

The Secret Spiritual Lives of UUs

Judy Robbins 11/13/22

We see a universe marvelously arranged, obeying certain laws, but we understand the laws only dimly. Our limited minds cannot grasp the mysterious force that sways the constellations. That, it seems to me, is the attitude of the human mind...to God.

~ Albert Einstein

Opening Words:

It's wonderful to have a rich musical experience this Sunday morning. This hour is a timeout, just one hour, when we can set aside concerns about the runoff in GA, the war in Ukraine, the price of gas, and the worries of our private lives. This hour is to replenish ourselves with the joy of music and to connect with each other and our own hearts. When taken in deeply, music works on us like a tuning fork that aligns our body, mind and spirit.

Today's pulpit talk takes up the idea that UUs have secret spiritual lives, things we do privately to feed our souls that we are shy or even embarrassed to bring out in public. More on this later.

Let's start with a situation we've all been in...trying to describe Unitarian Universalism to someone from a different faith. The reason it's hard to describe is because pretty much all other faiths have an agreed upon set of beliefs. In other words, they have a theology at their core. They have a holy book like the bible, the koran, the torah, that can be consulted. There is no Unitarian Universalist holy book. We purposely have no theology, no dogma. Instead we are given Seven Principles and Six Sources to use as a basis for creating our own personal theology.

The Unitarian Universalist association is doing their 15-year review of our ByLaws and it appears there will be changes to, or elimination of, our Principles and Sources. One that is may become a historic artifact is my favorite...the first one"

Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.

This morning, I'll speak about some common entry points for UU spirituality and begun to give us a vocabulary for talking about it.

Sermon:

As most of you know, I'm a retired psychotherapist. My doctorate is in transpersonal psychology, the area where spirituality and psychology overlap. During my working life, I focused on the psychology side and since my retirement I've been able to focus almost fully on the spirituality side. For quite a number of years I have led groups of UUs toward examining their spiritual lives, the last five as part of the *SpiritLife* program that serves our three Hartford area churches. I've learned a great deal in the process...too much for one pulpit talk but today is a start.

Our denomination has a double bind and it is this: not only do we UUs lack a sacred text or a theology as a reference but also very few UU ministers give their congregants a way to talk about spirituality. There is no one definitive place to read about UU spirituality and there are few places to hear it preached from the pulpit. So it's no wonder that we, who are so smart in so many other ways, are inarticulate about spirituality. If you have no vocabulary, it's impossible to express yourself. Even worse, since we *think* in words, without a spiritual vocabulary, it's really hard to *think* about spirituality. The consequence is that UUs tend to feel inadequate about their spiritual side. It doesn't mean we aren't spiritual, just that we know this side of us is underdeveloped, even as we are mature adults in most other ways. On the outside we may have an advanced degree in some useful discipline, but on the inside, many of us are in spiritual Kindergarten. Lest this failing been exposed publicly, UUs tend to keep their spiritual lives secret.

Many years ago Marye Gail Harrison and I had a series of conversations about what could be done about this. Based on those conversations, Tom Gervais and I put our heads together to come up with something concrete. We brought Dave Gonci from the Fern St church and Rick Tsukada onboard and eventually the *SpiritLife* program was born. The job of *SpiritLife* is to create a safe platform for talking about and developing our spirituality. Today I'll begin to bring this vital part of us out of the closet. Hiding it away makes it seem more complex than it is. The essence of spirituality is simplicity itself.

Brother David Steindl-Rast is a lively 96 year old Benedictine monk. He says "People get the mistaken notion that spirituality is a separate department of life, the penthouse of our existence. But rightly understood, spirituality is a vital awareness that pervades all realms of our being. Someone will say, 'I come alive when I listen to music', or 'I come alive when I garden' or 'I come alive when I play golf.' Wherever we come alive, that is one area in which we are spiritual. And then we can say 'I know at least one place where I am spiritual.' To be vital, awake, aware in all areas of our lives, is the task that is never accomplished but it remains the goal."

Spirituality does not have to be esoteric. The basis of spirituality is ordinary, it's simple. You can deepen it far beyond what I am introducing today but simple practices can be very satisfying.

What exactly is spirituality to UUs? Because we don't have a specific creed, we need to use an unusually broad definition to include all the various ways that UUs might define their own spirituality. We've got to have a big tent. So let's go way back to the Latin root: *in-spire*, that which we breathe in. In its most basic form, spirit is the life force, that which enlivens us. Each breath we take is an opportunity to be mindful of our dependency on that life force. This is one reason so much emphasis is placed on breathing in meditative practices.

Of course you can't miss the English word, *inspire*, which comes to us intact from Latin. When we are spirited, we are inspired – creative, full of ourselves in a good way. We feel on top of things, capable. At the same time, we feel grounded and stable. Spirituality is innate. We don't have to earn it, we are born with it. Anyone who has spent a day with an infant can testify that babies come into this life spirited.

