

“What is Spirituality?”

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“Spirituality” and “spiritual” are words you didn’t used to hear in most Unitarian Universalist congregations in the 60s, the 70s or the 80s. Some of our congregations, especially up in New England, never threw out so-called “churchy” language, but in most places, religious humanism reigned, and in those congregations, a lot of traditional religious language had been replaced with words that people didn’t associate with the traditions they had rejected.

I grew up in a congregation in Ridgewood, New Jersey, which was served by the late Reverend Kenneth Patton. Patton was a confirmed humanist. And we didn’t use religious language there. In fact, he refused to use the title of Reverend. He gave “addresses,” not sermons, and we met in a “meeting house,” not a church or a synagogue. He would not have used the word spirituality.

Patton was a prodigious writer. In one piece, he wrote, “We are all things, all persons...The creature that is life is apart from nothing that lives.” This statement sounds very much like some definitions of spirituality that I’ll share with you in a few minutes, although if Patton were still alive and heard me say this he would probably be blasting me at this very moment. He was like that, I’ve heard.

The word, “spirituality” comes from “spirit,” which in Latin is “spiritus,” also meaning “breath.” The word for “spirit” in Hebrew is “ruach,” and it also means “breath,” or “wind.”

It wasn’t until the 1990s that the word “spirituality” began to creep back into use in Unitarian Universalist circles. It was considered radical in the mid-90s when the UU Ministers Association selected “Spirituality” for the theme of its nationwide convocation. I was in seminary back then, and I didn’t attend, but my supervising minister did, and I was fascinated by the materials she brought back. She made a copy for me. On those sheets, five hundred ministers summarized the work that they had done during their week together: small groups had gathered all week to create their own definitions of spirituality.

I clutched those papers like they contained the secrets of the universe. You see, I couldn't have offered a definition of spirituality if my life depended on it. I thought I needed those ministers' words. I didn't.

Sometimes, though, it can help our own process to hear how others define a concept. Through the wonders of Facebook, I was able to do a quick poll of some of my colleagues on the UU Ministers Association Facebook page.

One offered that spirituality is "how we face mystery. It's our search for deeper life." (Peggy Amlung Clarke) From the time humans created cave paintings, and probably even before that, our consciousness has led us to seek greater understanding. Why is there something and not nothing? Is there a purpose to life? Is there more that lies beyond our comprehension?

Someone else said that spirituality is to "walk with mystery." The image that comes to my mind is of stepping slowly, thoughtfully, maybe with hands behind back; we are someone who is reflecting deeply. But walking with mystery could just as easily mean the sound of our shoes striking the wooden boards of a dock overlooking an inlet at night, and we are staring up at the starry, starry sky. Or we might be a young parent carrying our infant in a snuggly, and we are gazing into his eyes, amazed at our love for this tiny being.

If mystery could speak, it might say, "Come and find me. You won't have to look hard. Come to where the ocean touches the shore." Elizabeth Tarbox has written many reflections using a seaside setting. She continues: "Find me in the bright-light promise of morning on the waves; look carefully at the bubbles breaking on the wet sand—there I am. Hear the gulls crying—that is my voice. Lie with me in the tall, green marsh grass; see my footprints in the sand you have walked upon. You have found me. I am here." (adapted)

"Walking with mystery" implies a non-verbal sort of communion. Poet Billy Collins says "... it is hard to speak of these things; how the voices of light enter the body and begin to recite their stories / how the earth holds us painfully against its breast made of humus and brambles / how we who will soon be gone regard the entities that continue to return greener than ever / spring water flowing through a meadow and the shadows of clouds passing over the hills and

the ground where we stand in the tremble of thought / taking the vast outside into our selves.” (Billy Collins, adapted)

Another definition of spirituality is “when big things come together in a hugely meaningful way and you go, ‘Ahah!’ ...or when you go ‘Ahhh’ and sometimes ‘Ha-ha-ha!’” (Mark E. Hoelter) Also, I think it includes that sense of awe and wonder when we want to say, “Wow!” or “Wow...”

