

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist
“Spirituality and Spiritualism”
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Introduction

Last week I spoke about “Personal Transformation.” I mentioned that institutions also go through transformations. This happened to our religious association, The Unitarian Universalist Association, in the 20th century. In the early part of the century humanism dominated our theology. In the latter half we faced the issue of spirituality. Some humanists felt they were left behind in the process. Today I want to address this transformation.

I consider the "spirituality" movement in our culture to be one of the most important religious developments of the last century. If the word that summarized the deep religious questioning of the 19th century was "salvation" the word that summarizes the modern yearning for something religious it is the word "spiritual." I affirm that yearning.

I also want to say: "Let us not take it too far." The problem with any good thing is that it can be overdone. I don't want us to go backward. A UU writer, Ellen Lyle, critiqued this movement when she wrote:

I feel that in some cases we are drifting far from our (UU) parameters. The various schools of thought and practices that I've seen gathered under the banner of spirituality within our religion seem to include both the sublime and the ridiculous. I think some of them cast aside the responsible search for truth we have embraced throughout our history in favor of blind faith. These schools of thought toss reason to the four winds.

Spiritualism

Before I outline by own beliefs and discuss my own approach to spirituality, I would like to discuss spiritualism which is quite a different thing from spirituality. Spiritualism in the realm of philosophy is the belief or doctrine that ultimate reality is spirit. Different philosophers define spirit in different ways. Some see it as logos, others as reason or logic. Spirit is the opposite of matter.

In the religious realm spiritualism means something quite different. The spiritualism that we often see is the belief that spirits of the dead communicate with the living through mediums. It is this kind of spirituality that many Unitarian Universalists have rejected. It is this belief that Ellen Lyle was responding to in her "reason to the wind comment." She includes astrology, tarot cards, psychic channeling, and past-life regressions in her list of the ridiculous.

We must admit that at certain times in the history of Unitarian and Universalism spiritualism has been considered seriously by many of our members. There are those among us today who are quite comfortable moving between the worlds of rationalism and supernaturalism. This was especially true in the 1840's and 1850s when spiritualism spread throughout the Northeast—from New England to New York and Pennsylvania. Many Universalists could see compatibility between the belief in the restoration of all souls and a belief in spiritualism, which may have included mesmerism (hypnotism), phrenology, mediums, communication with the dead, clairvoyance, prophecy, trances and dream interpretation.

We have all heard stories about how some of these beliefs have influenced residents in the White House. Mary Todd Lincoln is the most famous. She claimed to have psychic abilities. Nancy Reagan consulted with Joan Quigley, an astrologer. Bob Woodward has written that Hillary Clinton consulted with Jean Huston who worked with “unseen spirits of the dead”, and channeled the spirits of Eleanor Roosevelt and Mahatma Gandhi. Hillary does not deny her relationship with Jean Huston, but has played down the channeling events.

Some of these movements have also been a part of the Unitarian Universalist Association. There is an organization in our denomination today, the Psi Symposium, which devotes its attention to many of these kinds of kinds of belief. It describes itself as a forum for free exchange and study of topics related to metaphysics, holistic health and parapsychology. Many universities, including Duke and the University of Virginia have had similar departments.

There are several principles of our religion that support such investigation: First, is our belief that truth must come through and be interpreted by the individual. This principle encourages each of us to use and develop our powers that can heal and not harm others. I do believe that people can develop such powers to heal, though I question that if communication with the dead is one of those powers.

The second principle that encourages such investigation is our rejection of a creed and unanimity of belief. We may not accept all of the beliefs that some have among us, but we should never say their belief limits them from membership in our association.

A third principle which could also encourage such investigation is the belief that revelation is not sealed. There may be truths and ways of knowing that traditional science does not yet understand.

If we believe the creative power of God or the universe is in every human being, who is to limit such power to what science has taught until now? When I was a student at Duke I lived for two years very near the home of J. B. Rhine, the advocate of parapsychology, first at Duke University, then later at the independent institute. These studies were quite controversial at Duke which was the reason for the separation of the institute which carried Rhine's name but not the university's.

It is my feeling that such studies are a legitimate investigation for a university and for the religious arena. The tools of science should be applicable to such experimental fields such as extrasensory perception (ESP), psycho kinesis, telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition, as well as the spiritualist beliefs in mediums, channeling, astrology, tarot cards, etc.

