

## **UUism and SPIRITUALITY**

One of the ways I know I am in the right place religiously is when I listen to Unitarian Universalists describe what spirituality means to them. I led a sample covenant group as part of our UU Thursdays program the other night and I could identify with every answer given about the meaning of spirituality, and none of them were traditional Christian answers. Due to confidentiality concerns I cannot report what was said or by whom, but the answers were wonderful, taking me into nature, mystery, community, family and all the connectedness of our UU 7<sup>th</sup> Principle! Identifying myself as a web-force-religious-humanist, I am sometimes uncomfortable with the language of spirituality, at least as it is often described by Christians. I was not uncomfortable with anything that was shared the other night, and was in fact much comforted to be with my people!

Over the years, I have seen some UUs wince or gag when spirituality is mentioned, but if we don't let evangelical Christians declare what Spirituality means for the rest of us, there are really some wonderful ideas of what spirituality means. There is no single answer that works for everyone, and certainly not for many UUs. On the other hand, the frequent anti-spirituality response from 20<sup>th</sup> Century atheist UUs is not all that helpful either. We do not have to believe in any deity to have a spiritual component to our lives. We do not have to be Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, or Pagan to be spiritual.

I am not so sure about what the category 'Spiritual but not Religious' means. This is an answer often given by the currently unchurched and fairly frequently by newcomers to Unitarian Universalism. If people mean what Rabbi Rami Shapiro calls 'Spiritually Independent', then it makes a certain amount of sense, but spiritual and religious have often been considered synonyms describing a connection to piety, beliefs in a deity, and to beliefs shared by a religious community. To be fair, those calling themselves Spiritual but not Religious most often seem to mean that they have some beliefs in the sacred but no great desire to be connected to any church.

I am often more tempted to say that I am religious but not spiritual, though that doesn't mean that I am really that far different from those who have little use for organized religion. Fortunately, as Unitarian Universalists, our religion isn't all that organized anyway! We don't have doctrine or dogma or creeds and there is no hierarchy nor even a council to insure our adherence to correct beliefs. Historically, we can look at the plight of Theodore Parker, who was to become one of our most prominent ministers before the Civil War. At one time he was ostracized and encouraged to leave the movement for his transcendentalist beliefs. When he refused to leave the fellowship of liberal ministers, there was no mechanism to remove him and so he remained. Transcendental views eventually became more widely shared, and Parker is remembered as one of our great Unitarian leaders.

Our congregations at best have a behavioral covenant by which to manage disputes and if necessary remove particularly disruptive members, but no test of beliefs would be allowed within our polity (or organizational structure). Any number of spiritual and religious beliefs are at least tolerated if not widely accepted. Many of us enjoy learning about the belief systems of others. Courses in world religions are often popular in our congregations, though sometimes more people think we should offer such courses than actually will show up!

As I share with you some of my most spiritual experiences, I want to invite you to think about what is most spiritual for you and when you have had the most spiritual sense. When I still considered myself a Christian, I would answer questions about being saved or born again by saying I have been born again and again to new religious or spiritual awareness. I could not name a single time of coming to enlightenment, because there have been so many. I was baptized as an infant and grew up in the church, going to Sunday School, singing in the Children's Choir, belonging to the Cub Scout Pack and Boy Scout Troop sponsored by that Methodist Church 4 blocks from my home, and I was active in the Jr. and Sr. High Youth Fellowships. Many of my friends were from that church and the ontological questions that led me toward ministry were first asked in that setting and at Methodist Youth Camps. My journey into ministry was all about trying to answer questions about the mysteries of life and listening to and helping other people.

Some of the most spiritual moments that stand out for me from my youth are moments around the campfire and watching the stars at youth camps, and moments during youth retreats along Lake Michigan at the Indiana or Michigan Dunes, watching the waves come in under a starry sky. As I travelled more widely as a young adult, I had opportunities to enjoy beaches along the Pacific and Atlantic coasts, and to watch the stars from atop mountains in Wyoming, Colorado, and Montana. I had always felt comfortable among the trees, but I came to love the Ponderosa and Jeffrey Pine forests, and especially Coastal Redwoods and Sequoias. Yellowstone, Muir Woods, Yosemite, and Sequoia became favorite places, spiritual places.

I still treasure the mind-expanding moments under starry skies, at the beach, by a waterfall, or in Redwood forests. Some nights, I like to just lean back and look at the stars from my backyard framed by my Redwood tree. My spiritual sense isn't about the way Jesus is talking to me or about passages in any Bible. It doesn't easily fit into the language of American religions. It is certainly more pagan than Christian, more about mystery than about pat answers to spiritual questions. It isn't about salvation or heaven or hell. It is about interconnections and interdependence and the wonder of what might be out there, somewhere in the cosmos.

