

Me? Spiritual?
Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
October 19, 2008

Meditation

In the midst of these tumultuous, anxiety-provoking times we share...
In the midst of whatever our own lives have brought us, for good or ill...

May we pause, and find a quietness of body and spirit at the heart of our lives...

Pause...

For now... put aside any worries... put aside any churning emotions...
If we can... put all this aside and be present... here... now...

Notice our weight in the pew...

Notice the presence of our neighbor...

Notice this room... the light just so... the ancient beams...

Here... now...

In this, the only moment we ever have...

And may we remember that it is from this moment, from this quiet, from this center, that our love grows, that our wisdom grows, that our soul grows, that our heart grows... reaching out to all beings with compassion and care and concern...

Readings

The first reading is from Chinese Zen master Layman P'ang (740-808):

My daily affairs are quite ordinary;
but I'm in total harmony with them.
I don't hold on to anything, don't reject anything;
nowhere an obstacle or conflict.
Who cares about wealth and honor?
Even the poorest thing shines.
My miraculous power and spiritual activity:
drawing water and carrying wood.

The second reading is from an essay titled “Eclectic Spirituality,” by Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Barbara Wells:

I have come to realize that my spiritual practice can best be described as “eclectic.” I have been fed through diverse and what may seem to be conflicting ways. I have gained spiritual knowledge in places as different as a college classroom and a New Age support group. I have journaled, prayed, meditated, danced, and sung to nurture my spirit. I have worshipped alone on a mountainside and in a ballroom filled with thousands. I have gone months without doing anything that looks remotely spiritual and have prayed every day for weeks at a time. That variety has been extraordinarily fulfilling and good for my soul.

Eclectic spiritual practice goes against the prevailing view that spiritual practice is like exercise: It must be a consistent, daily regimen, or your spirit will wither and die. Because this belief is so common, I have on occasion been called to task for not being “spiritual enough.” But I believe there is no one-size-fits-all spirituality. Each person’s spiritual practice will look different from everyone else’s. For many, the ideal is a regular practice that springs from one tradition and follows one path. But for others, broader boundaries along which to explore our spirits are what we need.

Sermon

Me? Spiritual?

First of all, what does that word mean?

The hymn we’ve just sung might give us a hint.

I love this old African American spiritual. “Over my head I hear music in the air... There must be a God somewhere.”

I love it not because it offers my logical, philosophical mind a proof for the existence of God. I love it because it offers balm for the spirit. I love it because whether you think you believe in some reality called God or not, the words and the music offer a truth of the heart,

If you do a web search for “over my head I hear music in the air,” you will discover that on Sunday, September 16, 2001, my colleague in the Unitarian Universalist ministry, Kathleen McTigue, said this in her opening words:

Over our heads, today, we may *hear* no music in the air. But in our time of deep grief, we come together to bear witness. The music *is* sounding still. As the sun still rises and shines each day, as the rain falls in its course and blesses us, as the stars, serene, turn in the sky, love is alive in our world. Love is our only salvation. Love will bring us to wholeness again.

Love, of course, is for many another name for God. Just as the universal forces which guide the sun’s rising (which is to say the earth’s turning), the rain’s falling, the stars and spinning galaxies... are yet another way of understanding the reality, the mystery, we might name God... or we might name cosmos... or we might name universe... in any case an interwoven mysterious and miraculous reality of which we are a part. “Over my head I hear music in the air...”

But none of this is logical “proof” for that something we might name God. Yet, suggestive at the least of a dimension to our lives we might consider “spiritual.”

In my last sermon, a couple of weeks ago, I explored the question of what it is that is “more enduring” than the passing triumphs and tribulations of our lives, of the “wheel of fortune” on which we live, as I put it, evoking that ancient symbol, with its rim of ups and downs and its hub of stillness and continuity.

I named love and wisdom, truth and ethical grounding. At the end of the sermon I asked you to name what else endures for you. Among the things you said: hope, faith, beauty, honesty, music... even chocolate.

