

The Search for Spirituality
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One of the things I had hoped to learn in seminary was What is spirituality? I had heard of it, of course, spirituality. I knew that a lot of folks considered it a good thing. But I didn't know what it was. And I was embarrassed to ask. Asking about spirituality felt like asking about the missionary position. I figured that everyone else already knew, since that's the sort of thing you *should* know, if you're preparing for the ministry.

There wasn't any course at Wesley Theological Seminary on spirituality, no exam questions on it, no one asked me to write a paper on spirituality. If it was covered in class, I must have missed that day.

During my internship, my seminary adviser pressed me to have spiritual practices. I knew what practices are, even if I wasn't sure what made them spiritual. I told her that it was my practice to play hymns every evening, and I offered to read passages from the Koran every morning, and that satisfied her.

When I graduated, after six wonderful years, I was still clueless on spirituality.

But I think I have some idea about what spirituality is *not*. As I see it, spirituality is not about how you feel. It's not a feeling, or perhaps I should say it's not *just* a feeling. When people claim to be spiritual, or when people are striving to be spiritual, or more spiritual, they're not talking about a certain feeling that they have, or that they're looking for – or at least they shouldn't be, if you ask me. If feelings were the issue, then the answer might be pharmacological. If feelings were the issue, the key to spirituality might be in the right drugs, or in alcohol, or in sexual gratification.

Spirituality is not the same as mysticism. You don't have to have mystical experiences to be spiritual. I have nothing against mysticism. I can't claim ever to have had a mystical experience, but if *you* have, more power to you.

A while back I had the idea of starting a list of words that we could drop from the English language, without any loss at all. Words that just aren't helpful, or words that lead to confusion or misunderstanding. You can probably think of some words you'd like to discard. But the word I thought of first was *spirituality*. Don't tell me you're spiritual – give me a longer explanation, give me examples. Since then, I've reconsidered that idea. I would not ban “spirituality” from the English language.

The approach I would take today is not to discard the word, not to disparage the idea, but to look deeper into spirituality, to try to see what it's really about. As Bill Mayer has instructed us, “Just because your tattoo has Chinese letters in it doesn't make you spiritual.” [*New Rules: Polite Musings from a Timid Observer* (2005)] We need to go deeper than that.

I can't get out of my head the quote from the late Unitarian Universalist theologian, James Luther Adams. "A purely spiritual religion," he wrote, "is a purely spurious religion." Adams was not against spirituality, but only against what he called "sham spirituality," which ignores the need for "the community of justice and love." [James Luther Adams, "A Faith for the Free," in *The Prophethood of All Believers* (ed. George K. Beach, Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), pp. 54-55. See also George K. Beach, *The Seminal Gospel: Forty Days with Mark* (2013), p. 107 (on the spurious spirituality of gnostic Christianity)]

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According to Benedictine monk Father Daniel Homan and his colleague Lonni Pratt, in their book *Radical Hospitality: [Benedict's Way of Love* (Brewster, Mass: Paraclete Press, 2002)], what people are looking for when they say they're in search for spirituality is often, really, comfort.

If you receive many mail order catalogs, [they write,] you have noticed that common household items and clothing are now sold with a spiritual promise. Turn on your soothing music, wrap up in your cotton robe and curl up beneath a silk-and-wool afghan, light a candle, and plug in your flowing fountain. You should now be feeling spiritual. And it will cost you only a couple hundred dollars. [p. 34, edited]

Here is how Homan and Pratt respond to the idea of spirituality as comfort:

Americans want chocolate spirituality that soothes and feels good. But genuine spirituality is not cozy, and seldom makes you comfortable. It challenges, disturbs, unsettles, and leaves you feeling like someone is at the center of your existence on a major remodeling mission. Spirituality is meant to change you. If it doesn't, it is something less than spirituality. [p. 35, edited]

For me, whatever spirituality is, it has to be tied to our experience in the world, it has to be tied to our response to the world, it has to involve relationships. Spirituality isn't comfort as much as discomfort. It's not *feeling* good; it's *doing* good. It's not about *trying* to change yourself, but about engaging in the world, and finding that you are changed in the process. It is about looking for the meaning of life, not through introspection, not through devising a program called "the search for the meaning of life" but by participating in life, participating fully.

Here's an example of what I would consider a spiritual experience. Again, it's from Homan and Pratt. It's one of Father Dan's stories. One of the families in his parish has "just had a terrible tragedy." The son has killed himself; the mother is "inconsolable;" the father has "lost himself in a drunken stupor." And there's a six-year-old little sister. Here's how Dan tells the story:

I went over to check on the family and found the mother locked in her bedroom and the father sitting in a chair, completely intoxicated and basically unconscious. The little girl was sitting on the floor sobbing, with her frail little shoulders heaving and her eyes red from so much crying that you wondered if her little body could handle the force of all the pain. She was completely alone in her grief, not because her parents were cruel or uncaring, but because they were shattered.

