

A Meditation on Spirituality

A Sermon by Gary Lerude

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Introduction

A much analyzed and discussed survey by the Pew Research Center¹ found that the number of Americans who are not affiliated with a religion grew to 23 percent of U.S. adults in 2014, when the study was conducted. That is over 50 million Americans. In an earlier survey by Pew, nearly 37 percent of these *nones*, as they are called, say they are *spiritual*.²

What does it mean, to be spiritual?

French philosopher and priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said we are spiritual beings on a human journey. Whether you believe that or the converse — that our spirituality emerges from being human — we are spiritual beings.

What does it mean, to be spiritual?

That question has been one of my quests during 30 years as a Unitarian Universalist.

The image of spirituality from my youth in the late '60s would be of someone sitting in a lotus position, meditating, the smell of incense in the air, perhaps a sitar playing softly in the background. However, that caricature has evolved considerably over the decades, shaped by my exploration.

This morning, I'll share *my* answer to the question “What does it mean to be spiritual?” — with the caveat that I encountered no burning bushes on the drive from Nashua to Peterborough. And I didn't have time to go to the top of Pack Monadnock to see if there were any stone tablets lying about.

Let's begin in traditional UU fashion by defining terms. What do I mean by spirituality? The term spiritual comes from the Latin term *spiritus*, meaning breath. The current definition of spiritual relates to the human spirit or soul, in contrast to material or physical things.

To me, the spiritual focuses on the mysterious essence of our being that animates us and makes us human, with self consciousness and the ability to conceptualize ideas and bring them into reality. Living a spiritual life is living in a way that realizes our positive human capabilities, both individually and as a community.

¹ www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/

² www.nytimes.com/2014/07/19/us/examining-the-growth-of-the-spiritual-but-not-religious.html?_r=0

You may have noticed that I have said nothing about religion. As I distinguish religion and spirituality, religion is an organized effort to explain the meaning of life and how to live ethically and morally. Religion is embodied in some type of institution. While religion is focused on living the spiritual life, living the spiritual life does not require religion.

With that bit of definition, let's turn to the interesting questions: What does it mean to be spiritual? What is a spiritual life? My explorations have led me to discern five practices that embody spirituality:

- Humility
- Gratitude
- Compassion
- Service
- Transcendence

Let's explore them.

Humility

Perhaps you've heard the story of a Buddhist scholar who traveled to Japan to visit a Zen master. While the scholar had long studied Buddhism, he wanted to meet with the master to learn more deeply about Zen. As the master prepared tea to welcome the scholar, the scholar began to talk about his studies and expertise in Buddhism. When the tea was ready, the master poured the tea into the scholar's cup until it began to overflow and spill onto the floor. The scholar saw what was happening and shouted, "Stop! The cup is full! No more will go in!" The Zen Master smiled. "Like this cup," he said, "You are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

Humility is emptying your cup.

It's hard to be humble growing up and living in American culture, considering the value our society places on independence, competition, and the idea of the self-made man or woman.

In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin tells that his initial list of personal virtues — 12 of them — did not include humility. He added it when a Quaker friend politely suggested that Franklin was too proud, even overbearing when stating a position.

Franklin writes: "In reality, there is, perhaps, no one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself; you will see it, perhaps, often in this history; for, even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility."

We all have justifiable reasons to be proud. Yet, we need humility to balance our feelings of self-importance. Without humility, I won't understand that I am just a part of society and a microscopic part of the universe. I risk being like Franklin: forcing my views, my approaches, my solutions on others who may not agree with my perspective. Each of us faces this spiritual dilemma: how to make our own unique contributions without hubris.

Contemplating what it means to live humbly, I've found it helpful to think of a field of flowers. Each flower is unique and beautiful and worthy of a photograph, yet no flower takes away from the beauty of the others. And the field of flowers is more beautiful than any single flower. You and I are flowers in that field. We should live our short summers by showing our individual beauty, while affirming the other flowers in the field.

