

Spiritual, Not Religious
The Unitarian Church of Montreal
Rev. Diane Rollert, 22 February 2009

“We’re spiritual, not religious.”

Frequently, that’s one of the first declarations I hear as I sit with a family in grief, or a couple planning a wedding or contemplating a child dedication. “Spiritual, not religious.”

Sometimes I’ll see a hesitation or a glimmer of fear as the words are spoken. After all, these are words spoken to a minister – though I think our lay chaplains will tell you they often experience the same thing. Will I understand? Will I judge the family or couple harshly for not being religious? Will I think they are flaky for calling themselves spiritual?

I’ve learned to make no assumptions about what these words mean, because the definitions are always very personal, especially when someone is facing a rite of passage like birth, marriage or death. Given time, people will carefully explain what spirituality means in their lives, and why it is important for them to separate that meaning from something they consider religious. When I explain that Unitarian Universalism doesn’t have a creed, that we reject dogma, and that I can’t define the holy or the sacred for them, there is most often a sigh of relief – and a sense of coming home.

I face these moments with awe and humility: To walk with others in times of transition; to support them as they define their own expression of the sacred; as they seek ways to honour a loved one who has died, or to celebrate a loving union in ways that are deeper and more personal than words of pronouncement in a city hall, or less perfunctory than a rote ritual. To be witness to the unfolding is a gift.

More often than not in these conversations, religion gets defined as dogma and hierarchy. Spirituality is that other thing: The human spirit, the spirit of the universe, as Denny describes it. Breath, life, connection, says Dima. A butterfly, says Allen. “Chase it, and it will elude you. Stop awhile and it will alight onto your shoulder.”

Spirituality is an “individual expression of beliefs, non-physical human needs, and/or developing a holistic identity,” says Kirstin.

Or as Christopher puts it, “Spirituality is the search for truth lived in this body that we are, that is our self. At the heart of spiritual seeking is the attempt (which we never achieve) to take on all the aspects of our being, its light and its shadow, its solitude and its dependence, as we face others and the universe.”

Roseann writes that “religions and religious practices... are very much constructs of society and people (primarily male... at least through much of history) ... and are a prime example [of what James Thurber refers to] as the Container for the Thing Contained.

“The really important part of this is ‘the Thing’ ... Spirit, spirituality which is as essential to life as air, water, light...All of which take the shape of whatever container they may find themselves in...and since they come from a universal source of abundance cannot be

limited to, restricted to any particular shape, size or condition, and if given freedom usually joyfully overflow.

“Someone who is desperately thirsty will welcome a drink of clear sparkling water whether it is offered in a fold leaf, a battered tin cup, or a gem encrusted golden chalice...The essence is what is important.. and the caring and sharing.”

Others see spirituality as synonymous with religion, with dogma and hierarchy, and I think Harvey is right. This is a word that is in transition. Our dictionaries are woefully behind. (Who writes those dictionaries, anyway? What’s the bias of their editorial boards? Haven’t I told you with just cause never to trust your Webster’s?—I’ll get off my soapbox, now.)

As Ann told me recently, her students, who range in ages from 16 to 21 and represent a full range of theological perspectives from atheists to theists, all tell her that spirituality has nothing to do with religion. To them, it means connectedness.

One young man told her, “I don’t believe in religion. I’m a scientist. However, everything I do in science is spiritual because it is connected to nature.”

Ann’s students say they want to separate themselves from their parents’ generation, the hippy generation that went out seeking an individualistic spirituality of the self. They also want to separate themselves from pathological individualism. You know, the disease that developed in the 1980s: “*I’ll get rich and get what I want, and you can worry about taking care of others and the environment.*” What bitter fruit we are harvesting now as a result.

Ann’s college students tell her that they believe spirituality is community and responsibility. It is love and caring for each other. She sees this as a return to the true nature of the word as understood by indigenous peoples. What is changing, Ann says, is that the elders of the indigenous traditions have come to realize that they must share their wisdom before it is too late. What was once held close and private, a spirituality of earth and community, is now being shared around the world.