I picked up the child, and without saying a word, I put her on my lap and sat in a rocking chair. I held her and rocked for a couple of hours, while she cried. A bond formed between us instantly. [pp. 138-39, edited]

Need I say that Father Dan did *not* set out to have a spiritual experience? As he sat rocking, he did *not* think to himself, “This is the most spiritual I’ve felt all week.” No, he was there to be with the family in their time of need. He was there, as it turned out, to provide the physical comfort that the little girl so urgently needed – a couple of hours of being held, of being rocked.

We don’t know what was going through Father Dan’s mind as he sat and rocked. Perhaps he was giving the girl his full attention, practicing the mindfulness that Thich Nhat Hanh recommends. [see *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation* (Beacon Press, 1987)] Or perhaps he was mentally preparing a shopping list, or brain storming possible tax deductions. I don’t think it matters.

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Here’s another example of spiritual engagement, an example of a person whose life embodied spirituality. Fred Mueller was my father-in-law, Kerry’s father. He called himself an atheist. From a traditional perspective, he *was* an atheist, no indecisive agnosticism for him. But more importantly, Fred was deeply and passionately drawn to the sources of goodness, truth, beauty, justice, and compassion. He experienced these in the music of Beethoven. He read voraciously – politics, religion, science, mysteries. He raged over the state of the world, and he wrote papers on foreign policy, finishing one just before his final illness. He traveled with enthusiasm, and he loved meeting new people and exploring new cultures. Fred was connected to a whole universe that was bigger than he was, and he participated with passion and good will and care.

No doubt about it, as I see it, Fred was a spiritual person, though he would not have used that language. And he was clearly a religious person as well. He was a committed and active Unitarian Universalist, a long time supporter of our churches and an elder statesman at the Main Line Unitarian Church in suburban Philadelphia.

Kerry’s father might have argued with you, if you’d suggested that he was a spiritual person. My father – he’s been dead for more than 40 years – I don’t think he would have known what to make of such a suggestion, that he was spiritual. He was an institutionalist, the kind of person every church and every denomination needs. Given the choice between the mystical

meditation movement motivational full moon workshop and the budget planning meeting, he would take budget planning every time.

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Spirituality is often thought of as an individual matter, as opposed to what goes on in an organized religion – or even in a disorganized one. But that’s a false dichotomy. Remember what we Unitarian Universalist congregations have covenanted to affirm and promote: on this short list is “spiritual growth in our congregations.” We do not see spirituality solely as an individual matter, divorced from a religious community, but more as what we strive for, what we do, together.

Protestant theologian and New Testament scholar Marcus Borg writes about the necessity of the institutions of religion. And what Borg has to say should remind you of the reading a few minutes ago from Tom Owen-Towle. [Tom Owen-Towle, *Growing a Beloved Community: Twelve Hallmarks of a Healthy Congregation* (Boston: UUA Skinner House Books, 2004)]

But the contrast between spirituality and religion [, Borg writes,] is both unnecessary and unwise. . . . Religion is to spirituality as institutions of learning are to education. One can learn about the world, become educated, without schools, universities and books, but it is like reinventing the wheel in every generation. Institutions of learning are the way education gets traction in history; so also religion (its external forms) is the way spirituality gains traction in history. Religion – its external forms – not just spirituality, matters. Its forms are the vessels of spirituality, mediators of the sacred and the way. [Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), p. 219]

Spirituality requires institutional support. Congregations, in my view, have the duty, and, fortunately, they have the ability, to encourage and challenge their members to grow in the maturity of their faith, to deepen their spiritual roots, and to broaden their religious imaginations. [Loren Mead, *More Than Numbers: The Way Churches Grow* (Alban Institute, 1993), p. 42]

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Here’s how one congregation took advantage of an opportunity for spiritual growth. It’s not a Unitarian Universalist example, but you wouldn’t have to change much to give it a UU framework. Here’s how Arthur Paul Boers described the problem and the solution.

Donny would have loved nothing more than to lead the worship service himself, but because of mental problems, his skills were limited. Besides, he was not ordained, and thus he wasn’t eligible.

During communion, Donny had an annoying and distracting habit of repeating the last phrase of everything the celebrant said. He had heard the liturgy so often that he had it practically memorized. Sometimes he tried to say the prayers and formulas *before* the celebrant did.

But how does a religious community, a community committed to compassion and hospitality, deal with such a problem? Donny was not mentally equipped for extended reasoning or careful conflict resolution.

There were temptations for the group. Some no doubt wished that Donny would disappear. Some wondered about silencing or evicting him. Resentment and annoyance would have made it easy to resort to criticism, avoidance, name-calling, or labeling.

The congregation wrestled with the issue for a long time. Their solution was brilliant.