Musical Reflection

Gratitude

Galen Guengerich, the Senior Minister at All Souls Church in New York City, believes that gratitude should form the heart of our Unitarian Universalist theology.

Why gratitude?

He writes: "It has to do with the role of religion and the nature of the universe. The role of religion, in my view, is to help us find our place as human beings within this universe we call home... I believe that gratitude is the appropriate religious response to the nature of the universe."

He goes on: "The first principle of the universe is not independence, but its opposite: utter dependence. Everything that exists is made up of constituent parts that are borrowed from, shared with, and related to others outside it. As humans, we are dependent upon the parents who conceived us, the plants and animals who daily give their lives for our nourishment, the trees that reverse our cycle of taking in oxygen and giving off carbon dioxide, and the sun that warms the atmosphere and lights our path. In every respect, we are utterly dependent."

Guengerich's conclusion is that an ever-present gratitude should be our response to that dependence. Yet the repetition of our days and stability of our lives can lull us into a sense of routine, which we then take for granted and, ultimately, believe we are entitled to. It is this sense of entitlement, this attachment, that the Buddhists see as the source of human suffering.

How do we cultivate an ongoing sense of gratitude?

I have been inspired by Kristen Munsen, who writes a blog called [The Grateful Project](#). For years now, most every day — with occasional lapses — she posts one or two sentences noting something that made her grateful that day. The idea came to her while visiting Calistoga,

California and seeing an olive tree covered in tiny white tags, each with a handwritten message of gratitude. She writes in her blog, “The idea was simple, the meaning profound. After reading several I felt obligated to contribute something in return. I found a basket of papers nearby and considered what to write. What am I thankful for today I wondered? I spent several minutes tapping my pen pondering what it was I wanted to leave behind. Finally, I wrote: ‘I am grateful to be able to celebrate the small things. And the big things – with the same person.’ This action of pausing to consider what I am truly grateful for each day is an exercise I have repeated each day since.”

Inspired by her devotion, I have developed my own act of gratitude, although I have not been nearly as consistent. On the mornings when I have a few moments before I let the day engulf me, I look at my surroundings, take a photo with my phone, and post it to social media with the label “Morning Gratitude.” It may be a flower or a cloud pattern in the sky, something that reflects my gratitude for the gift of sight. It may be the view from a hotel or other sight in a distant city that reflects my gratitude for the opportunity to travel.

This act of ongoing gratitude, whatever form it takes, should reflect Kristen Munsen’s admonition: “...every day something happens to be thankful for. Every day. Even the days your heart winds up on the bottom of someone else’s shoes.”

Musical Reflection

Compassion

While humility limits our sense of self-importance, compassion enables us to understand and support others.

I think it is unfortunately inherent in human nature that we are quick to judge others negatively. The greater the difference between *us* and *them*, the harsher our judgment. Within the span of my own life, I have seen society’s biases against long hair, the Japanese, African Americans, Latinos, gays, Muslims, southerners — even New England Yankees.

Karen Armstrong, the noted religious scholar, received the TED Prize in 2008. You probably know that TED stands for Technology, Entertainment, Design and have seen TED talks on YouTube. Each year the TED prize recognizes *One Wish to Change the World*. The idea is that the award will recognize and promote the recipient’s wish, which will galvanize the imagination, energy, and resources of the TED community. And they will work to transform the wish into reality. Karen Armstrong’s wish: to implement a [Charter for Compassion](#).

The Charter for Compassion includes these words: “The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of

our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.”

The Dalai Lama is a well-known advocate for compassion. He says: “Compassion compels us to reach out to all living beings, including our so-called enemies, those people who upset or hurt us. Irrespective of what they do to you, if you remember that all beings like you are only trying to be happy, you will find it much easier to develop compassion towards them.”