Others, like Hari, see spirituality as a human construct and worry that it does not lend itself to reason. They are wary of the word. Nancy asks why we can’t stay safely in the realm of secular humanism.

What would it be like, I wonder, if we banned all the dreamers, poets and artists in our midst? What would it be like if we unified our theological viewpoints down to one vision, dropping our long and beautiful Transcendentalist history, forgetting the likes of Emerson and Thoreau who challenged us to seek the sacred in all things?

We would be choosing to make a conscious statement that there can only be one path, one accepted means of expression. By doing so we would be creating a new dogma, a new test of faith. With or without God, it would still be dogma. We would no longer be Unitarian Universalists, and even my own ground for spiritual expression would be lost.

The light bulb joke Shoshanna told earlier is a way for us to laugh at ourselves, but it makes a serious statement.

Question: How many Unitarians does it take to change a light bulb?

Answer:

We choose not to make a statement either in favour of or against the need for a light bulb.

However, if in your own journey you have found that light bulbs work for you, you are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your light bulb for the next Sunday service, in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, 3-way, long-life and tinted, all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence.

To call ourselves Unitarian Universalists we must always leave room for many expressions and understandings of what is true and meaningful.

Yet I understand that, like all things, the term “spirituality” is not without its shadow side. This was certainly the topic of conversation in my house this week, as David shared with me a challenging article by Umberto Eco, Italy’s most famous cultural commentator.

More than 10 years ago, Eco, equated New Age spirituality with fascism during an address he delivered at Columbia University in New York City. This sounds harsh, and that, I think, was exactly Eco’s intention. From an Italian perspective, fascism is more than a political system. It is a way of being. It is like the pathological individualism that Ann’s students speak of, the individualism that leads to saying, “My needs, my nation, my tribe are more important than anything else.” (To see the full article: http://www.pegc.us/archive/Articles/eco_ur-fascism.pdf)

Eco warns that a unifying characteristic in all fascist movements is a cult of tradition that espouses the belief in a single, eternal truth, revealed at the dawn of human history. Ancient texts, modern writings, everything is bent to fit that single truth in the service of the movement. Other texts and messages that seem to say different or incompatible things are deemed to be “alluding, allegorically to the same primeval truth.”

While Eco does not argue that all spiritual and religious beliefs lead to fascism, he points out the dangers of what he calls Traditionalism. “There can be no advancement of learning [when] Truth has already been spelled out once and for all.” The people are kept in check, and the regime lives on.

For this reason, Eco is wary of the bringing together of diverging texts to serve one master. He writes (and here’s the offending passage), “If you browse the shelves that, in American bookstores, are labelled as New Age, you can find there even Saint Augustine who, as far as I know, was not a fascist. But combining Saint Augustine and Stonehenge – *that* is a symptom of [Eternal]-Fascism.”

Okay, so I get it. There is a lot of fear that things like spirituality and religion can lead to cults or to the fascist manipulation of a people. If you had lived, as Eco has, during an era of political regimes that used neo-spirituality and religion to further their totalitarian

agendas, it would be easier for you to understand the fears... oh right, I lived through the Bush era in the US before coming here... We have to tread carefully.

This, I think, is where Harvey's reflection leaves us. What we don't need is mindless spirituality. What we do need is a deeper spirituality.

Enter Stuart Kaufman, author of *Reinventing the Sacred: A New View of Science, Reason and Religion*, and founding director of the Institute for Biocomplexity and Informatics at the University of Calgary. Kaufman was interviewed on the CBC radio program *The Current* back in December (17 December 2008), a program that I know created a bit of excitement around here.

(For the full interview: http://podcast.cbc.ca/mp3/current_20081217_10197.mp3 Ignore the introduction about music. The interview begins shortly after.)

Kaufman's thinking as a scientist and an atheist was transformed in 1992 when he was asked to meet with three other "big thinkers," as he says, "to presumptuously consider the great problems confronting mankind." It was then that poet Scott Momaday of the Kiowa First Nation said to the group, "The most important problem confronting mankind is to reinvent the sacred." At first, Kaufman found these words too far from his scientific comfort zone, but Momaday's wisdom began to slowly seep in and make sense. It was then that the idea for Kaufman's book was born.

