

In the Depths – The Spiritual Depths

So, I've gone off the deep end. We could have a lot of fun with this. How about a six-foot deep baptismal pool up here in the chancel, maybe with a glass front, to watch the swimming? Or some snake handling, or maybe some peyote. But no death cults – no kool-aid or trips to heaven in the wake of Haley's comet. The spiritual deep end IS a relative term.

Last year, at the board retreat, we listed as one of the goals that the board would support the minister and Worship Committee in the "renewal of worship." Our worship style has begun to feel quite dated to me, a little lacking in energy, -- "not enough juice." Old and stuffy, like me. : -) Maybe it's that I'm getting old. Or maybe, it's because we've been doing the same thing in worship for sixteen years. But it seems to me it needs to be re-thought. The covenant and affirmation of faith which we use was chosen at the beginning of the congregation, because it was expedient. We borrowed it from Schenectady, because we needed some words that we would all read and sing together. The words of this specific covenant appear in the back of the hymnal, with the addition of "with our God." So, it has stood the test of time. But these words were never really ours in the sense that we went deep within ourselves to wrestle with what it is that we do together, our reason for gathering. We never drafted and adopted our own covenant for worship, something that came from within us.

The most urgently-needed change was to do something about the announcements, which were sometimes running to 15 minutes, as long as most sermons. But this change was so traumatic that we got stuck there. For ten months, the board talked about announcements, and we never got to the deeper work of looking at our covenant and affirmation of faith, or thinking deeply about what kind of music we want and what role and form prayer and meditation would take. I feel sad about this, but it will be there to do with another minister.

There is much talk in Unitarian Universalism these days about hunger for spiritual deepening. The Wellspring program is billed as a "program for spiritual deepening." But after reading many articles and books about spiritual deepening as part of my assignments for the Shalem Institute's Long-term Training in

Spiritual Guidance, I think we don't really have much of a clue about spiritual deepening. Only half-jokingly, I say, our idea of spiritual deepening is "we'll move from here to here (from just below the mouth to the bottom of our chins.). But please, don't ask us to get out of our heads, or involve our bodies or our whole selves. Don't expect us to have some kind of daily spiritual practice. Coming to church a couple of times a month to have an intellectually-stimulating sermon is quite enough spiritual practice for me."

I've come to believe that part of this resistance to spiritual deepening is rooted in our anti-authoritarianism – "Don't tell me what to believe." But more important is fear – especially fear of loss of self. The hymn we sang just a few minutes ago, about "the soul of nature" pouring itself into my soul is a good description of what the psychiatrist Gerald May calls a "unitive experience." In such experiences, we encounter the mystery at the heart of life. Wordsworth still says it best for me,

*I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things."*

This, or the description of Brahman that we read a few minutes ago, is much closer to what I think of as God than the old white guy in the sky. It's

largely mystery. It can be experienced but not fully understood. It involves as Gerald May says, a “surrender of all willfulness.” And that’s pretty scary, especially if our world view is that we are accidents of evolution, and this is all there is for us. My consciousness is separate from all other consciousness. It began when I was born and will end when I die and that’s all there is to it. So, hell no, I can’t surrender myself. It’s all I’ve got. I must hang on to it at all costs.

So, for good reason, we fear opening ourselves to the mystery, because we fear loss of self. And yet, when we’ve run out the string of psychology, when it cannot help us overcome our weaknesses or addictions, when science cannot explain everything, we may have no choice but to expand our boundaries and open up to the mystery. Gerald May says, “No spiritual quest can progress very far without becoming religious.” And what does it mean to become religious? When we “begin to identify a relationship with the Ultimate Spirit or Mystery of life, and when that relationship begins to manifest itself in specific behaviours such as worship,” we have become religious. (Page 33, *Will and Spirit*.)

Religious worship addresses many human needs: a need for belonging, or community; a sense of moral responsibility (ethics); a sense of security (what happens when I suffer and die?); and inevitably, a need to understand “the mystery and meaning of being.” This is where the tension about worship manifests. We strive to meet all these needs. We meet the need for belonging – through announcements and through joys and sorrows. We meet the need for “experiencing the mystery and meaning of being” through readings and sermons and “going inward” to the deepest part of ourselves, opening to the mystery or God. Sometimes these needs compete. If we restrict worship to one hour, it can be tricky to find the right balance for meeting all these needs. Which needs should predominate?

Would it be enough to just have announcements and joys and sorrows and coffee hour? One of Garrison Keillor’s jokes about us is that UUs “come together to sing ‘Climb Every Mountain,’ drink coffee and go home.” We need more. We need to sing together, to engage in ritual and meditation and prayer, and to hear sermons in order to have spiritual depth in the service. We need all of it, and we

may not all have the same idea of how to balance those things. For me, in worship, the vertical dimension, encountering the mystery, is more important than hearing announcements or introducing visitors or even passing the peace.