Donny was given one phrase in the service, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.” [*agnus dei, qui tolit peccata mundi*] This was his line and no one else’s. At the appropriate moment, the celebrant elevated the loaf of bread in silence, and waited for Donny to say his line, which he did, with gusto and devotion. The congregation’s brilliant solution was good for everyone. [Arthur Paul Boers, *Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behavior* (Bethesda: Alban Institute, 1999), pp. 134-35, edited (Boers is a Canadian Mennonite minister)]

Everyone involved experienced spiritual growth. Of course, they didn’t characterize the situation as a spirituality opportunity. They saw it as the problem of how to worship properly without compromising their principles of compassion and hospitality.

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Perhaps this would be a good time to consider how congregations – how *this* congregation – can provide the institutional support necessary to enable our members – those of us right here, right now – to grow in our spirituality, to deepen our faith, to build a mature religion, to strengthen our relationship with the holy. But our institutional support goes further – at least I hope it does – than providing for those of us in this room.

Consider the children. We want our children and grandchildren to develop their faith. We wouldn’t intrust their religious education to their playmates on the playground, or to TV, or to what they find on the Internet. They need, they are entitled to our institutional support.

Can we stop there? I don’t think so. Right now, there are hundreds, probably thousands of folks in Gettysburg and the surrounding area who are not comfortable with their religious lives, who are dissatisfied with their spirituality, who are on a religious quest. They will use a variety of different words to describe what they’re going through, or they may not have a

vocabulary for it at all, but only a vague sense that there's got to be more to life than this. If you ask me, we need to be there for them; we need to prepare a place among us for them; and we need to invite them in.

Creating and maintaining an institution – this congregation – that can meet the needs of its members, that can invest in the lives of its children, and that can welcome and incorporate the stranger – it takes hard work and planning and leadership and – you know this – it takes money. It is always the right time to be serious about your financial commitment to this congregation.

But here's the really good news. This is a two-for-one offer. Your generous financial support enables this congregation to thrive, *and* sharing what you earn, sharing your wealth can be part of a spiritual practice; it can be a path to spirituality. This is the argument that Tony Larsen makes, in his essay on "Giving," in Scott Alexander's collection *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life* [(Boston: UUA Skinner, 1999).] Here's a little story Larsen shares, which gives you an idea of his thinking:

A well-to-do family moved right next door to an Amish community. The Amish watched them unload the computer, the large-screen TV, the stereo equipment, the VCR, the Jacuzzi. [This was published, by the way, back in the 20th century; today the list would be longer.] To be polite, one Amish woman came over and said, "If you ever have trouble with any of those, let me know, I'd be glad to help." The new neighbor was surprised and said, "Thank you! You really know how to fix these things?" And the Amish woman replied, "No, but I'll teach you how to live without them." [p. 225]

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Since I started thinking of banning the word spirituality, I've found three other words that I like better. Or perhaps I should say three words that I feel help me explain what spirituality might represent – wholeness, holiness, and piety.

For me, spirituality is related to wholeness, to integrity. That's what the responsive reading was about. [adapted from Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004)] Those with integrity, or wholeness, those whose life are undivided, they are deeply connected both to themselves and to what is beyond themselves – family, religious community, the nation. They have a life that is both engaged and reflective. They have bedrock moral principles and the capacity for growth and change.

Holiness, not surprisingly, comes from the same root as *wholeness* – *kailo*, which means "whole" or "uninjured." "Health" comes from the same root as well. Holiness can mean the "ability to confront evil without being defiled," the ability "to take the wicked in their arms and transform them," without running the risk of having any of their corruption rub off. [Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, *If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), p. 73] The writers I borrowed this interpretation of holiness from would restrict its application to God, but I think we humans can aspire to holiness, too. Here

again we have the idea, the necessity of being engaged in the world, if we are to participate in spirituality, in holiness.

Finally, we have piety. One of my heros is Socrates. It is Socrates' idea of piety that I have latched onto, with considerable help from Gregory Vlastos, my ancient philosophy teacher at Princeton. I won't get into his reasoning, but for Socrates, God is loving, God desires the best for humanity, and God knows what is best, but God is limited in what God can do. Piety, then, according to Socrates, consists of our doing for humanity, on behalf of God, what God would do, if God could. [Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 173-78, discussing Plato, *Euthyphro*] For those of us who don't see God as an actor in the world – and even, if you're willing to get metaphorical, even for those who would dispense with *God* altogether, this understanding of piety feels just right. Piety implies engagement in the world. And so, too, does spirituality.

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Here's the bottom line, as I see it, if you are looking for more spirituality in your life: open your eyes and look around you. Don't look for a mysterious feeling; don't imagine that you have to take a pilgrimage to Tibet. You can even forget the word, *spirituality*, it doesn't matter. But here's what I recommend: seek justice in our nation, strive to build and support a community of compassion and hospitality in this congregation, practice kindness toward both those you love and toward strangers, and take advantage of the opportunities for personal growth that obstruct your path. Amen.