I don't know if there is a God out there somewhere, but I do know that there are connections between people and plants and animals. I wouldn't have had to know anything about DNA or genetics to feel the connections between living beings. There is a life force that we all share. I am sad when a plant I have been tending dies. I cried when I had to give a dog away once, even knowing she was going on to a life far better fitted for her personality. I can see our connections whenever I look at another human being. These are spiritual truths for me that speak far louder than the most eloquent passages of sacred writings.

The majestic silence of the Redwoods and Sequoias, branches blowing in the breeze, amazing living beings of California, teachers of wonderful lessons spiritual, philosophical and religious. Twinkling stars, suns almost beyond sight, distant sources of light and heat and stardust, calling human animals to prayer and meditation upon the wonders of the cosmos.

Oceans rolling waves onto the shores, sending forth animal life, ever reshaping the boundaries between water and land. Mountains, snow catchers, forest holders, geologic answer to tectonic and volcanic cataclysms. Animals carrying the seed of life, moved by unseen forces, drawn to explore, companions to all beings. These are the things that are of spirit, sacred writ more spiritual than human words.

If you ask me if I am spiritual, I may not answer until I know what you mean by spiritual, for if you mean, do I believe in the Christian Trinity as expounded by evangelical fundamentalist Christians, I must answer no. But if you mean to know whether I believe in that cosmic spiritual force that connects all life, studied by theologians as well as philosophers and scientists, then I would answer yes, of course. I have studied the Judeo-Christian scriptures, but I find a far more expansive lesson in spirituality every time I look into my dog's eyes, or up into the branches of my redwood tree, or when I sit along the beach watching the waves roll in, or when I walk in the forests or on the mountains. My religion is not the religion of the book, but of the library and the garden and the forest and the pond.

If there is a God out there somewhere, I thank her for birthing this amazing universe and filling the earth with so many lands full of chosen peoples and making such a marvelous variety of plants and animals. If I were to meet this deity, I would ask her to travel to distant worlds to see the creatures of other planets, to learn from their trees and flowers, to meet their animals and study all that is sacred and gives meaning to them. But if our origins are in the big bang with consciousness something only recently evolved, then let us celebrate for that. In either case, life is a gift that is very good, a gift spiritual as well as scientific, a gift from which all human and earthly meaning flows!

We come late to this universal story, whether created or only evolving, the universe become conscious, spiritual, philosophical, religious, and scientific and able to appreciate itself. We are the eyes and minds and hearts of the universe. We are the priests and priestesses, the philosophers and prophets, the scientists and explorers. We are the spirit of the universe. And it is good, it is very good.

As Unitarian Universalists, we each are free to discover our own sense of spirituality, our own religious beliefs, our own center of meaning. This, too, is a great gift. We are not bound to the past, nor to unchanging and inflexible ideas of what is right and true and worth our belief. We are spiritual as we decide to be spiritual, or not. If we dislike the language of spirituality, we can choose our own language to describe what we believe. Our religion does challenge and encourage us to seek out what it is that we believe, to continue a journey of exploration and discovery from the day we become UUs to the moment that we leave this movement or this world. Some of us are comfortable with God language, others more comfortable with a pagan understanding of our connections with nature and the changing seasons, others only with the language of science, but all of us must find something to believe. Whether we find spirituality in the heavens, the forest, the test tube, the book, or the great waters, there are wonders to behold. We are conscious, self-reflective beings, beings with mind and heart and soul.

Whether we are made in God's image, or God made in our image, whether the universe is an expression of our expanded consciousness or that which birthed all matter and being, we are not separate or apart from anything which is or can be conceived. We are one with the universe, and that too is a matter spiritual and scientific!

Science is the province of facts and discoveries, but both science and spirituality can be areas for exploration. Science can tell us how things have evolved and how the material universe will likely evolve. Spirituality is the home of dreams and hopes, it is the province of feelings and soul. From our spiritual side, we can develop a sense of hope for the future and celebrate this moment in joy or sorrow. Spirit is not bound by facts of science but may benefit from retaining some rational perspective. Unitarian Universalism has often been described as a rational religion, but it also is among the most optimistic of religions because we tend to believe in the triumph of the human spirit in this world in our time.

I believe that Unitarian Universalists may be quite spiritual, but it is often a different kind of spirituality. I hope that each of us can find spiritual beliefs that inspire hope, the support our faith, and that give us courage to live the best lives that we can! So may it Be!

Shalom, Salaam, Namaste, Amen, and May the Force be with You!