You see, says Kaufman, science is taking us beyond Newton's laws of nature, beyond scientific reductionism that sees all reality as simply particles in motion. What we are learning, he says, is that there aren't quantifiable laws, but rather something called emergence. And here I am quoting, and sometimes paraphrasing what Kaufman told Anna Maria Tremonti:

"The biosphere is ceaselessly, wondrously creative, without a creator agent...We don't need a creator God anymore, but we do need creativity, as the root of our sacredness... as a way [to regrow] the spirituality that we have deep within us, that some of us have lost... we can evolve our sense of a supernatural God to the creativity of the universe itself and call it God."

Kaufman laments that our lives are increasingly commoditized and we are poverty-struck without the spiritual. We need a global ethic that can move us toward a sustainable economy that doesn't destroy our planet and creates a safe haven, spiritually, across our traditions.

"We are members of this creative universe, we are not, in this view, made in God's image. We too are god, but so is the bumble bee, the lichen and the rock. I... find this sense of joy when I walk out in the woods and I'm related to everything."

For Kaufman, the way to save the future is to reinvent the sacred. We have to find a "pathway between the God delusion and the ancient religious traditions that give so much solace." He says it isn't that the arguments of atheists like Dawkins and others aren't good, or that their anger at the misuse of religion isn't right. But their harshness is not what will

bridge the gap between the diverse cultures of this world. "We have to find ways to talk to one another about things that are spiritual. We have to bridge the gap." If we don't, "we're going to kill one another."

You know, I think he has a point.

If I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times. We have to begin by bridging the gap right here. We have to open ourselves to listen beyond our own assumptions, to leave room for the complexity and imperfection of language, to find ways to speak to each other about things that are spiritual, to uphold the beauty of our tradition that does not hold us to one single truth, and to find a pathway of loving kindness between our diverse beliefs.

If we can't do that here, what hope can we have for the world?

Amen. Shalom. Blessed Be. Namaste.

Reflections on the Wounded Word "Spirituality"

**From members of The Unitarian Church of Montreal
Shared during the service on 22 February 2009**

From Dima Dupéré:

I associate spirituality and spirit with BREATH, with LIFE and with CONNECTION. By connection, I mean with myself, with others and with the world around me. Finding my place in the universe. This was experienced most intensely once when I was in Pointe Pelee National Park with a friend of mine. We had spend the morning walking off the beaten path, spying on the deer. At one point we sat quietly while about 15 deer grazed quietly just a few feet away from us...Later, we stood at the Point (the most southern point of Canada that dips into Lake Erie), both of us in silence. It was a warm April day, the sun was shining, the birds were flying over head and we could hear the water lapping on the shore. As I stood there and looked around I felt PEACE. Suddenly, we were all ONE - the water, the trees, the birds, the deer, the sky and I. I was a part of the universe - not separate from it, not affected by it but woven gently into it. For that moment, nothing else mattered - not work, not family, not my worries. I remember not wanting to move at the risk of disturbing the moment. We did eventually go - and I was able to carry the feeling with me for days.

Practicing spirituality to me simply means that I suspend my beliefs about my human limitations so that I can open myself to the possibility of experiencing something I may not understand, allowing myself to be moved by mystery or inspired by beauty.

I have many experiences of being moved by nature, music, laughter, friends, but never to the same extent as I was that day in April. It somehow changed me... I can't explain how -

but my feelings about myself and my contribution in this world changed. I felt there was a rhythm and a purpose and I needed to trust it. I have often thought of that moment during difficult times and it has sustained me.

From Christopher Thomson:

Selon le psychiatre Aimé Hamann, une façon de concevoir le spirituel est exprimée dans l'idée que l'esprit est le corps habité véritablement.

La spiritualité est donc la recherche de la vérité vécue dans " ce corps que nous sommes ". La tentative (jamais achevée) d'assumer tous les aspects de notre être, ses lumières et ses ombres, sa solitude et sa dépendance face à autrui et à l'univers, est au coeur de la recherche spirituelle.