Reason, Spiritualism and Emotion

The problem we have as a movement today is that our historical emphasis on reason in religion has been challenged by the new emphasis on spirituality. If you look at our history, the fact that our religion was seeded by the Enlightenment, you know that reason is one of the basic tenets of our faith. Most of us came to Unitarian Universalism because it offered some balance between reason and faith or belief. This is especially true of the scientists among us who found orthodoxy difficult to mesh with religion as faith in that which is beyond or opposite of reason.

The problem we have had as a religious movement, some would say, and I would agree, is that our emphasis on reason has often shut off the potential for the religious aspects of our being. In my view the spirituality movement in our culture has been an attempt to balance the rational and the religious component our lives.

Unfortunately, this is often described in terms of reason versus emotion. I personally have difficulty with this dichotomy. As Ellen Lyle points out in her essay:

Some individuals have wondered if spirituality is just another word for emotion. I think it is not. The difference can best be explained borrowing from a dichotomy used by William Faulkner in another context: "Spirituality is of the heart; emotion is of the glands."

I agree with Ellen. One can believe in the need for more spirituality in our movement and still emphasize reason. Those who contrast reason and emotion I believe are wrong. One can be a rational and a heartfelt person.

Definitions of Spirituality

Let's now look at the word "spirituality." The problem I have with the spirituality movement begins with the problem of definition. I have seen as many as a dozen different interpretations of the word spiritual. I am going to outline a few of them:

Let us begin with the Jewish tradition as seen in the Old Testament. First, spirit, was seen as the dynamic activity of God--creation--the beginning of life. If you read Matthew Fox or others in the Earth-Centered movement you will probably like this Old Testament approach. Fox defines spiritual as: "A return to origins, the return to the source of your being; an affirmation of the world as a whole; experiencing awe and wonder of our existence."

As I think about my most spiritual experiences, the awe and wonder of creation are central. Yes, I am also moved by human creation, but much of what I consider to be holy is beyond the human. Some would call this transcendent, and others would say this is God.

What is spiritual about these experiences is that it takes me beyond my individual self to the larger creation. My world is not centered on me at that moment, but to the larger world which in part created me, continues to give me life, and breath, and love. This is what is spiritual to me.

Second, is the spirit in human beings. This is the breath of life that vitalizes us. The Jewish perspective is helpful because in Jewish thought spirit includes, human intelligence, the will, emotion, human feeling, the heart and the soul. All of these aspects of the self lead to human action. The English word, "spirit," originates from the Latin, *spiritus*, meaning breath, life, soul and mind. The Greek word is *pneuma*.

In the Christian tradition the word spirit became associated with the belief in the Holy Spirit with a belief in the miraculous, through the birth, life and resurrection of Jesus. In humans this Holy Spirit gives people new life, joy, love, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.

If someone asks me if I believe in the Holy Spirit, I ask them what they mean. If they mean that God disobeys the laws of nature, such as speaking in tongues or resurrection of the body, then I would have to say, "No." If they define Holy Spirit as new life, joy, love, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control, I would say, "Yes, of course. Give me these holy traits all the days of my life."

One of my colleagues, Richard Kelley, defines the term "spiritual" very narrowly when he says the word refers "to one's devotional life and growth as distinct from more mundane experiences." This definition is helpful because it places the present spiritual movement in a cultural context. Many people in our culture spend far too much time on mundane matters. Most of us live very busy lives, but how often do we take time to take care of ourselves. Yes, most of us take care of our physical bodies, but what about the spiritual side of lives? Our culture is much more responsive to material than spiritual needs.

The word that keeps coming to me as I think about spirituality is the word "balance." We all need to have a balance in our lives--a balance of the rational and the emotional aspects of ourselves, a balance of taking care of ourselves and helping others, a balance of individual and community living, a balance of solitude and involvement with others.

One of my colleagues who expresses this very well is Charles Howe, a UU historian and former Interim Minister at TJMC. Here is how Charles defined spirituality:

As an awareness of the potential presence of the holy, creative spirit in all people--a spirit that manifests itself in freedom, and in acts of justice, compassion and love; a willingness to be transformed or inspired by a mystical experience, a discovery, an experience of beauty, awe or love, or the inspiring words or actions of another person. . .

This is one of my favorite definitions of spirituality. It emphasizes the balanced life. It doesn't place too much emphasis on either the contemplative or the active life.

Another definition of the spiritual is by our own Gordon McKeeman. I save the best for last. Gordon wrote many years ago, the spiritual life is the "quest to perceive, feel, embrace, address any person, any event, any object in its holiness or wholeness." To be spiritual is a way of living. It is to see the divine in all of life and in every thing we do.

