

SPIRITUALITY, RELIGIOSITY AND WELL-BEING

**A Sermon by
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READING: "What's in the Temple?" by Tom Barrett

In the quiet spaces of my mind a thought lies still, but ready to spring.
It begs me to open the door so it can walk about.
The poets speak in obscure terms pointing madly at the unsayable.
The sages say nothing, but walk ahead patting their thigh calling for us to follow.
The monk sits pen in hand poised to explain the cloud of unknowing.
The seeker seeks, just around the corner from the truth.
If she stands still it will catch up with her.
Pause with us here a while.
Put your ear to the wall of your heart.
Listen for the whisper of knowing there.
Love will touch you if you are very still.

[...]

I miss the old temples where you could hang out with God.
Still, we have pet pounds where you can feel love draped in warm fur,
And sense the whole tragedy of life and death.
You see there the consequences of carelessness,
And you feel there the yapping urgency of life that wants to be lived.
The only things lacking are the frankincense and myrrh.

We don't build many temples anymore.
Maybe we learned that the sacred can't be contained.
Or maybe it can't be sustained inside a building.
Buildings crumble.
It's the spirit that lives on.

If you had a temple in the secret spaces of your heart,
What would you worship there?
What would you bring to sacrifice?
What would be behind the curtain in the holy of holies?

Go there now.

SERMON:

The memories are VERY clear – I am about eight years old ... fidgety because I resent the interruption to my games outside with the neighborhood kids. My mom is sitting in the big red leather chair in the den with a pile of socks in her lap which she is darning (there were six kids in my family – always LOTS and LOTS of holey socks needing attention). Being the multi-tasker that her motherly position DEMANDED, Mom decided this would be a good time to drill me on my Catechism. So there I was, reluctant and anxious that all those things I HOPED I'd packed into my memory would not let me down and that I could respond with enough assurance to satisfy Mom that I really had done my homework. And she began:

#1 – Who made us? (Whoever put together this Catechism decided to start with an easy one):

GOD MADE US! I reply dutifully.

#2 – Who is God?

With conviction, I recite: *God is the Supreme Being, infinitely perfect, who made all things and keeps them in existence.* (She smiles)

#3 – Why did God make us? *God made us to show forth His goodness and to share with us his everlasting happiness in heaven.* (The whole “show forth his goodness thing never quite made sense but, still, I was able to say it with adequate confidence that Mom nodded solemnly and proceeded...)

#4 – What must we do to gain the happiness of heaven? *To gain the happiness of heaven we must know, love and serve God in this world.*

And the questions continued in that manner. Mom, with her lap full of socks and the open Baltimore Catechism – my little girl brain working feverishly to retrieve the language I had worked so hard to memorize. I didn't have to know all at once (there were nearly 200 questions in the book as I recall) but it was a standard and serious part of my Catholic education to eventually commit all of them to memory chapter by chapter. Pope Pius XII is dubiously reported to have said, “Give me your child until age 9, and I will have him for life.” Whether such a sentiment was ever expressed by a religious leader or not, many of us are living proof that's not entirely true. Nonetheless, I can tell you that the phrase to “know, love and serve God in this world” is indelibly, permanently engraved in my brain.

And, in some ways, though, it was almost easier when a Catechism was available to answer all the questions one might have about theology. Religions have changed quite a bit in the last four decades, but what I was taught then was that I had only to memorize those pages (and obey the decrees therein) and I would then know everything that was important to know about how to please this God and, in so doing, I would be rightly practicing my religion.

That belief began to disintegrate for me in late high school, but I still had a spiritual hunger. In fact, I cannot remember a time when I was not intrigued by this subject and, consequently, I have experienced several different religious belief systems - each with a sincere heart and with full devotion, and each giving me GREAT gifts for my life. But, prior to finding Unitarian Universalism, in each one, there eventually emerged a “back wall” that was just too constricting. There were always outside limits of the prescribed orthodox beliefs that I found impossible to take on with authenticity. Yet, there was a desire for a connection to SOMETHING profoundly meaningful and purposeful that persisted within.

I’ve heard it said that religion is a construct that humans have devised in order to answer the three most pressing questions of our existence. From all continents and ages, people have endlessly wondered:

How did we get here?

What is the point of this thing we call life?

What happens after we die?

That catechism that numerous folks my generation pored over grandly undertook to provide definitive answers to those three huge questions. Even as a kid, I wondered how on earth the grandest of mysteries could be contained and explained in less than twenty chapters!

But the attempt to document **Truth** with a capital T is a path many have gone down. We’re in the midst of our UU201 Adult Education class – Marie Murton and I are facilitating – and our group spent last Thursday evening talking about some of the several people who have given their lives for the propagation of this faith we hold so dear. The Unitarian and Universalist trails are both marked by the blood of martyrs - people who endured torture and death because they were unwilling to espouse a Creed that they did not believe was true. It’s amazing to me to really think about that level of dedication and to bring it into our own life today. It makes me wonder, what personal beliefs do I hold SO strongly, that I would be willing to stake my very life and breath on? That sort of question deserves long reflection

But actually the other side of that the question also intrigues me. Imagine holding a theological belief SO firmly that you might think that people who disagree deserve pain and death! For many of us, THAT sort of fervor simply does not compute. Yet, the pages of history are full of people for whom that inexplicable concept made perfect sense.

