me;
Nothing else.
No free lunch.
For every downhill
There will be an uphill.

We don't think of Epicurus as a spiritual leader as much as we think of him as a philosopher. But Epicurus taught that the keys to happiness were to be found in simplicity -- simplicity of food, simplicity in activity, that just spending time with a friend was a key to the happy life, and that we should have no worry about death. Epicurus said, "it is never too early or too late to care for the well-being of the soul."

Lao Tzu, in the *Tao Te Ching* wrote of this need to stop worrying and to simplify.

*Colours blind the eye.
Sounds deafen the ear.
Flavours numb the taste.
Thoughts weaken the mind.
Desires wither the heart. ...*

Success is as dangerous as failure. Hope is as hollow as fear.

*What does it mean that success is as dangerous as failure?
Whether you go up the ladder or down it,
your position is shaky.*

*What does it mean that hope is as hollow as fear?
Hope and fear are both phantoms
that arise from thinking of the self.
When we don't see the self as self,
what do we have to fear?*

*See the world as your self.
Have faith in the way things are.
Love the world as your self;
then you can care for all things.*

*Look, and it can't be seen.
Listen, and it can't be heard.
Reach, and it can't be grasped. ...*

*You can't know it, but you can be it,
at ease in your own life.*

In our bulletin today we have a quotation attributed to Jesus by the Gospel writer, Matthew:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns... . Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ... Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

Our Unitarian and Universalist mentors provide many examples of seeking a spiritual life through simplicity. Henry David Thoreau provides a prominent example. Thoreau honed self-culture and devoted himself to spiritual practice. He referred to the *here and now* as that "nick of time" -- the moment. Thoreau said,

In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick, too; to stand at the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment, and to toe that line."

Of his time at Walden Pond, Thoreau wrote:

There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or hand. ... Sometimes on a summer

morning, ... I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon ... amidst the pines and hickories and sumacs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in my west window, or the noise of some traveler's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance.

So why don't we all do this more -- "stand and stare," as our hymn advised; and take time to be reflective, to be more mindful, to be more in the moment, and to consciously simplify our lives? I think the underlying reason is that we do fear death; we fear the end of our existence. We deal with this fear by keeping busy. We fear deep thinking about our situation so we fill our moments with busyness, with entertainment -- books, TV, movies, -- we chatter gaily and endlessly about anything that is inconsequential.

At the beginning of this talk I said I would avoid definitions until after we had talked about the subject of spirituality itself. In the summer issue of *UU World*, Reverend Doug Muder offers his definition of spirituality in an article entitled "The Spirituality of Humanism." Reverend Muder offers this:

Spirituality is an awareness of the gap between what you can experience and what you can describe.

I can accept this. This gap between what we can *describe*, and what we can *experience but not describe*, is another realm that we can enter through spiritual practice. My own attempt at defining spiritual practice is that of *experiencing* without *reasoning*.

An example of experiencing without reasoning might be to ask a great composer where the original theme for his composition came from. From his reasoning? Or, his feeling?

How are folks handling this goal of simplicity in an ever more complex world? Does it mean we have to disconnect the phones, throw out the TV, walk instead of drive, and get rid of our computers? I don't think so. In fact, used wisely our technology can aid us in attaining simplicity. It is our state of mind, that can starve our souls, not the tools we have. What we need is to find is our balance, our equilibrium.

Yes, we do need to plan, and organize, and analyze. But we need to take time out from the planning and organizing to nurture our souls, our spiritual side, our non-reasoning side. Whether it is spending quality time with a friend, or family, or taking a quiet walk in the woods, we need to create that balance in our lives.

There is a wonderful art film I have watched many times called "Koyaanisqatsi." This film has no dialogue, only moving images of earth and its people accompanied by music composed by Phillip Glass. The continuously changing scenes evoke the restless world, moving ever faster, ever more impersonal, ever more chaotic. The title of the work comes from a Native American word meaning "life out of balance." If we could see ourselves as we do in this film, as one of the hurrying masses, if we could see ourselves from an aerial perspective scurrying about the earth like ants do, we might think about regaining balance. After all, everyone we know will be dead in a few more years. Why don't we take some time to really be with them, and to be reflective, to be

contemplative, to be in the moment, to be in the *here and now*, to be fully conscious and mindful of this amazing little span of time each of us has been given.

Discussion

Closing Words

As we return to our homes,
and to the busyness of another week,
may we take time to be fully present with our loved ones;
may we take time to nourish our own souls
in silence and deep reflection;
may we find ways to be in the here and now;
may we discover ways to simplify our lives,
so we can see the essence of life more clearly.
May we mindfully cherish each precious moment of this gift of life.
So be it.

Bob Weekley

August 21, 2011

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