With the possible exception of chocolate (though some might disagree), in all this I believe we are naming spiritual realities. Whether or not we find the word or concept “God” useful or comfortable, in speaking these other words, we are I believe naming or evoking spiritual realities... and doing this, whether or not we think of ourselves as “spiritual.”

So, circling back to that first question: what do I mean by “spiritual”?

I first return, as you have heard me return before, to the root of the word, the Latin “spiritus” which simply means “breath.” The translation in Hebrew is “ruah.” And in the second chapter of Genesis, the story reads that God created the flesh and bones of the first person, Adam (which itself simply means “soil” or “earth”) and then, as one translation puts it beautifully, “God... blew into his nostrils the breath (‘ruah’... ‘spiritus’) of life, and the human became a living creature.” The flesh and bones came from the earth. The life (so this story has it) comes from God – spirit. Yet... *one* living human being.

So, with this in mind, again, what do I mean by “spiritual”?

To begin with, the spiritual is whatever it is that gives us not just biological life, but life more abundant, life that is more than simple physical existence. So if some activity or practice or experience leaves us feeling more alive, then that might be a hint that we are treading in the realm of the spiritual dimension of life.

This said, we have to tread carefully. There is fool’s gold in the streams of life. For example... another drink? Might make me feel more alive. So is that spiritual? An old mistake: as others have said before me, the mistake of confusing “spirits” with the spiritual. And as it has also been said, an alcoholic or drug addict just might be a spiritual seeker knocking on the wrong door, a profoundly wrong door.

There are other wrong doors.

Maybe a faster or fancier car will make me feel more alive, some might think. Maybe more money, more than I could possibly need.

Well, nothing wrong with the pleasures of life, with worldly success. But they can all become addictions, wrong turns on the road to genuine spirit, to life truly more abundant. And the usually temporary feelings of greater aliveness from any of these things (all of them subject to the ups and downs of that wheel of fortune...) may suggest that we have been knocking on the wrong doors in our spiritual seeking.

So... “spiritual”: something more than simply feeling more alive in the moment. I would suggest, then, also more whole, more connected to the world around us, to other people, to bird and beast, to sun and moon and stars. I would suggest more ethically grounded. I would suggest more loving.

Put more simply: not just *feeling* more alive in a given moment, but *being* more alive to the wholeness of our lives and of the larger life of which we are a part.

For example then, here – to bring this down to earth a bit – are a few of what I would name my own spiritual experiences – yes, I confess... I have had spiritual experiences! – which I hope will make clearer what I mean:

Running through the woods on a sun-sparkled autumn afternoon, my breath taken away by the beauty of turning leaves, the splendor of sunlight filtered through those leaves, bathed by the mid-autumn warmth of the air around me.

Walking Nantasket Beach, waves rolling in, enduring sea stretching for miles upon miles before me, rhythmic pounding of surf bringing peace to my heart, silencing – for a time anyway – questions, worries, cares.

Listening to Schubert’s “Trout Quintet” right here in the Old Ship Meeting House several years ago, piano and strings impeccably speaking the beauty of the “Trout,” our old Meeting House holding and echoing the beauty as light from the setting sun caressed the old wooden posts and pews.

Conversation in the Parish House parlor about things that matter, conversation with you, all of us engaged in plumbing the meaning of an ancient text or poem, or struggling with an ethical or social issue – war, peace, injustice, torture – and in all of this seeking meaning within our lives, seeking to make a difference with our lives.

Finding myself immersed in conversation for half an hour with someone of a different political persuasion, considering together the complexities and challenges of our political lives, our human lives, and feeling a connection to this person that transcends this political moment and our divergent views, a connection that is human, that is spiritual.

Sharing a meal with family, sharing old jokes and the private language that comes only with years of love and care and understanding, in spite of our imperfections and mistakes along the way.

Being here with you, pondering together, singing together, silent together, sharing grief together, celebrating together... simply being together.

Sitting still for twenty minutes watching the rising and falling of my breath, noticing my ever-wandering mind, returning over and over again to the stillness at the heart of things.