We wonder, how could they be that convinced that they were right? It seems the gamble – and the consequences – are so great! Gandhi apparently agreed with that cautious viewpoint because he indicated that while he might be quite willing to offer his own life for his beliefs – as in his struggle to protect the most defenseless and the oppressed – he was unwilling to KILL for the sake of those beliefs, because he always knew... that he might be wrong.

And that seems to be a key element to hold. There is a certain humility about knowing that we might be wrong....Accepting the vulnerable position of being flexible and not rushing to conclusions....a willingness (and this is a tough one!) to face the discomfort of “not knowing.” It is a spiritual practice to allow ourselves to approach all of life as a learner instead of wanting to assert ourselves into the teacher’s position. In our culture, it’s every easy to get caught in a trap of always wanting to appear as one who holds knowledge. When people ask a question – especially if it’s an area in which we think you SHOULD know the answer we are eager to respond in a way that appears to support our competence. Like when I was recently asked, “What IS the Transfiguration” - You’d think that with all that childhood memorization, the answer would have just sprung to mind....but it didn’t. I might have simply replied, “You know, I don’t really recall the answer to that.” Instead I stumblingly offered my vague recollection which, of course, wasn’t really adequate. Later I got a thoughtful email letting me know that they did what most do nowadays – they Googled it and got the answer in a snap. But it’s funny to ponder about why our egos often tempt us to offer a reply with many more words than our actual knowledge would or should support. It’s a pretty common phenomenon in our world.

In fact, one of my favorite gifts that I received when I entered the ministry here is a little book entitled, ON B.S. (those are just the initials of the actual title – it’s spelled out on the book cover). This is a small book On B.S. was written by a Professor Emeritus of Philosophy from Princeton and it actually does look at the increase and universality of this conversation style. My friend gave this to me because she said (on a little note tucked inside) that she thought that this new vocation of mine might demand a honing of my B.S.-recognition skills. (I’m not certain whether she meant my own or others!)

But even when we are not engaging in that spurious form of communication, one of the odd things about what we think of as “truth” is that we often are blinded to our own gaps in our thinking. We look through filters of our current “knowledge” and are unaware of the things that may be stuck in our blind spot – or are so far outside our own experience that they are inconceivable to us – so we simply don’t see them. Nothing says this better than the poetic wisdom of one of our present day political figures who artfully offered this little refrain – in a news briefing – and it has now been launched into internet immortality. Since it was spoken spontaneously, he did not give it a title, but, I call it “On Knowing” by Donald Rumsfeld:

“As we know,
there are known knowns.
There are things we know we know.
We also know
there are known unknowns.
That is to say
we know there are some things
we do not know.
But there are also unknown unknowns,

the ones we don't know
we don't know.”

Indeed!! And it is those unknown unknowns that are incredibly dangerous territory. Throughout history, we can see the grave consequences of political and religious leaders failing to give heed to their own limitations regarding the infinite number of unknown unknowns --- and that has resulted in countless destroyed hearts and lives - physical lives and also spiritual lives.

There are some faith systems that appreciate and embrace the unknown - that state of not-knowing. Many have their roots in Eastern wisdom. The Buddhists speak of approaching all things with the learners' mind. The Taoists have similar teachings. In their sacred book, the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu describes a softness that is inherent with accepting and appreciating this attitude. He says:

[All people] are born soft and supple¹;
Dead they are stiff and hard.
Plants are born tender and pliant;
Dead, they are brittle and dry.
Thus whoever is stiff and inflexible
Is a disciple of death.
Whoever is soft and yielding
Is a disciple of life....

When we think we already know all that is to be known on a subject, we are closed and hard and unimaginative. Nothing new can come in because we hold obstinately to our own beliefs. Interestingly and ironically, this sort of closedness can manifest itself right here when we are so certain of our own UU-rightness! But, when we approach life embracing the simplicity of this state of our own “not knowing” then we can be free to be open, curious, engaged, eager to learn ... **soft**. We can be a, as Lao Tzu says, a disciple of life.

It takes humility to let go of our devotion to our own “right-ness” and instead approach each day's encounters from that flexible, open-hearted place. When we are able to let go of the stiffness and rigidity, it is from that place that genuine dialogue can occur.

I'm certainly not advocating failing to speak your own truth – but it seems much more productive when we are able to convey our own authentic thoughts and feelings through a heart-space and words that also creates space for the others to be respected and truly heard.

This sermon sprung from my reflecting on a working definition of “spirituality” as it contrasts with “religion”. Of course, all definitions are inadequate in some ways and perhaps particularly so when dealing with theological terms but I'm taking shot at it here. I see some connections to this “soft” vs. “hard” stance – openness vs. inflexibility.