I often hear Unitarian Universalists regret the fact that we operate from a disadvantage: we don't have God or Satan to motivate us to live a religious life. I don't agree with this. As religious liberals we should see the divine in all things. No, my God is not a personal God with human characteristics. My God is the presence of goodness, beauty, and love in all of life.

If you know Sam, our church custodian, you see this kind of spirituality. I see Sam as very spiritual. Since I have been at TJMC, and greeted Sam each morning, we often exchange comments about the weather. Sam sees every day as good, no matter if the sun is shining or it is pouring down rain; every day is a good day. Yes, some days it is hard to find, but divinity, goodness, and beauty are all around us.

Historically Speaking

One of the aspects of the modern move toward the spiritual is that it confronts an important aspect of our UU heritage. Historically, our religion was born in response to an over-emphasis in the 18th century on religion as personal salvation. Historians refer to this period as the "Second Great Awakening" when camp meetings focused on personal conversion but did little to emphasize reason and the practical aspects of living the Christian life. We have all seen the excesses of these camp meetings where preachers called for people to come forth and be saved, but overlooked the problems of society.

I, personally, came to Unitarian Universalism out of the Methodist tradition, a religion caught up in the revivals of the Great Awakenings. It was a part of the Methodist church that I could not stand and wanted to avoid. I learned very quickly in the churches I served that I was not going to avoid this personal piety in the Methodist Church, so I joined the Unitarian Universalist ministry--a denomination more concerned about social justice than personal salvation.

Another Unitarian Universalist who criticized the spirituality movement was James Luther Adams. He saw the emphasis on "spirituality" as "an evasion of the practical and moral aspects of religion. He says: "A pure spiritual religion is a purely spurious religion." Dan Hotchkiss takes this one step further when he says: "Purely spiritual religion can be a kind of hedonism--a search for mere pleasant experiences."

The problem with any corrective religious movement is that it can easily go too far in the opposite direction. A religion that over-emphasizes reason is corrected by a movement which stresses the emotional and visa versa. A religion that corrects personal pietism focuses too much on the problems caused by society and does not concern itself with the role of the individual in that society.

What I have learned in recent years, as we have become more involved in spirituality, is that we need to find a balance between religion as purely individual salvation and religion as social justice. When I started the ministry in the early '70's, I relished in the possibilities to be a minister preaching the message of social justice. I frankly overlooked the importance of personal spirituality. I rarely attended chapel while I was in Divinity School, and spent almost no time in personal meditation and prayer.

When our well becomes dry, we need to look for ways to fill that void. In my view the modern spirituality movement, especially in our liberal traditions, is an attempt to fill that void. We need to find those restorative waters that can feed the soul. Here at TJMC we have many programs to help—the labyrinth ministry, covenant groups, music, vespers, Dreamquest, and the Buddhist group, are among them.

To Live With Spirit

What I have learned in recent years is that all of us need to find that personal balance of personal spirituality and working for justice. While in graduate school I over-emphasized knowledge as the way to salvation and failed to see my need for meditation, prayer, personal soul searching, and the other spiritual disciplines. The spirituality movement reminds us that these other important aspects of the person should not be overlooked.

If you asked about what it means to live with spirit, I would say: To live with spirit is to be willing to open yourself to feelings of awe and wonder, dipping your feet into that running brook, gazing at the stars at night, walking along the beach in the early morning, midday or by the moonlight.

To have spirit is having a willingness to learn interesting and new things, to listen to the holy creations of Beethoven and Bach, Mozart and Handel, to join with others to hear music of the harp on a Saturday night.

To live with spirit is also to open your heart in giving, making another person happy, giving someone a hot meal or a place to sleep. To live with spirit is to join in song and praise and thanksgiving. And yes, Charles, to live in spirit is to take part in acts of justice, seeking freedom for all. To live with spirit is to do all of this and more.

When my spiritual well runs dry I often turn to the spiritual teachers who feed my soul. One of those teachers was Ralph Waldo Emerson. The following passage, which I would like to end with this morning is one of my favorites. It goes like this:

O my brothers and sisters, God exists. There is a soul at the centre of nature, and over the will of every person, so that none of us can wrong the universe. It has so infused its strong

enchantment into nature. . .There is guidance for each off us, and by lowly listening we shall hear the right word. Why need you choose so painfully your place, and occupation, and associates, and modes of action, and of entertainment? Certainly there is a possible right for you that precludes the need of balance and willful election. For you there is a reality, a fit place and congenial duties. Place yourself in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which animates all whom it floats, and you are without effort impelled to truth, to right and a perfect contentment. . .Then you are the world, the measure of right, of truth, of beauty.

May it be so, Blessed Be, and Amen.