

## Spirituality and Personality Type

**The Rev. Laura Horton-Ludwig, Minister**  
First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton  
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Every once in a while, something happens here at church  
that's kind of funny.

After a Sunday service, someone might take a minute  
to tell me, wow, they loved the service,  
it really spoke to them,  
it was just what they needed.

And of course that's lovely to hear; it's nice to be affirmed;  
but so often what happens next  
is that someone else comes up to tell me,  
wow, that service really wasn't working for them,  
and could we maybe not do that again?

And I love when this happens!

Not only is it a very good corrective for the ego,  
it's absolutely perfect evidence of what I want to talk about today,  
and that is the truth that spirituality means very different things  
to different people.

One person's brilliant Sunday service may be another one's dud.  
The same prayer or song or story that touches one person deeply  
might leave another person unmoved.

The spiritual practice that grounds one person for a lifetime  
may do nothing for the person right next to them.  
And that's OK!

There are a million ways to connect with the universe  
and the forces behind it,  
and the great adventure is finding out what works for us,  
what gives *our* life meaning,  
what helps *us* open the doors to spirit.

Let me start with a working definition of spirituality.

This is mine; yours may be different.

When I say “spirituality,”

I mean everything that connects us to the forces of life,  
love, creativity, justice, and peace—  
all those values that make life worth living,  
for ourselves and for others.

Spirituality is that sense of awe that comes over us

when we gaze at the face of a very young child;

when we’re driving along a narrow road

and all of a sudden we go round a bend

and the mountains rear up to greet us with their sublime dignity;

when we lose ourselves in the task before us

and rejoice in the power that flows through us;

when we laugh with delight or weep with despair;

when we come together to be more and do more

than we can be or do alone;

all this is spirituality, everything that makes us more alive  
and good and free.

And when we find something that really helps us connect

with that feeling of life and goodness and freedom,

when we find a practice or habit or a way of thinking

that really helps us,

it can be so very tempting to think that what works for us  
ought to work for everyone.

Have you ever gone to see a movie with someone,

and for you it’s just an incredible movie,

the experience of watching it feels profoundly spiritual,

but afterwards you find out the person with you

just didn’t go for it so much.

They might say, “It was all right,” but something has happened  
for you that did not happen for the other person.

Isn’t that a strange feeling?

But that's how it is.

And now I want to tell you about the best way I've found to make sense of those disconcerting differences between people. I'm someone who likes theories, big theories that make sense of a lot of information, and the one that I think makes the most sense out of our differences is called the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, or MBTI for short. The Myers-Briggs model is based on the work of Carl Jung, who lived from 1875 to 1961.

Jung was a psychiatrist and a scholar of myth and religion. He was fascinated by personality differences between people, and eventually he came up with a theory of personality types which was later expanded on by a mother-daughter team, Katharine Cook Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers.

The idea is that you can understand a lot of the personality differences between people by looking at four dichotomies, basically four pairs of contrasting qualities, that describe how people interact with the rest of the world. I'll spin through them briefly right now so you can get a sense of what this is all about.

The first one is *Introversion–Extraversion*, or I and E for short. This pair is about what gives you energy, what recharges your batteries.

Think about how it feels to go to a party.

If you're extraverted, you probably have a great time at the party, talk with a lot of different people, make some new friends, and at the end of the evening you have more energy than you did when you got there.

For an extraverted person, being with other people is energizing.

But if you're introverted, you get an energy boost from being by yourself. You need quiet time to recharge.

You can still have a great time in a crowd of people,  
but you might prefer to talk to just one or two people.  
You might be ready to go home sooner than your pal the extravert.

Another difference is that introverts tend to think before they speak,  
whereas sometimes extraverts don't even know what they think  
before they say it out loud.

This can be a big source of conflict  
if you have an introvert and an extravert trying to get along.  
But neither one is better than the other.  
It's not a question of good or bad, just different.  
And some people aren't one or the other,  
but somewhere in the middle.

The second pair is *iNtuiting—Sensing*, or N and S.

This one is about how we take in information.

Typically someone with a preference for sensing  
is really good at remembering details. They notice things.  
They're very practical.

On the other hand, someone with a preference for intuition  
is more of a big-picture person.

They like to make connections in their mind  
between things that aren't obviously connected—  
like the English poet John Donne, who wrote a famous love poem  
comparing his relationship with his girlfriend to a metal compass.  
(Trust me, it's very romantic!)

When sensors and intuitive types work together,  
they can get on each other's nerves.

The sensors get frustrated at the intuitives' bouncing around  
from idea to idea, and the intuitives get frustrated  
at the sensors' wanting to take everything step-by-step.

Say you have two people putting something together.

One of them wants to read the instructions  
and count all the parts first;

the other would rather just get going and figure it out as they go.

But here again, this is not about better or worse, right or wrong. They're just differences. And it can actually be quite helpful to have both skill sets in on a project, if the two people don't drive each other batty in the process.

The third pair is *Thinking–Feeling*, T and F.

Now, of course, everybody thinks and everybody feels.

This pair is about how we make moral decisions, what guides us when we have to make a choice.

There's an old story that goes like this:

once, a poor woman became very sick.

Her husband went and begged the local pharmacist to give him the medicine that would cure her.

But the pharmacist refused.

Late that night, the husband broke into the pharmacy and stole the medicine. It saved his wife's life.

And the end of the story is,

did the husband act in a moral way? You decide.

