

Spirituality

Unitarian Universalist Experiences

Introduction

The note of spirituality that Unitarian Universalists have heard over this past decade has become a distinct melody. It has entered our congregational life as new rituals and liturgies, and it has entered our personal lives as practices and experiences.

We have heard its sound before. We heard it in the voice of William Ellery Channing: “I call that mind free which discovers everywhere the radiant signatures of the infinite spirit, and in them finds help to its own spiritual enlargement.” We heard it in the Transcendentalists. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal One.” Margaret Fuller stated, “I accept the universe.” We heard it in the words of Humanists like Clinton Lee Scott: “The continuing mission of human beings is to learn how to live decently together. The universe responds!”

Today we hear it in our own voices as we seek what is holy. We find it in the quiet of our hearts, in the voices of fellowship, in the work of justice, and in the wonder of nature. The sound calls us to discipline and practice and manifests itself through inward spirit and outward action.

This pamphlet brings together five voices. Each of the five could have belonged to any one of us. The sound of spirituality is growing more distinct. With open hands and minds, we respond, individually and institutionally, to meet the challenge and feel the comfort of this new sound.

Rosemarie C. Smurzynski
Minister
Unitarian Universalist Area Church
Sherborn, Massachusetts

The Greater Connections

Spirituality for me is about connections, with people, with animals, with nature, with energies deeper than the human eye can perceive. My spiritual awakenings occur as I touch and am touched by other parts of our miraculous web of existence.

I am walking down the hall at church on a Sunday morning, busy with a thousand details. I decide to pause and look in at the children in the nursery. Kelly, who is only twenty months old, looks up and, smiling, calls my name. In that brief instant she offers to me the gift of the Spirit of Life.

I am tired from a hard and hassled day at the office. I open the front door feeling empty, and my German shepherd greets me. With her brown eyes filled with love and her tail wagging, she offers unconditional love—another “greater” connection.

The times of struggling and despair—these, too, offer connections. They force me to return to the core of my vision and being, and then they offer me the unbidden courage to begin swimming toward the future once more. The crisis, which occurs with such pain and fear that it takes all the discipline I have to move through it, eventually offers—in some unexpected way—an opportunity for deeper growth. These words attributed to Fra Giovanni offer inspiration: “Life is so full of meaning and purpose, so full of beauty . . . beneath its covering . . . that you find earth but cloaks your heaven. Courage then to claim it, that is all!”

My spirituality is nurtured as I allow myself to feel and experience the connections of life—seen and unseen—and to probe more openly and deeply into the energies of ultimate meaning that they offer.

Makanah Elizabeth Morriss
Co-minister
Unitarian Universalist Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming

Practice, Practice, Practice

I have been practicing meditation for almost thirty years, using different techniques drawn from Eastern religions at different times in my life. Others have also found that a daily or weekly spiritual discipline has become an essential dimension of their approach to spiritual growth. Now, in mid-life, I have settled into a meaningful daily meditation practice and biannual attendance at week-long meditation retreats as cornerstones of my

spirituality. My meditation practice takes a Zen Buddhist form. However, most approaches to meditation have the same basic understanding of the goal: “being in the moment.”

As a lifelong UU, I will always be grateful for the theologically diverse congregations I have belonged to, and for the blend of reason, justice seeking, and celebration we bring to religious life. Meditative practice has reinforced for me the deep thread of mystical appreciation for life’s oneness and wonder that runs through our UU history. I meet many other Unitarian Universalists who have felt the need for a regular discipline of the spirit. Sometimes that need is fulfilled by opportunities made available within our movement. At other times our members seek teachers and resources that are outside of our community. The blessing that is Unitarian Universalism not only allows, but encourages this search and invites us to bring back home what we learn.

Wayne Arnason
Co-minister
West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church
Cleveland, Ohio

The Interdependent Web

We should not try to separate the life of the spirit from the life of action in the world. Jesus expresses this belief clearly when he reminds his followers of the two great commandments. The first, he says, is “Love God with all your heart, soul, and strength,” and the second is “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The contemplative Thomas Merton said, “Go into the desert not to escape other men [and women] but in order to find them in God.”

I often see such attempts to build an either/or world. There is either social service or social action, either spirituality or social concern. And yet these supposedly contrasting approaches to life really need one another. Effective social change is rooted in the shared experience with those who feel social oppression. Effective social action is rooted and empowered by true spirituality.

In similar fashion, true spirituality incorporates the cries of the suffering and the search for understanding, in order to usher God’s reign into the world of human struggle.

As Unitarian Universalists we must constantly struggle against our tendencies toward individualism and separation. Contemplation, prayer, meditation, and discipline can enhance the spiritual life but can also lead to an elitist position by removing us from the

human struggle. Or spiritual life can bring us into touch with the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part, and which is torn by social and ecological wounds.

Elizabeth Ellis
Minister, Executive Director
Unitarian Universalist Urban Ministry
Boston, Massachusetts

Beyond the Immediate

“Spirituality” is a kind of lens through which to enlarge and give clarity and meaning to the chaos of moment-by-moment experience, to make sense of the jumble of the past, and to conceive a future worthy of blood and breath. I think of religion as the particular creed I believe in and through which I relate to God and existence—in my case, Christianity.

I think of spirituality as including all religions, a name or label for the whole thrust and impulse of humanity to see beyond its immediate concerns and to act beyond ego, to take part in the painful and glorious process of creation.

At different times I’ve experienced whatever I think spirituality is in prayer, work, writing, and making love—just as I have experienced all those activities without it too. I have “seen” it exemplified on Boy Scout camping trips, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the loving care of a dental hygienist with an especially antsy patient (me).

“Spirituality” is not misty and ethereal, but funny, tough, and inventive.

Dan Wakefield
Author, member of King’s Chapel
Boston, Massachusetts

Catching Our Breath

When I was in high school, I ran track for a season or two to meet my athletic obligation. Whereas the coach and all the stars of the team would wax poetic about the thrill of the

run, what I liked best about running was that, once you were finished, you had to take at least ten minutes to catch your breath. During those ten minutes life seemed most worth living, I was most swept up in gratitude. Spirituality is not unlike catching your breath and being immensely grateful for it. Indeed, in Hebrew the word spirit originally meant breath or wind.

I want that which I love to live forever, and so I am forever tempted to be a runner from life's uncertainties, to bury my head in the distractions of the everyday. But occasionally I stop running and catch my breath. Or perhaps it is my breath that catches me. Occasionally the splendor of the world—some one, some thing—intrudes itself into my life in such a way that I cannot help but notice. Occasionally the glory of the stars explodes before me so that I cannot turn away.

Whatever discloses that abundance, whatever reminds us of the best we can be, whatever summons us to transform the world into ever wider channels of justice and of love—this is spirituality. The best way to experience it, I suspect, is to pause and ponder silence, for in silence we can feel our breath return, and occasionally, if we are very, very quiet, the wind itself may speak.

William F. Schulz
Executive Director
Amnesty International, USA