

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST SPIRITUALITY AND BELIEFS!

Some people think that Unitarian Universalism is only interested in matters of social justice. Some people would prefer that Unitarian Universalism would only concern itself with matters of Social Justice. Some others would rather not have Unitarian Universalism quite so involved in social justice issues! Personally, I have had my issues with some kinds of spirituality, especially when it is put forth as the only way to be spiritual by individuals and groups who wish to define true spirituality for everyone. I usually focus more on earthier things, though there are also those who would happily define the right and true earth-centered spirituality! Throw in a discussion of immanent and transcendent and you can be in a full-blown discussion of theological beliefs almost instantaneously. Some of those theological discussions from my seminary days were fun, but over the years they have come to interest me less and less. It probably makes a good bit of difference that I no longer believe in a God that is engaged in our lives, if I ever did. I most often describe myself as agnostic these days, though I do believe in a life force that connects us all in the interdependent web of existence. I have used the terms Web-Force-Religious-Humanist to describe myself for many years, and that still works pretty well. I still believe in the goodness of people, even in the light of much evidence to the contrary!

I also believe in beloved community, in the triumph of hope in the face of sometimes overwhelming challenges, and in the power of friendship and love to overcome most of the trials in life. Oh yes, and I believe in music, music that soothes, music that heals, music that along with various kinds of art can touch the deepest parts of our souls. As a United Methodist growing up and continuing through my early ministry, I learned to sing my beliefs—a tradition that continues!

Spirituality is about what is sacred or holy, transcending the ordinary. It is about beliefs and peak experiences, about touching the depths of the soul, about hopes and dreams, mystic moments, and things that re-orient our self-understanding. Spirituality is about feeling the forest, watching the ocean, listening to the wind, finding sister and brotherhood with the wolf and hawk, bison and eagle! Spirituality is that which moves our inner being, our soul!

For some of us, spirituality may be found in the great cathedrals, or in an organ-concert, or singing with a great choir. Spirituality may be in our gardening or traveling or painting or dancing. Anything that frees or nurtures our spirits might be spiritual. Even work or lovemaking or walking may be spiritual, it is all in how we feel and sense the moment or the activity. While we UUs may not talk about spirituality as much as many groups, we tend to be open to a wider and deeper range of things we would call spiritual or at least understand others if they call them spiritual! Some groups might say not this or not that, while we mostly are open to saying yes this and that and all of those!

There are many UUs who find their spirituality in the work of social justice, the demonstrations, the planning meetings, the letter-writing. Certainly for many UUs Social Justice is the work that is holy, while matters of spirituality in other traditions are not held to be as important. Those Humanistic UUs who are interested in Social Justice have sometimes looked down at those UUs who are interested in any kind of spirituality, but in recent years there has been more interest in spirituality across the board in Unitarian Universalism. And of course there are many UUs who are very committed to social justice work and also interested in spirituality.

It is always an interesting exercise to have UUs define spirituality—there are so many widely varying answers! Depending on where we each are on our life journeys, our definitions for so many things may change completely! For myself, it is almost always easier to give examples of moments that have felt spiritual than to try to confine it in a few words.

Starry nights at the beach or on top of the mountains are almost always spiritual for me. Quiet moments in the dark around a campfire or a candle are often spiritual. Fresh fallen snow at night is often spiritual. Walking through the Redwoods at Muir Woods or the Sequoias in any of the parks that have them is almost always a spiritual occasion. Sitting on the beach at Sunset is almost always spiritual. Lots of music, especially in churches or cathedrals is spiritual to me. Clouds and storms and moments traveling can be spiritual. There are so many moments that have that spiritual component, but these are some of the ones I make more time for and give more attention to than others.

Some might limit the definition of Spiritual to transcendent moments, but that isn't really enough even if there are many transcendent moments! There are peak moments that bring everything together, there are peak moments in lovemaking, there are academic peaks, and talking peaks, and awesome moments, and so many other times that can be spiritual. To name a moment spiritual often is to capture only a fleeting glimpse of the power of the moment experienced.

To be in a spiritual moment is often to suddenly recognize something beyond the self, something which startles or surprises, something that brings a sense of awe or wonder. Whether we believe in a divine being or in the power of the life force or something else, the spiritual has a way of breaking into the commonplace to bring us a greater sense of connection with humanity or all of life or the universe. Any moment that gives us that sense of connection seems to me to be spiritual.

There are of course things that we can do to help us be aware of the spiritual, such as various kinds of meditation starting with mindfulness and including almost anything done or experienced mindfully. And the spiritual is not necessarily separate from any other part of life. The division between secular and sacred is sometimes helpful, such as in the wall of separation between church and state, but in each of our lives there is a continuum of experience that is not so clearly divided.

Another division has appeared more frequently in recent years as a way for people to describe an interest in things spiritual while denying any interest or involvement in any organized religion, this would be the category of Spiritual but not Religious! A lot of people don't think of Unitarian Universalism as a religion anyway, and certainly not an organized one but this distinction does not strike me as very helpful for a number of reasons. For one thing, I am not sure that Spirituality is something one can do with any meaning alone. It seems to me that the nature of spirituality is to connect with others, and religions are about people gathering together for spiritual purposes. When people describe themselves as Spiritual but not Religious, it seems like they most often mean that they do not like the religious choices that they have experienced and do not identify with any religious group.

For those who do identify with Unitarian Universalism, there is a wide range of acceptable beliefs in regard to spirituality as well as most other things. Having no creed, doctrine, or dogma, it is up to each of us to decide what we believe. In the spiritual realm as in the scientific and political realms, so long as we are acting within the broad parameters of our value-based Principles, we have great freedom to define whatever we many consider spiritual.

In some other traditions the spiritual component of beliefs would be considered the most important, while within Unitarian Universalism I do not find that to be true. Spirituality is one part of that which we may consider most important in life, while philosophy or works of social justice, or our work, or scientific discoveries may be equally likely to be primary. Again, it all depends on what we each believe, how we order our priorities, how we choose to live. We live in a world full of options, choices we may make now and again tomorrow. Spirituality may or may not have an important role for each of us.

Whether spiritual matters are important for us or not, there is a general feeling that human beings have an awareness of things spiritual, religious, sacred or holy. This awareness may be hereditary.

This awareness of the spiritual may have been shared by ancient ancestors, but there is something to it. People feel it in cathedrals and temples and graveyards, around mountains and waters and in forests. It may be primordial, some artifact of earlier times. Do these feelings define the spiritual, possibly or not, but they are suggestive of the kinds of things that are most deeply spiritual. In this modern world, where most life processes have been explained, there is still a sense of wonder that comes to us from time to time.

Well, I have talked about spirituality for several minutes now, but what are your experiences? When have you sensed the sacred, ineffable, awesome presence of something beyond yourself? How would you define things spiritual? What is your sense of the role of the spiritual among Unitarian Universalists?

At this point in the service, I invite your thoughts, your comments, your experiences!

Thank you for sharing your awareness of the spiritual and your thoughts!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!