

THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

“Spiritual But Not Religious”

By

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“SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS”

The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy

Today, I want to talk about those – including some of us, no doubt – who consider themselves to be “spiritual but not religious.”

Picking up on our “Story for All Ages” and the suitcase metaphor, let me begin with my understanding of the cluster of meanings and values that would be in the “suitcase” of those who might describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” In drawing this portrait, allow me to draw on Robert C. Fuller’s book called, *Spiritual but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*.¹

The “spiritual but not religious” folks, first of all, are “seekers” who pursue their spiritual development primarily outside of the realm of traditional, organized religion – traditional Christian churches, Jewish synagogues, and Muslim temples. Rather, they pursue their spiritual development through workshops, books, videos, meditation, yoga, T’ai Chi, and so forth. “Religion,” for those who consider themselves “spiritual but not religious,” connotes rigidity, lifeless rituals, orthodox doctrines, and dogmatic creedalism. “Spiritual,” on the other hand, connotes fluidity, flexibility, mysticism and mystery.

The “spiritual but not religious” folks, like we Unitarian Universalists, value curiosity, intellectual freedom, and deciding for oneself what one believes.

Those who describe themselves as “Spiritual but not religious” tend to borrow eclectically from diverse sources, overlooking differences and synthesizing commonalities into a personal belief system. They tend to be highly tolerant, given that most view their own spiritual truths as being provisional and subject to change as experience brings them new wisdom.

The “spiritual but not religious” folks’ conception of the divine tends towards pantheism, in that God is frequently seen as something like the “light within,” or as the “wisdom within,” or the “Higher Self,” as opposed to a more traditionally monotheistic creator God which is separate from its creation.

Spiritual authority, for the “spiritual but not religious” seekers, is highly suspect, especially established clergy – including me (to a certain extent). Indeed, many who identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious” consider “organized religion,” virtually by definition, to be antithetical to an authentic spirituality.

Some, of course, however, will eventually find that, even though we clearly are at least somewhat “organized,” Unitarian Universalism is the perfect home for many – certainly not all, perhaps, but clearly for many – who think of themselves as being “spiritual but not religious,” because we obviously share so many values in common.

II

This, then, tells us something about those who describe themselves as being “spiritual but not

¹ “Spiritual but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America,” a book review of Fuller’s book by Austin Cline on About.com: Agnosticism/Atheism.

religious.” But let’s go a bit further. Let’s bore down into this concept of “spiritual” a little bit to see what, at best, it might mean. Let me begin with a story.

After fourteen years of concentrated effort, the disciple of a great religious master finally gained the power to walk on water. Transported by joy, he returned to his teacher and said, “Master, come see! At long last, I have accomplished my purpose. I can walk on water!”

The sage was unimpressed. He replied, “It is nothing. You have obtained only that which is worth a penny, for that which you have accomplished after fourteen years of labor, ordinary people can do by paying the boatman a penny.”²

Indeed, spirituality, as *I* would choose to define it, or want to explore it, has neither to do with supernaturalism (and the ability to do tricks) nor with outward shows of piety.

Rather, consider this story. It is a Hindu teaching story that tells of a wandering sannyasi (a spiritual seeker) who had reached the outskirts of a village. She settled down under a tree for the night when a villager came running up to her and exclaimed, “The stone! The stone! Please give me the precious stone!”

“What stone?” asked the sannyasi.

“Last night the Lord Shiva appeared to me in a dream,” said the villager, “and told me that if I went to the outskirts of the village at dusk I should find a sannyasi who would give me a wonderfully precious stone that would make me rich forever.”

At that, the sannyasi rummaged in her bag and pulled out a stone. “He probably meant this one,” she said, as she handed the stone over to the villager. “I found it on a forest path some days ago. You may certainly have it.”

The man looked at the stone in wonder. It was a huge diamond. Perhaps the largest diamond in the world.

