

Sermon/Discussion

I'd like to start by calling your attention to the back of the bulletin to the Eight Spheres of Spiritual Growth, taken from the Rev. Eric Wikstrom's Spiritual Practice workshop, which is part of UUA's Tapestries of Faith Program for Adult RE. We'll talk more about that in a minute, but first we begin with a Story from that workshop.

The Wandering Teacher

Once upon a time there was a Teacher who was known far and wide as one who had mastered all the great disciplines of a spiritual seeker. She wandered the country, and whenever people heard she was near, they traveled to seek her wisdom and her guidance.

"Great Teacher," one would say, "I wish to get closer to God." "By what path do you travel now?" she would ask. "I study the scriptures, diligently applying myself day and night to unlocking their mysteries," might come the reply. "Then you should put down your books and walk in the woods—thinking nothing, but listening deeply."

Another would say, "I do good to every person I meet, doing all that I can to serve their needs." "Then for a time," the Teacher would reply, "consider yourself well met and strive to serve your own needs as you have so well served others."

One day the Teacher noticed someone in the back of the crowd, someone not pushing his way to her as most of the others did.

She went to him. "What is it I can do for you?" she asked.

"I do not know," he replied. "I feel in need of something, but I do not believe in God and have nothing you could call a

'practice.'" "When do you feel most alive?" the Teacher asked.

"When I am playing with my children," the man said without hesitation. "Then play with your children," said the Teacher.

"And you will find what you seek."

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"When do you feel most alive?" We might have different answers for that. I'd like your help to get some of the answers out in the open.

**(Pass out slips. Get people to read them out.)**

**Rev. Denise Davidoff** wrote: It is my practice to take time to consciously acknowledge the gift of life most every day. I look at the world about me and acknowledge awe before the miracles of nature.

I acknowledge the joy of family, the blessings of health and the comfort of substantial material possessions. It took me a while to realize that this practice is actually meditation, perhaps it is prayer. It is a personal religious ritual, simple and at the same time complex and, I believe, very Unitarian Universalist.

Given the freedom to figure out how to be conscious of the grace in my life, disobliged to repeat a litany not of my choosing, encouraged to be awake to wonder; I love this facet of Unitarian Universalism more than any other. The imperative to learn, to discover, to not necessarily finish up where one starts. How lucky can we get to have this opportunity for spiritual sustenance and deep worship experience!

**Rev. Barbara Merritt** "Whether or not you believe in God, you need to realize that you yourself are not God." For some it takes a lifetime to achieve that realization; for others it's a daily discipline to remember it. This may be one way to understand what is meant by the term, "spirituality"—the task of discovering, and then remembering, that we are not god.

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We can sometimes get the impression that "spiritual" and "intellectual" are mutually exclusive characteristics, or that we need to "get out of our heads" to experience spiritual growth. This perception may come, in part, because the modern emphasis on spirituality often calls for types of experience other than the purely intellectual. It may stem, also, from expressions like this one, from Taoism's *Tao Te Ching* (chapter 48)—"In pursuit of knowledge, every day something is added. In the practice of the Tao, every day something is dropped"—or Zen patriarch Bodhidharma's famous dictum, "no reliance on words or letters." Christian monks such as St. Francis of Assisi again and again emphasized their own simple nature as opposed to the learned people with whom they were often in conflict. And so, in the popular imagination, people often equate "spirituality" with contemplative practices such as silent meditation rather

than, say, reading a good book on astrophysics or engaging in a lively debate on the psychology of politics.

Yet throughout time and across cultures, it has long been recognized that reason and rationality are among many paths to the discovery of deep truth. In Hinduism there are said to be five primary paths, or *margas*, leading to the same goal: realization. These are *Hatha Yoga* (body), Karma Yoga (willing), Bhakti Yoga (feeling), Raja Yoga (mind), and Jnana Yoga (knowing). According to Rabbi Rifat Sonsino, Judaism embraces six different spiritual paths: transcendence, study, prayer, meditation, ritual, and good deeds. The Zen Mountain Monastery in upstate New York has a schema with eight "gates." These eight gates provide the framework for the Eight Spheres of Spiritual Growth that [are on the back of the service bulletin]. Evelyn Underhill, a well-known British expert in mysticism, said in her book *The Essentials of Mysticism* that "reason has a well-marked and necessary place in the soul's approach to God."

While it may indeed be true that many people can get "stuck in their heads" and miss out on what Margot Adler calls "the juice and the mystery," it is by no means a direct correlation that the use of the intellect requires one to be blinded to the miraculous. Consider Albert Einstein, who said that he knew his special theory of relativity was correct not because all of the equations added up but because it was so "beautiful," and who opined that "the most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious." Many of the world's most rational thinkers find that the more they learn, the more their appreciation for the majesty and magnificent mystery of life grows as well. [This by the way, is the main theme to our story today *The Man Who Kept his Heart in a Bucket*].

And isn't this at least a workable definition of "spirituality"—that which deepens your appreciation of the magnitude of life?

- What are some of the things that make you feel most alive?
- Is doing those things a spiritual practice? How so, or why not?
- What makes a practice "spiritual" and not just "emotional" or "mental"?

- What does "spiritual" mean to you?

Spiritual Practice takes many roads. One need not believe in God or a supernatural "spirit" to be spiritual or to have a spiritual practice. In essence, our spirituality is our connection with the Spirit of Life—the energy and force that makes up the ground of our being, the ground of life itself. Spirituality can be felt and accessed by connecting to people, animals, the earth, the universe, tangible things, or intangible energies. *Spirit in Practice* seeks to help each of us grow in our connections to the sacred, however we define the sacred and however we define ourselves.

### Slips handed out for people to read (each person gets 2)

journaling

meditation

UU prayer beads

fasting

peace vigils

listening to a friend

listening to music

serving on the congregation's Board of Trustees

needlepoint

antiracism work

writing letters to the editor

painting

therapy

volunteering in the community

cardio kickboxing

bath time with your kids  
saying “hello” to cashiers and clerks  
dancing  
reflecting on the past week’s sermon  
teaching RE  
going on retreat  
washing dishes  
taking a bubble bath  
chanting  
camping  
sacred reading  
running  
random acts of kindness  
creating sacred space  
giving change to the homeless  
pledging to the congregation  
being respectful of others  
tai chi  
going to an art museum  
making pottery  
attending worship  
living with cancer  
caring for an ailing parent

living simply  
taking time to meditate about family and friends  
writing haiku  
a book study  
playing an instrument  
playing with children  
praying  
yoga  
reading poetry  
keeping Sabbath  
hosting coffee hour  
having dinner with friends  
studying astronomy  
quilting  
cycling  
recycling  
family dinners  
tipping large  
giving coworkers the benefit of the doubt  
singing in the choir  
nature walks  
recognizing the seed of goodness in the people you work with  
working for social change

meditating at your workstation

reciting mantras

reflecting and journaling

e-mailing your governmental representatives

listening to a coworker who's grieving

grief

gardening

learning about the universe

studying evolution