

DESTINATION: SPIRITUALITY
A Sermon Offered by Rev. Tim Kutzmark
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Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading

The mystery of life
is not a problem to
be solved,
but a reality
to be experienced.
—Aart Van Der Leeuw

She listens, but hears only the emptiness of the night, and the sound of her car racing on the highway.

Her hand reaches out. She finds the ‘on’ button, and pushes it. Static fills the car, that harsh empty sound, so like the feelings pressing heavy in her heart. She moves the tuner, from radio station to radio station, static easing into momentary voices and snippets of song. She’s sampling, searching, moving on. Then, something from her past reaches out and stills her hand. She doesn’t tune away this song. She knows it well--Diana Ross, from thirty-eight years ago, 1975, the “Theme From Mahogany.” Diana Ross sings:

*Do you know where you're going to?
Do you like the things that life is showing you?
Where are you going to?
Do you know...?*

Her hands tremble at the questions, she feels suddenly exposed. “Do you know where you’re going to?” Lost on this desert road to nowhere, she turns off the radio, and reaches for a map.

If you don’t know where you’re going, you’ll never find your way.

In his search for the source of the Nile River, explorer Sir Richard Burton tells of the danger of losing direction and destination. During one foray into the wilds of Africa, his team lost sense of where they were headed, and roamed aimlessly through dunes and 120 degree desert heat. He remembers:

The sun parched our brains. . . . I opened my eyes to the heat-reeking plain . . . so blank and death-like to us . . . A few hours more and the little party would . . . [be] . . . food for the desert beasts When we had been lost thirty-six hours without water we could go no further, and we were prepared to die.” (*The Devil Drives: A Life of Sir Richard Burton* by Fawn M. Brodie, p.116)

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In some ways, we are like Burton's little group of explorers. We Unitarian Universalists walk very much in the adventurous spirit of Captain Burton. Our Unitarian Universalist religious identity historically walks off the beaten path. We have cast aside creed, dogma, and belief in only one way of being religious. We have, like Captain Burton, "shaken . . . the fetters of Habit, the leaden weight of Routine, the cloak of many Cares and the slavery of Home." But our adventure--our challenge--is not the harsh topography of Africa. We traverse the terrain of the Spirit. But, as spiritual travelers, we are in danger of becoming lost.

Many of us say we are on a 'spiritual journey.' We say that we are a 'spiritual people.' Some of us say we are spiritual but not religious. Some of us came to this church specifically to find a spiritual home. We say this church is a 'spiritual community.'

But what does it mean to be spiritual? Do we have a concept of what we mean when we say 'spirituality'? Or has the word spiritual, like much of our language, been so commonly and casually used that it has been stripped of all real meaning? Is spirituality a path leading toward the Infinite, or has it become a desert road leading to nowhere?

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In an article entitled *Sacred Blather*, Mark Matousek writes: "I've come to detest the word spirituality. After years of working in the so-called spiritual community, and writing about the spiritual path for a living, I've OD'd on sacred lingo, terms such as mystical, enlightenment, awakening. I'm saddened by how empty these words sound to me now, reduced to clichés through overexposure. Mostly I'm struck by what these words have come to hide and falsify in our scramble for higher consciousness." (*Earth Star Magazine, October/November 1997, p. 21-22*)

Matousek suggests that spirituality, like so many other things in our consumer-driven society, has become a label we wear because it looks good, feels good, sounds good. Matousek writes: "I'm painfully aware of the insidious ways in which spirituality, and all the magic it promises, can be misused as an escape or as decoration from lives we feel are too mundane."

Given Matousek's harsh condemnation, should we cast aside the word 'spirituality'? Is it meaningless, useless, or clichéd? Should 'spirituality' go into the great garbage heap of trashed terminology? I don't think so. Our challenge, I believe, is to *define* spirituality. We must gain clarity in our minds as to what 'spirituality' actually means—what Unitarian Universalist spirituality actually means. Then, with definition we can find our direction.

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What does spirituality mean to you? What does it mean to be spiritual?

I suggest there are three essential elements that contribute to true spirituality: mystery, meaning, and movement. Mystery, meaning, and movement.

Like Agatha Christie, let us begin with a good mystery. *Spirituality is that which invokes mystery in our lives.* It was Shakespeare who wrote: “There are more things in heaven and earth . . . than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” (*Hamlet*) This idea of something unknown that is beyond our comprehension can make some of us very uncomfortable. We are beings that like to know. We are beings that like to be in control of the show. We are beings that like to believe that we can ultimately wrap our minds around all things. Many Unitarian Universalists think that reason and intellect, when applied diligently, will dispel ultimate mystery—all will be revealed. But I doubt they will dispel it completely. For example, even as science stretches into the ever-expanding reaches of outer space, the answers received about the origin of the universe invoke more mystery. Scientists tell us this universe is expanding away from itself at millions of miles per hour. This unceasing race into Infinity began with the big bang; science is showing that the statistical probability of a self-sustaining creation coming from that explosion is so improbable it is staggering. To quote conservative columnist George F. Will from his article “The Gospel from Science”: “[The Big Bang] sent a cosmos hurtling outward at an unimaginable speed. The forces loosed were—are—remarkably . . . balanced. If the Big Bang has been slightly *less* violent . . .the universe would have collapsed back on itself. If the explosion had been slightly *more* violent, the universe might have dispersed into a soup The ratio of matter and energy to the volume of space at the Big Bang must have been within about one quadrillionth of 1 percent of ideal” (*George F. Will, “The Gospel From Science,” Newsweek, Nov. 9, 1998*).