He took the diamond and walked away. All night he tossed about in bed, unable to sleep. The next day at the crack of dawn he woke the sannyasi and said, “Please, I beg of you: teach me the wealth that makes it possible for you to give this diamond away so easily.”³

Ahh, now this kind of wisdom, this kind of depth of character, this living out of our deeper spiritual core, arguably gets us closer to a more engaging meaning of the term “spiritual.”

Some years ago, one of my colleagues, the Rev. Roger Fritts, asked those present at a gathering of Unitarian Universalist ministers, Directors of Religious Education, students and faculty at Meadville

² Cited by Sweetser, Terry, *Finding Foxes* and attributed as having been cited by F. Forrester Church.

³ Cited by Gibbons, Kendyl, “Our Mother’s Keeper,” DuPage Unitarian Church, Naperville, Illinois.

Lombard Theological School to take five minutes to write down their own definition of spirituality. Here is a sampling of what he got:

- **Charlie Kast:** "Spirituality is the depth dimension in life.
- **Richard Speck:** "Spirituality is touching that inner core of being that unites us to the whole reality. We realize we are a part of a wondrous whole."
- **Viola Moore:** "Spirituality is going into the depths of ourselves to find connection to self, others, nature, and God. It is an experience of depth."
- **Tom Chulak:** "Spirituality is a deep down way of being in relation with life that transforms, challenges and heals."
- **Janet Emmons:** "Spirituality is awareness of the holy both within and without; the knowing that all is connected to all; the continuing dialogue with God."
- **Karen Jonas:** "Spirituality is connecting to the silence within us and within all; the place beyond words, which is our center."

The Rev. Mr. Fritts continues:

Common words and ideas can be found in these definitions. Most common is the word "connect," or phrases such as "we are a part" or "in relation" to indicate the same idea as the word connect. . . . Many definitions also use the words "depth" or "deep" or "inner" or "inwardly." "Center" or "core of being" were also used in several definitions. A composite definition, bringing together these common elements, . . . might sound something like this:

Spirituality is the effort to pay attention to the depth of the inner core of our being, the place within us beyond words, the place that is our essential center. There we find connection to the whole of reality; we are in touch with ourselves, with others . . . , with nature, and with God. We realize we are part of a wondrous unity.⁴

I like Roger Fritts' definition of spirituality for it confirms and complements what I've been thinking and suggesting for years, namely, that our spiritual dimension is our dimension of depth. It is our well within. It is our dimension of ultimacy — that inner place of high joy and deep sorrow, that inner place of awe and wonder, that inner place of pain and ecstasy — at the center of our lives. But Roger's definition, as good as it is, is still a bit abstract. Indeed, for me, when I hear people talk about spirituality, what I think I hear a yearning for, first and foremost, is not just a *definition*, but an *experience*.

We want to *experience* the well within, the "deep down freshness," as Gerard Manley Hopkins describes it, that renews, restores, and sustains us.

We want to experience a meaningful connection — to others, to the world, to nature, and to the larger cosmos.

Moreover, we want to experience something of the mystery and poignancy of life — and to drink deeply of it.

⁴Fritts, The Rev. Roger, "Defining Spirituality," *First Days Record*, March 1992, p. 19.

III

Often when we have such spiritual experiences of depth and connection, the place becomes holy ground. We place a rock for remembrance. Or carve in a tree. Or seal a relationship. We build a shrine to mark the place in our minds with stone or memory or both.

Unitarian Universalist minister and author Robert Fulghum speaks of this process with one of many stories which might be invoked at this time to illustrate one of the many kinds of spiritual experiences we have, or might have, of depth and connection. Time, however, only permits this one story.

Fulghum writes:

Lourdes, Mecca, Jerusalem, Benares, . . . Canterbury, Salt Lake City. All famous Destinations of religious pilgrimage. Holy places, temples, shrines, cathedrals – containing relics, books, and wisdom. Saints, sutras, the smell of incense...great processions, and great revelations come to mind.

My own sacred city may be Pocatello, Idaho. There's an invisible shrine there in the middle of an aisle of an Albertson's grocery store. Where the canned meats are – right in front of the tuna fish, to be specific. Once in a while I go there in my mind – and I wish someday to make a pilgrimage to go stand at that place once more and see if what happened last time might happen again....