La spiritualité nous invite à un éveil à la réalité (fugace) de notre existence, à la pleine conscience de nos sensations, nos sentiments et nos pensées, sans nous laisser emporter par eux.

La spiritualité nous amène à délaisser les idées que nous faisons sur nous mêmes et les autres pour ressentir ce qui se passe pour de vrai à l'intérieur de nous et entre nous ... mais toujours avec la conscience de la subjectivité inévitable de toute prise de conscience.

From Denny Meyer:

The human spirit, the spirit of the universe, that possibly magical part that does not die with the body, seems somehow, sometimes, plausible to me. On the whole, I AM CONTENT WITH THE MYSTERY.

Spirituality I sometimes see as a subset of matters religious, but occasionally it appears to come from within, and thus presents itself as more personal, and less inflexible, less dogmatic than external, organized religions. When it is vaunted it is immediately suspect, however. It is something I find interesting to discuss with others who, like myself, do not need religion but who acknowledge there is a mystery within which we experience our living.

With apologies to you-know-who:

Spirit of the universe,
Of which I am a part and which is part of me,
May we all know thee.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in the multiverse!

From Harvey Shephard:

Surely, I hear someone protesting, spirituality could not possibly be wounding. Surely spirituality is, above all, nice. The whole idea is that you can get the warm, cuddly feelings sometimes associated with religion without a lot of nasty and unfashionable dogma, rules and regulations, disciplined thought and other unpleasant appurtenances of the religion of our mothers and, particularly, fathers.

But the more traditionally minded – whether they tend toward traditional religious outlooks or rationalist “humanist” perspectives – might rightly retort that spirituality, unconstrained by religion or reason, does sometimes seem to contribute to wounding people. It seems sometimes to leave people vulnerable to commercial or sexual exploitation. In some cases – I suspect not as common as sometimes suggested – “spiritual” groups can evolve into what are sometimes called cults, perhaps more confining and stultifying even than traditional religions, or can lead people to a point where they flip from some “spiritual” enterprise into some kind of fundamentalism.

There is something interesting when we compare this discussion of spirituality and our previous ones about the “wounded words” “faith,” and “God.” Those who denigrate “faith,” and “God” tend to see themselves as representing modern, progressive points of view and their opponents as hidebound and reactionary. But those wary of “spirituality” tend to see themselves as upholding some sort of tradition against the faddish and newfangled. (I am not speaking of the literal ages of those in any actual debate.)

Indeed, so far as I can recall, the idea of “spirituality” as an alternative to “religion” is a recent phenomenon. I will have to leave it to some aspiring Ph.D. candidate to find the data to confirm or refute this idea of mine, but it seems to me that, well within my lifetime, “spirituality” and “religion,” being “spiritual” and being “religious,” were generally thought of as pretty well the same thing, or pretty close. Or, “spirituality” could have a fairly non-controversial meaning, which it still retains, to denote those parts of a person’s religion, or those activities of religious institutions, that appeal more to the emotions and the esthetic sense, and distinguish them from theology, ethics, church government and so on.

To try to cast spirituality loose from religion, so that someone can talk of being spiritual but not religious is a huge theoretical and practical step, fraught with negative potential, although I think positive potential as well.

How do we avoid the dangers of wounding in modern “spirituality,” while still exploiting the beneficial possibilities that I think do exist. You may expect me to say that we do this by striking some sort of balance between “spirituality” on the one hand and “religion” and “reason” on the other. And I would say that.

But also, we should go deeper into our spirituality.

If there is a danger of spirituality running rampant, it may be a swing of the pendulum, because it was denigrated before. Christians, perhaps especially Protestant Christians, Unitarians and western secularists, have been too prone to see spirituality as either valueless or a kind of icing on a rational, theological and ethical cake. Perhaps this undervaluation of spirituality sets the stage for mindless overvaluation of mindless spirituality. But perhaps if we go deep enough into our “spirituality,” it will turn out to have a discipline of its own.