The acts of meditation and contemplation are forms of spirituality. When researcher Andrew Newberg studied the brain activity of Tibetan Buddhist monks, he found that activity decreased in certain areas during meditation. These areas of the brain are responsible for giving us a sense of our orientation in space and time. It’s thought that blocking sensory and cognitive input into this area, which is what happens during meditation, is what leads the monks to experience the sense of no space and no time that they often describe. Catholic nuns in contemplation were also studied. They also showed decreased activity in the same area of the brain.

This conception of spirituality fits well with what another UU minister said, which is that spirituality is the expansion of identity. It’s when what we normally experience as “me” expands and connects to the matrix of infinite interdependence. We feel a sense of spaciousness, acute awareness and a diminishment of our egos. (Ron Phares)

Spirituality is an experience of connection with something greater than the self, which is worthy of reverence. (Amanda Aikman) It means awareness of this connection, and because of the nature of the human mind, it means bringing our selves back to that awareness over and over again. It means listening to the many voices of the interdependent web of all existence, and sometimes it means hearing just what we need to hear in that moment.

One of our Christian UU ministers says, “Spirituality to me means, “Breathing with God.” In Greek, the language of the Christian bible, “pneuma” has the same range of meaning as the Latin and Hebrew words: “breath” or “spirit.” Breathing with God means, “Not just in deep meditative prayerful breathing, as important and wonderful as that might be. Breathing with God can mean the hard breathing of birthing, or labor; it can mean the struggle to find breath itself after you have

had the wind kicked out of you, as in the struggle against oppression and for justice; it can mean the rare breath that just barely comes in illness or crisis.

“Spirituality, like breath, like God, comes in many forms, but no matter the context, no matter if it is your first or your last, no matter even the form of life itself, the breath is the same for all. We are to treat the Spirit, the spirit of life and love and liberation, like we are to treat Breath itself, as a gift of life; pay attention to it, respect it, protect it and give it away when life requires it.” (Ron Robinson, adapted)

One common theme among many different expressions of the meaning of spirituality is the element of “connection,” as Peter Morales spoke about in our reading. There’s the “me,” and then there’s something else. Spirituality is about relationship: breathing WITH God; connection WITH something greater than ourselves; “me” and no space and no time, or “me” and a sense of infinite spaciousness. There’s the “me” experiencing the world and responding to it, whether it’s “Wow!” or “Hahaha!” “Ahhhh” or “Ahah!”

Spirituality is us walking WITH mystery, wherever life may take us. The joyful, the peaceful, the ugly, the sad and the painful. All of it. It’s us FACING mystery. Not running away from it, but saying, “OK, I may not understand this right now, but I trust that it has something to teach me” and I’m going to just be with whatever it is. It’s us SEARCHING for deeper life. It’s saying, “Yes, I’m going in. I’m going to put my ‘whole self in.’ No holding back. No standing on the sidelines. I’m going to take some risks. I’m going to do whatever it takes.”

Searching for deeper life can also mean that we are seeking a place of peace and serenity. That we are learning to find a sense of calm within ourselves, a place that we can return to again and again. A true and honest searching means that we are willing to take a good look at ourselves and how we’ve been living. It means recognizing that we have choices. Choices about how we view the world; choices about our attitudes; choices about what we say and what we do.

For me, spirituality is multi-faceted. It is the relationship between myself and something that’s greater than myself. It’s the relationship between myself and all that is. As I see it, in a universe in which everything is sacred, that “something greater” is immanent, present in everything –and everyone. Including myself. So

spirituality is also experiencing a lack of separation between myself and the rest of the universe. I know that place of no time and no space that I sometimes get to in meditation. And when I talk of a spiritual connection, I often mean that sense of connection with nature, or a feeling of deep connection with another person, or a connection with my inner wisdom, that voice that sometimes speaks to me, and says just what I need to hear.

And if we don't have a personal definition of spirituality? That's OK! In fact, one minister responded to my question by saying, "I don't have a definition. But I know it when I feel it!"

As Unitarian Universalists, we are not afraid of "spirituality" anymore. It's a useful word, even if it's not so easy to define. As humans, we are spiritual beings. And as spiritual beings, when we look up from our distractions, we are in touch with the rhythms and harmonies of the universe. When we set aside our concern for things which are not, in reality, important, we are aware of the beauty of creation that continually unfolds. When we pay attention, as spiritual beings, we discover that here, in this moment, is what is really real.

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