

“ What is Spirituality?”

I check the sermon suggestion box in the back of the Narthex on a regular basis. Several weeks ago I found a set of questions that were exciting and very challenging at same time ...The index card read “What does it mean when a person says he/she had a spiritual experience? Is it an emotional experience/feeling? Can one have it someplace other than in a church? Does a deity have to be involved?”

As loaded a set of questions they may be, they are indeed critical to understanding the basic concept of Unitarian Universalism. They are the very ones we struggle with the most, yet are the questions we have to answer for ourselves. First before I begin to tackle each one it would make sense to address the question “what is spirituality?” The dictionary offers this definition of spirituality “the quality or condition of being spiritual!” Right! Not helpful... Rev. David Robinson a Unitarian Universalist Scholar defined spirituality as, “a feeling or hunger for a deeper inner life and a more profound experience of the world we share.”

May I offer, Spirituality is the process of becoming acutely aware and connecting with the mysteries of life itself; with those moments of awe and wonder that can move us to great joy, to wonder, or to tears. Spirituality means to nurture and to welcome the mysterious elements of our creation that reside within us and around us. To be spiritual is to seek, to embrace and to fully experience those mysterious elements, that leave us with an enduring sense of warmth, love and comfort that is never forgotten.

However, explaining a spiritual experience is much like trying to describe the color red when it is hidden from our sight. It is very clear in our minds what the color red looks like, but to describe it to one who has never seen “red” is nearly impossible. Rather, we can express how the color makes feel, even though it remains unseen.

For some, the color red may signify a sentiment of anger, or injury; to others, happiness, joy, the perfect shade to lighten up a room.

A spiritual experience does not require us to understand it, explain or dissect its parts. Rather, to be spiritual means to invite into our conscious minds the wonders of the unknown, through the activities of our daily living, through the emotions we feel when we are deeply moved by an experience that we may not have anticipated happening to us.

In viewing Christian religious circles we UU's have a tendency to equate spiritual experiences with happening only to those who belong to a church or religious group that have a definite set of theological rules that specifically defines God's presence, what HE does and exactly how we will be judged in the afterlife. Any claims of spiritual experiences under those terms are officially classified as spiritual experiences only by a cleric's interpretation and it always involves some kind of divine or God centered intervention. Such experiences can include the appearance of an angel that drops down out of nowhere to impart good news from a divine source upon an unsuspecting at home dad just finishing up the dishes; or the onset of an ethereal voice that materializes out of nowhere to clearly instruct the hearer to follow a specific route or pathway. Then, there is the plethora of recent "spiritual" experiences, such as a hunk of pizza with a squiggle of cheese and tomato sauce sporting an image that looks just like Jesus, miraculously appearing in between the pepperoni and the crust. For some that clearly defines a spiritual experience of being personally singled out by God to receive some kind of message from above. For others such interesting physical manifestations have led one to deduce that God wants the bearer to be wealthy and the pizza slice becomes a cash cow on e-bay. To those who take these events seriously and find them meaningful, they are undeniably spiritual experiences that can neither be explained nor fully understood.

In most traditional religious circles, many believe that the atheists among us can never be privy to a spiritual experience, therefore what is the purpose for an atheistic point of view? Just the opposite. Atheists support the freedom of ideas and exchanges and exhibit a passion for this life, knowing and believing that mystery abounds all around us, through the power of resurrection as the earth replenishes itself season by season. To declare oneself an atheist does not mean needing a rational explanation for all things.

It can mean being on high alert for others whose spirituality and definitions of divine intervention, incorporates bigotry, prejudice and injustice. It does not mean a lack of reverence for beauty and mystery.

The Rev. Anthony David in his essay, *The Spirituality of Atheism* wrote

“What a mystery we live within! And how awe-inspiring to think that, through hundreds of millions of years, the world went on unheard, unseen, silently eating, giving birth, dying, until human consciousness was born, and now, we are the ones, we are the ones who give voice to all this, we are the precious eyes and ears, we are the witnesses!”

So regardless of our chosen affiliations how do we know when we have had a spiritual experience? Once we have enlarged our view of what constitutes a spiritual experience from those that are defined by a specific set of doctrines or religious rules, we open some doors to remembering and identifying those times that remain in our thoughts that enriched our lives and elicited a strong emotional response and awareness. I recall a cold winter night walking 10 blocks through thorny curtains of icy sleet in New York city with my favorite aunt. We had had a wonderful day of concerts plays and museums. It was dark and we were frozen when we finally reached her apartment. We stripped off our wet clothes, and she put on a vat of hot chocolate.