Fulghum had been accompanying his wife, who is a pediatrician, for six weeks of in-service medical training at a clinic in Pocatello, near the home of Idaho State University. Fulghum chose to spend most of his time in the university library, savoring the experience of lots of time for reading and research without any exams, term papers, or sermons to write. "Anything I wanted to know was mine," Fulghum gleefully declared. "As I walked home in the evening," Fulghum continues,

I had an overwhelming bad news/good news feeling: knowledge and the number of books that contained it were infinite – I could *never* read them *all*. And as I read one, ten more were being written somewhere. That was the bad news. The good news was that knowledge and the books that contained it were indeed infinite. I would *never* run out of things to learn. Knowledge was infinite in every direction I turned. . . .

One Friday evening, in this reflective mood, I stopped off at the Albertson's grocery store on my way home. Watermelon on my mind. Big watermelon. Take it home and eat the whole thing out in the yard. There was something else I was supposed to get, but could not recall, so I started walking up and down the aisles of the grocery store in much the same spirit as I had stalked the library shelves. And the same thing happened. Bad news and good news about groceries.

All this food – more than I could ever eat or taste – involving thousands of people from all over the world to get it here on the shelves – infinite in every direction because thousands of other people would come and get it and take it home and eat it at

thousands of dinners and it would fuel their lives to do millions of things, and I could only have just the barest comprehension of this immense complexity.

I picked up the first object in front of me — a can of tuna fish — and thought about its contents, the can itself, and the label, and all the incredible learning and working and the machinery and the processes and the fishing boats and fishermen and factory ships and trains and trucks that brought it here from so far away. . . .

Then there's the line of thought away from here in the direction yet to come — where would it all go? — Where would it end up? — the can, the label, the fish, and the person who ate the fish, and on and on and on?

This is not how I usually spend my time in a grocery store. For a moment the rational monitor in my mind was warning: uh-oh, you are losing your marbles.

Walking up the aisle, my eye was caught by the bold black-and-white headlines of an advertising placard, which said: "Well, You're Not the Only One!" — and in smaller print it had something to say about the quest for a decent canned spaghetti sauce.

The headline fit my existential state. Yes, I thought to myself, I'm not the only one. Not the only one who ever got a flash of the big picture. Not the only one who understands how utterly amazing it all is. There is lots of testimony in those books up there in the library. This is exactly what all those books are about.

Holding on to my sanity and the watermelon and the can of tuna fish with equal care, I stopped at the checkout counter and paid with a twenty-dollar bill. I noticed a handwritten note on the little cup where [the] coins appear at the end of a transaction. The note said: "Please accept your change — take it with you." Here was yet another unexpected message. Yes, I thought to myself, I accept my change — and the changes yet to come. And I will take my change with me, wherever I go.

Turning to leave, I was confronted with still another sign. The automatic doors were broken. The sign said: "Please note — The only Way Out is In."

As always, it is how one perceives the door that determines the coming and going. There are two journeys one must make to have balance — out there and in here. One depends upon the other. Every exit is an entrance. The door swings both ways. The only way out is always in. To move on in the world as it is, one must turn to resources within.⁵

Such is Robert Fulghum's experience of the holy — of the depth dimension that lies all about us — while shopping at Albertson's grocery store in Pocatello, Idaho. It is, of course, only one of many kinds of "spiritual" experiences of depth and connection.

So, what kinds of experience come to mind for you when you think of "spiritual" experiences? And are they also marked, as Roger Fritts suggests, by depth and/or by a sense of connection?

⁵ Fulghum, Robert, *Uh-Oh* (New York: Villard Books, 1991), pp. 87-93. Cf. 93Sept12.

And, finally, if you are not already a member here and if you count yourself as someone who is “spiritual but not religious,” then welcome! If this community is a good fit for you, then welcome. Welcome to the religious home you perhaps never knew you had.