¹ Tao Te Ching, #78, Stephen Mitchell trans.

The Taoists revere a concept they call the “the uncarved block.” An uncarved block is perfect in its simplicity. It is not limited in what it might be – it is free to be whatever the imagination brings to it - it contains all the possibilities of what it might become. And spirituality seems like that to me – it can softly hold all of our questions within a place of humble wonder. Spirituality can rest comfortably in the state of not-knowing.....and there there is the space for us to wordlessly discover awe and reverence.

I am aware that it’s unfair to state this as a stark contrast because I know there are many who find inexpressible mystery in religion too. I suppose that rather than contrasting spirituality and religion, per se, I am really contrasting it with dogmatic, unyielding religious teachings. It seems unhelpful and unrealistic to create religions doctrines about the unspeakable wonders in this vast universe, about the experience of being human, about the ultimate fate of the soul. Yet, over the ages powerful people in nearly all religions “carved those doctrines in stone”- often to the detriment of humankind, I believe.

Chief Joseph of the book Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee is quoted as saying, “We do not want churches. They will teach us to quarrel about God.” How sadly right he was. And nothing we observe in history would indicate that arguing about God is a fruitful practice. Instead, our experience points to the ever-mounting evidence that that sort of HARD knowing – whether it is in the realm of politics or theology or within our own personal relationships – does not enhance life on this earth. It instead puts up walls that break human connections – that damage this most precious web of life that we recognize is essential to the well-being of all creatures.

We have numerous Unitarian Universalists who say, “I’m not religious – but I am spiritual.” Even our UU Association puts together a promotional campaign calling us are “The Uncommon Denomination.” Technically, we are not even a denomination – we are an association of individual congregations and faith communities – who set their own requirements for membership and ministry. We have no dogma, no creed. We believe that regardless of whether we are more comfortable with the word “religion” or “spirituality” or “association” or “society” – whatever we discuss and do - must be founded on FREEDOM, TOLERANCE, AND REASON. Those three have been part of our heritage from the beginning.

People who learn about our faith for the first time often don’t quite know what to make of all the freedom of belief we have here. Our lack of creedal statements can be unsettling – it’s not what most are accustomed to when they think a faith community.

Our young adults presented a bit of a quandary to the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute in a recent study they performed about the Spiritual Lives of College Students². It was pretty in-depth study – they questioned over 112, 000 entering college students at over 200 diverse colleges around the country and the survey covered over 150 items. In their Executive Summary they concluded that for the most part, *today’s college students have very high levels of spiritual interest and involvement. [Many] are actively engaged*

² Available online at <http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/spirituality/reports/FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>.

in a spiritual quest and in exploring the meaning and purpose of life. Many also very engaged and involved in religion, reporting considerable commitment to their religious beliefs and practices.

As you would imagine given our small numbers, Unitarian Universalists were a very small percentage of those surveyed – only about 4%. Nonetheless, our youth stood out notably in the results. When looking at the UU's as a group, the study identifies them as having “the most distinctive pattern of scores, differing significantly from [other] students ... on 11 [out] of the 12 measures.” WOW – our UU students really made an impression. Unlike most of the others (but not surprising to us), the Unitarians had very high scores on Religious Skepticism and low scores on areas like Religious and Social Conservatism (in fact, they had the lowest of all religious groups in that final category of Conservatism). That seems to fit. Yet, the UU student group scored exceptionally high on areas such as Spiritual Quest, Compassionate self-concept, Religious Struggle, Ethic of Caring, and Ecumenical Worldview. Significant numbers of the UU students stated that despite rejecting religious doctrine, integrating spirituality into [their] life” is an “essential” or “very important” goal to them.

These were surprising combinations to the researchers but it makes really good sense to us. I guess maybe we ARE the Uncommon Denomination! And we know that this sort of spiritual questing and ethic of caring is not limited to our young adults – these are essential parts of what we do here together, in community. Our principles affirm that our congregations are places where we enjoy the acceptance of one another – fully – in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning – and where we encourage one another's spiritual growth – in community.

We don't come here so we can learn “right thinking” or “right answers” – we come here so that we can receive a word of hope from one another and be enticed to go back home and with open hearts do the work of our own spiritual searching... our customized, individual truth with a small “t” that is to be found within. And then, always and endlessly, we must translate the answers that we find there into the actions of our every day lives.

As we read our Call to Gather today: “...Let us return here week after week, so that we can worship, not in bowing down, not with closed eyes and stopped ears. Let us worship with the opening of all the windows of our beings, with the full outstretching of our spirits. Life comes with singing and laughter, with tears and confiding, with a rising wave too great to be held in the mind and heart and body, to those who have fallen in love with life. Let us worship, and let us learn to love³....” Let us do all these things TOGETHER.

May it be so.

³ #437, *Let Us Worship* written by Kenneth L. Patton in [Singing the Living Tradition](#)