Well, name such experiences something else if you like. Spiritual experience works for me, moments and occasions that heighten my experience of being alive, that connect me to others, to the world around, to the universe, to something nameless yet real and powerful at the heart of things.

Now, there is in some quarters a vigorous debate concerning the reality of what many call spiritual experience. I’ve read the books by biologists and philosophers and others who reduce spiritual to religious (and of course it is undeniable that institutional religion has been and is responsible for violence as well as peace, for oppression and division as well as justice and community; but religion is not the same as spiritual – that is another sermon...)... in any case, I’ve read the books that reduce both spirituality and religion to some kind of evolutionary instinct with survival value or just an evolutionary quirk or to a “God gene” in our DNA or a “God spot” in the brain or a chemical reaction or some combination of all these things. And it is all very interesting, evocative and provocative.

But... paraphrasing neuroscientist Mario Beauregard in his book *The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist’s Case for the Existence of the Soul*: if scientific materialism is as convincing as scientific materialists assert, why don’t most people believe it? Why do most people continue to believe in God, or in some transcendent force or power, in “something more”? Are we all that

deluded? And why would we be? What is the advantage of being deluded in this way? Of seeking meaning? Of believing at the least that there is meaning to be had, meaning that transcends the hard facts of material existence?

And after all, what we call “material” is hardly very “material” at all, but is rather made up of fields and particles that are sometimes particles, sometimes waves, that leap from one position to another with no in-between.

So that even at this quantum level of so-called material reality, there really are “more things in heaven and earth... than are dreamt of in... philosophy” as Shakespeare’s Hamlet put it.

All this said, such debate – and it *is* interesting debate – doesn’t actually matter much to our lived lives. Sure, I don’t want to delude myself by going beyond the evidence as I seek meaning in my life. But neither do I want to limit myself by denying the possibility of “something more” before the evidence is all in.

So whether one chooses to call it “spiritual” or not, I am convinced that the better way to live is to notice the beauty around us (as Annie Dillard put it, “so that creation need not play to an empty house”), and to experience that feeling of connection to everything as I walk the woods or stand beneath (or more accurately “among”) the stars, and to participate in some effort to make the world a more peaceful and just place, and to be kind. And I would name all of this spiritual.

(And, not incidentally, our Unitarian Universalist “Principles and Purposes” do a pretty good job, it seems to me, of embracing all of this.)

Now: Do you need something called a “spiritual practice” in order to have these experiences of beauty and connection and meaning, or in order to develop oneself spiritually?

Well, no... and yes...

Such experiences as I’ve described sometimes just come to us.

But intentional practices such as prayer or meditation or yoga or journal writing – or, like Barbara Wells in the second reading a more eclectic mindful mix – *can* help us grow spiritually, help us to become more attuned to the beauty of a fall day or a song or sonata or the face of the person in the next pew, can help us develop our felt sense of connection to and within cosmos, universe, can help us to more often discover spirit in our work, in our activism, in our daily encounters one with another.

To put it another way, we can live more or less mind-lessly, always reacting with our immediate emotions and impulses... or, we can practice mindfully to develop greater compassion, kindness, understanding... greater depth of spiritual awareness of one ourselves, of one another, of woods and stars.

Finally, why does any of this matter?

I expect it is self-evident.

Don’t we want to be more alive, more whole, feel more connected to one another and to... everything?

Don’t we want to be more compassionate and kind?

And doesn’t the world need more such awake and aware and kind human (humane) beings?

Whether or not we call any of this “spiritual” – whether or not any of it suggests a reality we might name God.

In any case, I don’t know about you... but over my head, if I listen... I hear music in the air...

Benediction

May we leave this place and this hour:

Recommitted to use this precious gift of life well...

In the spirit of love

In the spirit of peace

In the spirit of wisdom and compassion.

So may it be.

* * *

Further reading that may be of interest:

Spirit Matters, by Michael Lerner

The Spiritual Brain, by Mario Beauregard and Denyse O’Leary

The End of Faith, by Sam Harris

Breaking the Spell, by Daniel Dennett

Everyday Spiritual Practice, edited by Scott Alexander