As we sat together on the couch and sipped the hot chocolate, I felt a wave of warmth and love, I had never experienced before; for the day, for her and for that mug I held in my shaking hands.

I felt hugged by the Universe and it was a deeply spiritual experience that left me filled with wonder and joy that I will never forget. It is not important to me what others think of my claim. It does not need any verification by anyone to be called spiritual. Whenever I find myself a parishioner in church, I recall that day, that feeling comes back and I sense the same need for such warmth from all those seated around me.

In a UU church I can treasure that very common, simple moment without analysis or judgment from an “expert”. It was not earthshaking nor did it warrant a front page sighting of the divine. Yet it felt just as holy and as sacred as any that have made the list of bonafide authentic spiritual experiences. I can share it as I choose. I feel no need to explain it, yet it is a story I treasure, a living prayer of perfect love, of the day, of the moment and of life itself.

As we grow older the uncomplicated events of childhood often become less significant. What was awe inspiring and amazing to us then has become commonplace and stale. A walk in the rain and a mug of hot chocolate would probably not have had the same meaning as an adult. I am sure for my aunt she was just glad to get back to a warm apartment. At each stage of our living, no matter how old or how well seasoned we may be, there is always the opportunity to know and to experience the spiritual in our lives.

Regardless of ones religious upbringing a spiritual experience can also occur by our own making. It can come to us in the midst of an inspired creative activity or through a solution to a difficult problem or a thought put to canvas, or molded in clay, or wood, through poetry, music or dance... when the essence of our need or passion becomes a reality.

This church is the place to share those experiences, to ponder a thought that may not have occurred to us before, to be moved by a piece of music or the words of a friends. A true spiritual experience is meant to be shared, for in the sharing we encourage others to open their hearts and minds to the wonder around us that will never grow old even as we do.

When my mother was in the last stages of the illness that took her life there were times when I knew she was silently dealing with the anxieties and unknowns of dying. She was a UU all her life and never even mentioned the word “god” even when she was angry. She awoke one morning and I found her sitting at the kitchen table staring into space. “What’s wrong,” I asked “are you OK?” “Yes,” she said, “ but something very strange happened to me last night. I was awakened by what felt like someone sitting on my bed. I turned over and my mother was lying beside me. It was not a dream I was fully awake. She was real. She said nothing, she just held me. I don’t understand it, but it happened. I don’t believe in angels or any of that, but something extraordinary happened and because of it, I am not afraid of what is to come.” We just looked at each other in silence. I felt no desire to try and figure this out; was it a dream? A kind of nighttime paralysis, or even a hallucination caused by all the medications she was taking? I knew that what had happened to her was indeed very real, profound and undoubtedly spiritual. She had been hugged by the Universe. So, if spiritual experiences can happen anywhere, anytime to anyone regardless of any religious affiliation or lack thereof, then why come to church? If living a spiritual life means just plodding through each day and waiting to see what happens, then why any church at all?

The Rev Peter Lanzillota wrote:

“ Spirituality propels us on our individual quest; it also forms the feelings bond of affiliation and affection that hold communities together. That which is of the Spirit, then, can be defined as whatever is deemed sacred, true, love and respect worthy for the individual; for their community, and for their world. To be spiritual (as Unitarian Universalists) is to pay reverent attention to the holy within, between, among and beyond us all.

Spirituality is intimately connected to our sustaining sense of community. If there are no shared ideals, nothing held or believed in common, community disappears and spirituality is understood as absent.” That is why we come to church.

We are all spiritual beings and even the scientists will tell us we are a mystery, made of the stuff of starlight and moonbeams. We come from so many lifestyles traditions and teachings. From each of our varied experiences there are moments in our lives that shook us up, summoned back the wonder of our existence, that left us speechless and awestruck. Maybe it was God who opened that book of life for us, or Gaia who led us out of oppression, or the enlightenment of Buddha as his awakening blossomed under the bodhi tree. We are open to so many possibilities to continue our search, to find at each stage a new thought, idea or experience to ponder, to add to our understanding of what it means to embrace the spiritual within.

In conclusion William Henry Channing “summarized his idea of living a spiritual life, to satisfy that hunger for a profound experience of the world that we share” in a statement entitled My Symphony :

To live content with small means; to seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion; to be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich; to study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly; to listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages with open heart; to bear all cheerfully, do all bravely, await occasions, never hurry. In a word, to let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common. This is to be my symphony. "

So be it

Amen