This is where the thinking–feeling preference comes in.

Someone with a thinking preference would start by asking, what is just? What law could we apply here?

They want to be objective and treat everybody the same.

The thinking-type person would probably decide,

yes, the husband was right to steal the medicine

because saving a life is more important

than protecting private property.

Someone with a feeling preference, on the other hand,

would start by asking, what are the needs in this situation?

How are people going to be affected?

They might think, yes, the husband was right to steal the medicine because his wife was sick and she needed it.

They might go on to ask, what about the pharmacist?

How could the family make amends to him

when they're feeling better?

Where the thinking preference looks for laws and applies them,  
the feeling preference tells stories  
and looks for a happy ending for everyone.  
Both thinking and feeling types might reach the same decision,  
but by very different paths.

The last pair is *Judging–Perceiving*, J and P,  
and I must say right away, judging sounds like “judgmental,”  
but that’s not what it means.  
Someone with a judging preference likes things to be resolved.  
They like when decisions are made.  
They tend to be very organized; they’re planners;  
they really dislike last-minute surprises.  
Someone with a perceiving preference, on the other hand,  
tends to be much more comfortable in that space of wiggle-room  
before a decision is made.  
They like options. They like to be able to change their minds.  
They tend to be flexible and spontaneous.  
These are the folks who feel energized by racing a deadline.  
They’re great at handling the last-minute stuff that comes up  
and throws a judging-type person for a loop.  
It is *very* easy for these two types  
to really get on each other’s nerves.  
Think Oscar and Felix from *The Odd Couple*,  
if you remember that show from a few years back.  
But, yet again, it can be really handy to have both of these types  
on a team, to balance out each other’s weaknesses.

Those are the four pairs,  
introversion and extraversion,  
intuiting and perceiving,  
thinking and feeling,  
judging and perceiving.  
The theory says each one of us  
will have a preference, whether strong or mild,

for one quality in each pair—  
for example, I personally have preferences for  
introversion, intuition, feeling, and judging,  
so I call myself an INFJ. That's my *type*, according to the lingo.  
There are 16 of these types,  
and there is an enormous body of literature out there  
on the different types—how they function in relationships,  
what careers they gravitate towards.  
In fact, Myers and Briggs first started working with Jung's theory  
back in World War II, as a career counseling tool for women  
who were entering the workforce for the first time.<sup>1</sup>

Their theory also speaks to how spirituality works for different types.  
Each type is probably going to gravitate  
to different expressions of spirituality.  
People with a preference for sensing-thinking, ST,  
often have a deep sense of duty;  
they take care of their religious institutions;  
they love tradition.  
People who are intuitive thinkers, NT,  
may become our great systematic theologians.  
They are the scholars seeking truth and justice.  
Those who prefer sensing-feeling, SF,  
express their spirituality through loving service.  
They find deep satisfaction in caring for the people around them.  
And those who prefer intuitive feeling, NF,  
are often the mystics and idealists of the world.  
They dream of how the world could be better  
and work to make it so.

All of us are born with our own spiritual gifts and strengths,  
as well as our weaknesses and blind spots.  
The world needs all of us to be complete.

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<sup>1</sup> Myers, Isabel Briggs with Peter B. Myers (1980, 1995). *Gifts Differing: Understanding Personality Type* (Mountain View, CA: Davies-Black Publishing); quoted in [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myers-Briggs\\_Type\\_Indicator](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myers-Briggs_Type_Indicator).

And the beautiful thing about Jung's theory  
is that it gives us a model for both building on our strengths  
and growing *through* our weaknesses as we get older.  
Jung himself was always interested in how personality connected  
with spirituality. What he believed was that human beings are here  
to grow in wisdom, to become more than we are in this moment,  
to keep growing and stretching into communion with the divine.  
He believed the purpose of a human life is to integrate  
all the opposites of this existence  
and bring them into harmony one with the other.  
We are all born with certain preferences; that's just how it is;  
we don't have to be anything but who we are.  
And at the same time, over the course of a lifetime,  
we are challenged to develop our weaknesses  
and even our opposites, to incorporate them into ourselves.

Robert Terry Weston wrote these words  
which you heard in the first reading:

Beautiful are the youth whose rich emotions flash and burn,  
...and beautiful likewise are the mature...  
But most beautiful and most rare is a gracious old age  
which has drawn from life the skill to take its varied strands...  
and with fresh insight weave them  
into a rich and gracious pattern all its own.<sup>2</sup>

This is what Jung was talking about.  
He had a vision of human possibility growing and strengthening  
over time so that "a gracious old age"  
is the most beautiful human form of all.  
And this is what I wish for each one of you.

Our time today is coming to an end,

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Terry Weston, quoted in Elizabeth Roberts & Elias Amidon, *Life Prayers* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 307.

but if you have found this hour interesting  
and you want to learn more,  
I will be teaching a class on spirituality and personality type  
that starts next Sunday after church  
and will be meeting about every two weeks  
for the next couple of months.  
We have flyers available in the vestibule  
if you didn't get one when you came in.  
The signup deadline is tomorrow,  
so, if you'd like to sign up, please call or email the church office,  
or leave a note on our administrator's desk.  
Everybody is welcome!  
And, whether or not you choose to take the class,  
I wish for you all a beautiful life and a beautiful path,  
filled with meaning and grace.

May all beings be well and happy.  
Amen.