Our challenge in translating these lofty words into spiritual living is to catch ourselves when we don’t understand another perspective, when we become impatient and frustrated. As that moment of “shenpa” occurs, that moment when we self-righteously start telling ourselves the “us versus them” story, we need to pause, recognize our common humanity and that “the other” is a *sacred being*. Namaste. I bow to you.

I like Mother Teresa’s reflection about how she treated the poorest of the poor in Calcutta: “Each one of them is Jesus in disguise,” she said. You don’t have to believe in Jesus to believe the principle.

Musical Reflection

Service

We come now to service. While humility, gratitude, and compassion are largely “in our heads” — meaning how we perceive ourselves, others, and life — service requires action and interaction with others. You have probably heard the expression “We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.”

Rebecca Parker, the former president of Starr King School for the Ministry, a Unitarian Universalist seminary, urges us to identify and share our gifts. She writes: “Your gifts — whatever you discover them to be — can be used to bless or curse the world. The mind’s power, the strength of the hands, the reaches of the heart, the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing. Any of these can serve to feed the hungry, bind up wounds, welcome the stranger, praise what is sacred, do the work of justice or offer love. You must answer this question: what will you do with your gifts? Choose to bless the world.”

Have you considered that question? How do you choose to bless the world? What are the gifts that only you can give?

Blessing the world doesn’t require joining the Peace Corps or becoming President. It is simply looking around and serving in some small measure, especially to aid those who are marginalized or disenfranchised by our society. We extend our compassion through service.

Musical Reflection

Transcendence

Transcendence is hard to explain yet unmistakable when you encounter it. It's the palpable sense of being part of something much larger than yourself. The boundary of your identity, your day-to-day frame of reference, blurs. You feel the larger mystery of creation.

Navy Captain Ed Mitchell was the sixth human to walk on the moon, at the end of January in 1971 — 45 years ago. In relating the nine hours he spent on the surface, he tells the following story. You may want to close your eyes and imagine the scene he describes: “Suddenly, from behind the rim of the Moon, in long, slow-motion moments of immense majesty, there emerges a sparkling blue and white jewel, a light, delicate sky-blue sphere laced with slowly swirling veils of white, rising gradually like a small pearl in a thick sea of black mystery. It takes more than a moment to fully realize this is Earth ... home. My view of our planet was a glimpse of divinity.”

His fellow astronaut Alan Shepard had a similar experience when he stood on the moon. Shepard says: “If somebody had said before the flight, ‘Are you going to get carried away looking at the earth from the moon?’ I would have said, ‘No, no way.’ Yet when I first looked back at the earth, standing on the moon, I cried.”

While none of us will likely stand on the moon, each of us has experiences just as moving: seeing the Milky Way Galaxy on a dark night, watching a spectacular sunrise or sunset, witnessing the birth of a child, being part of a group that accomplishes something deeply meaningful. And I suggest that each of us has *more* opportunities than we realize to connect with the larger mystery of life, if we'll just step outside the *busy-ness* of our daily routines.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, writes “Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black curious eyes of a child — our own two eyes. All is a miracle.”

Indeed. All is miracle, if we only stop to see as though we have never seen before. Or heard before. Or smelled before. Or felt before.

The first step to experiencing transcendence is pausing and being open. Recognize what connects or inspires you, then spend time nurturing it. Is it music, being out in nature, deep conversations with dear friends? What is it that pulls you across the boundary of self and into connection?

Summary

Humility, gratitude, compassion, service, transcendence — five dimensions I've encountered on my journey toward a spiritual life.

Living spiritually is not ascetic or isolating, like becoming a monk and living silently in a monastery. Our busy lives can be spiritual. The challenge is practicing an awareness that keeps us present and engaged in the mystery and miracles of each day. We want to avoid the trap where our days become a tread mill of the routine and monotonous. Rather, we seek to develop and maintain the ability to experience life as a very young child would, with joy and wonder. Living spiritually, we won't become numb to this wondrous gift.

In his book *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau wrote, "Only that day dawns to which we are awake." Indeed. May we awaken to the fullness of life each morning.

Closing Hymn