Some of us believe in God, or gods, or angels, spirit guides, nature deities, messages in dreams, or other sources of divine presence. A handful of us are mystics who have a direct experience of the transcendent. Some of us meditate for various reasons. Some have no particular beliefs but remain curious and open. All of that is welcome. Spirituality is a very big tent indeed... plenty of elbow room for all sorts of beliefs. And plenty of room for non-believers as well. If you get no further than owning your spirit as part of your biology, that would be fine.

In the 1920s a group of Boston Unitarians invited Paramahansa Yogananda, author of *Autobiography of a Yogi*, to the United States. This may have been the first introduction of yoga on American soil. Yogananda chose his words carefully for his new audience. He said that what we call God is a vibration that “hums through every atom” but is beyond our understanding, much like that Einstein quote at the top of your OOS.

I have found, through humbling experience, that starting a conversation about God with my fellow UUs is often the fastest way to end the conversation. On the other hand, talking about a “vibration that hums through every atom” can get the conversation started. In fact, there are countless other ways to stir our spirits without ever using that easily misunderstood word, God... indeed, even without any belief in God. UUs already feed their spirits hundreds of ways, not because they are spiritual practices, but simply because they feel good. Music is one way of tapping our innate spirituality. Have you ever really listened to a piece of music that brought tears to your eyes? It touched your spirit. But music is just one starting place for a rich spiritual life. It could be golf, or gardening, or walking the dog... any activity that is done mindfully.

[cue David to show the tree illustration on screen]

The Center for Contemplative Practices has come up with an illustration of common ways that people connect with their spiritual selves. Like all other things UU, our vocabulary needs to be inclusive and flexible. Don't be put off by the word “contemplative.” It's not far out or woowoo. We do a contemplative practice here most Sundays. We call it Turning Inward.

This tree illustrates a number of ways that we can access our innate spirituality. At the root is awareness... another word for mindfulness... and *communion*. Again, don't be put off by the vocabulary. We are communing right now, connecting with each other this morning. The connection is also a connection with ourselves... being Present. I won't go over all the elements here... some copies of this tree will be on the usher's table and you can pick one up on your way out if you'd like. [A copy is appended here.] On the main branches you'll see categories that are likely to lead you inward to your spirit: stillness, generative activities like gratitude and kindness, art or any creative endeavor, activities like volunteerism, social justice work, relating to other beings including animals, moving meditations like yoga and qigong, and many rituals and ceremonies.

There are likely things on this tree you already do. Most of these things can be done as routine tasks. What transforms them to spiritual practice is doing them along with the things at the root, Presence and mindfulness,.

Talking about spirituality won't give you a taste, so for those who are willing, let's do a little guided meditation.

Guided Meditation

Close your eyes if it feels comfortable. Settle into your seat. We'll start with three deep breaths, all the way down to your belly.

Now, if you will, bring your attention inside your body as though you were just going to have a look around. A little tour. Just notice what's going on in there, any discomfort, any hunger or places where you are too cold or warm. Let your body know you see these things. Plenty of time to come back to them later.

Now, if you will, I'd like you to imagine an empty pew facing you several feet in front of you. Just for now, we're going to place your worries on that pew. Let's start with all your concerns about health, your own and the health of your loved ones. Imagine putting your health concerns in a bag, tying it securely and placing it on that empty pew. Next come your concerns about work, be it a career, volunteer work, household work or other work you have to do. Bag and tie the work concerns and put them on the pew. Now your relationships. Any difficulties, major or minor, with friends and family go in another bag and onto the pew. Next are your worries for the world: politics, climate change, wars, famine, inflation...anything else that concerns you about the world goes in this big bag. Finally gather up any unspoken concerns and place that bag on the pew, too. There they all are, right over there on the pew.

[pause]

Notice that you are so much more than those bags. Your Essential Self is looking at those bags...undisturbed... just observing. The Essential Self is a place of peace and renewal and it is always with you, easy to find when you know what to look for.

Perhaps that Essential Self has something to say to you, either about the bags or just a general message. Take a moment to see if a message pops into your head.

We'll take another minute to rest peacefully here. The bell will sound when it is time to come back.

[ding]

When you're ready and not until you are ready, come back to the sanctuary, bringing with you the serenity of your Essential Self.

Benediction:

You don't hear the word Lord spoken much from this pulpit, but this morning I do have a message from the Lord...well, actually it's *Lord of the Rings*. Wise old Gandalf is speaking. He

says: “It’s not great power that holds evil in check. It is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folks that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love.”

Go in peace, sharing love, doing small acts of kindness. And singing your own favorite songs.



A clearer illustration can be found at: <https://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree>