In plain English, it is a scientific miracle that our universe exists today. The more we discover with our power to reason, the more miraculous it all seems. Life is amazing! The more miraculous it all seems, the more we are encircled by a sense of the Infinite Mystery of life. There *are* more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy.

It is the unfathomable that gives spirituality its source. Jack Kornfield, celebrated author and teacher of Buddhist philosophy says: “One of the preoccupations of people throughout all times and all cultures has been to find that which is sacred, which is transcendental, which goes beyond the small sense of self. In all cultures, this search is taken as a journey, although separated by continents and by centuries, it’s always the same journey. It’s the journey of going from the small self-centered view of the world to an awareness of its vastness and mystery.” (source unknown)

Why do we willingly step into the mystery? What drives us in our journey to know the unknowable? The answer, I believe, is simple. We search the mystery because we want meaning. *Spirituality is that which gives meaning to our lives.*

What is one of the first words we learn as children, and then incessantly ask? “Why?” “Why are plants green?” “Why does the sun go bye-bye at night?” “Why do I make poop?” My four year old nephew Jon is an endless loop of: “Why, why, why?” As a teen, we add a ‘not’ to that ‘why.’ Every response becomes the challenge: “Why not.” You can’t stay out that late.” “Why not?” “I don’t want you to see that boy again.” “Why not?” “You’re not going to see that movie.” “Why not?” Developmental science has determined that asking ‘why’ and ‘why not’ are the tasks of our young people. ‘Why’

emerges from a child's need to discover their world. 'Why not' emerges from a teen's need to separate and self-differentiate from that world.

But as we grow older, those questions don't stop. "Why did this happen to me?" "Why did he die?" "Why did I lose my job?" "Why don't my kids just do what I say?" "Why did I marry you?" "Why did God allow this to happen?" "Why do I need to change?" "Why not some good luck coming my way?"

From the earliest age, our life is centered on a search for meaning. Spirituality, in whatever form, should provide a framework and hold a space for that questioning. Spirituality is that which, within the mystery, gives meaning to life.

But meaning within the mystery is not enough. Hitler created meaning within the mystery, but Nazism is not spirituality. The religious right and religious fundamentalism create meaning within the mystery, but veiled hatred is not spirituality. We need one qualifying aspect to create a complete definition of the spiritual. Spirituality must uplift the human condition. It must uplift the universal condition. It must lead us to something life-giving and life affirming. *Spirituality is that which moves us towards hope, love, and new creation.*

Hope, love, and new creation: We're not talking about ignoring reality. We're not talking about pretending that our present age of uncertainty, incivility and anxiety is not real. But true spirituality dares to find hope within all that is our life. It dares to reform and rebuild even in the broken places.

I've shared this story before, but do so again, because it illustrates that impulse to find hope amidst the despair, new creation amidst shattered pieces. Richard Selzer, a cancer surgeon in a major hospital, writes:

I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be thus from now on. To remove the tumor in her cheek, I had cut the little nerve. Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry-mouth I have made? The young woman speaks. "Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks. "Yes," I say, "it will. It is because the nerve was cut." She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. "I like it," he says. "It is kind of cute," . . . he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I so close can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works . . . I hold my breath and let the wonder in. (Richard Selzer, source unknown)

Hope, new creation: This is the impulse that leads us, after the long night, to stand on a high mountaintop, drinking in the first rays of a fresh morning's dawn. This is the impulse that leads us down from that mountain into the spring meadow, joining hands

and dancing with our sisters and brothers amidst the sounds of stream, bird, bug, and summer breeze.

Hope, Love, and new creation: It is the same impulse that leads us to light candles on these cold winter nights to remind us that the light is returning. It is the same impulse that leads people to mail Teddy Bears and soft blankets to the residents of Newtown, CT. It is the same impulse that leads doctors and medical technicians to use chemotherapy and other medical treatments to prolong the lives of some of our elders in this congregation—knowing that although the extra days might not always be easy, they can still be filled with love, learning, family, friends, beauty and celebration. Hope and new creation: It is the impulse that leads so many of us—despite this age of societal uncertainty and anxiety—to commit to being part of this church, to pledge countless hours, energy, and dollars to sustaining our dream of a vibrant home for liberal religion here at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading. It is the same impulse that led our Coming of Age youth into downtown Lynn and Lawrence on a service trip to underserved communities. It is the same impulse that led several of our Senior High Youth Group leaders to go into downtown Boston and spend the night on the streets distributing warm clothes, serving food, and sitting down to eat with and get to know some of the city's homeless.

Hope, Love and New Creation: It is that same impulse that led little Anne Frank to write "...in spite of everything, I still believe that people are good at heart." It is that same impulse that led Universalist John Murray to proclaim: "You may possess only a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them not Hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love."

Mystery, meaning, movement—the three elements of spirituality. Together, they provide direction and destination to our journeying. *Spirituality is that which gives meaning within the mystery, moving us towards hope, love, and new creation.*

Hey! Maybe we *do* know where we are going! Maybe together we'll find our way.

May it be so. Blessed Be. Amen.

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