I'm feeling more at home these days with my peers at Shalem Institute than in Unitarian Universalism. My peers at Shalem are deeply spiritual AND deeply religious, and yet they are very tolerant and open and non-judgmental. Most of them call themselves Christian, yet many have explored Eastern religions. They are very curious about my spiritual journey, anxious to not offend me, to make space for me, wherever I am. I wish we could be as open and non-judgmental. When we began this congregation, I always hoped it would be a congregation which would honor many paths. I never wanted us to be just a Humanist congregation or a Christian congregation. I always strive to find language for worship that is most inclusive. We use Spirit of Life, a term which came out of the Humanist tradition, rather than the word "God," because it leaves lots of room for interpretation. But I also worry that in trying to be all things to all people, we sacrifice spiritual depth. I'm haunted by Huston Smith's advice with regard to exploring many traditions: "If you want to strike water, it's better to dig one deep well than many shallow wells."

Our struggles with language also prevent spiritual deepening. Can you be a deeply spiritual person and not believe in God, not use any religious language? Yes, but I think it may be harder, because you'll have to invent your own language. We need language, and yet spirituality transcends language. Certainly many Buddhists are deeply spiritual without "believing in God." Yet I find they have equivalent concepts, but label them differently. Language is inadequate for expressing and describing all that we think and feel, and it's inadequate for expressing or describing the Mystery. That's why symbols are the language of religion, because they point to something beyond. We shouldn't get too excited about one another's language. When you find yourself reacting to someone else's religious language, please check out their meaning. It's likely that you are reacting negatively to a meaning that's only in your mind and not in theirs.

Spiritual depth also isn't primarily about having unitive or ecstatic experiences, though such experiences may change us. Spiritual deepening happens as we re-orient life to a divine center.

Thomas Keating, a Quaker who was both a scientist and a spiritual leader, and who studied religions of both the East and the West, writes about how we order our mental life on more than one level. On one level, we're thinking about all the details that we have to attend to in order to just get through life – carrying on our businesses, feeding, clothing and sheltering ourselves.

But deep within “we may also be in prayer and adoration, song and worship and a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings.” He notes that our secular world “values and cultivates only the first level, assured that there is where the real business of mankind is done, and scorns, or smiles in tolerant amusement, at the cultivation of the second level—a luxury enterprise, a vestige of superstition, an occupation for special temperaments.” Sometimes I feel like you treat me like a “special temperament.” “Oh Linda, well, she's the minister, so we'll let her attend to all that stuff. We'll tend to the real mission of the church, which is basically getting to know and care for one another.” I'm the religious expert to whom you've delegated the religious tasks. Meanwhile, I'm saying, “No, come and go with me to that land. Liturgy is the work OF THE PEOPLE, not the work of the service leader.” There really is no way we can do each other's spiritual work. We can be with one another, walk together, companion one another. But we cannot encounter the mystery for each other. You got to “wade in the water” for yourself.

Thomas Keating advises that it isn't in ecstatic experiences that we seek and find our divine center. It is instead, in a steadfast attending to our deepest selves. He writes:

“In a deeply religious culture, men know that the deep level of prayer and of divine attendance is the most important thing in the world. It is at this deep level that the real business of life is determined.”

For it is at this deep level that our motivations are brought to light, our desires educated, our intentions formed

Keating continues,

The secular mind is an abbreviated, fragmentary mind, building only upon a part of man's [humanity's] nature and neglecting a part—the most glorious part—of man's [our] nature, powers and resources. The religious mind involves the whole of man, embraces his relationship with time within its true ground and setting in the Eternal Lover. It ever keeps close to the fountains of divine creativity. In lowliness it knows joys and stabilities, peace and assurance, that are utterly incomprehensible to the secular mind. It lives in resources and power that make individuals radiant and triumphant, groups tolerant and bonded together in mutual concern, and is bestirred to an outward life of unremitting labor.

Between the two levels is fruitful interplay, but ever the accent must be upon the deeper level, where the soul ever dwells in the presence of the Holy One. For the religious man is forever bringing all affairs of the first level down in to the Light, holding them there in the Presence, reseeding them and the whole of the world of men and things in a new and overturning way, and responding to them in spontaneous, incisive, and simple ways of love and faith. Facts remain facts when brought into the Presence in the deeper level, but their value, their significance is wholly realigned.” (page 9-10)

So, the heart of religious life is not in discussing the ideas we hear in sermons or philosophizing about the good life. The heart of religious life is in commitment to attending to and living from our deepest selves. Spiritual deepening results in increasingly living simultaneously on both levels.

We UUs are famous for questioning. We're famous for being seekers. But seeking is not finding. And finding is not about experiencing

the occasional ecstatic experience. Finding is a discipline of centering ourselves in the best that we can conceive.

“Here,” says Keating, “is not ecstasy, but serenity, unshakableness, firmness of life-orientation.”

There is humility in surrendering ourselves to that which is greater. It may be even harder for us because of our intellectual orientation. Keating says, “Where pride in one’s learning is found” it is harder to find people oriented to living from a divine center. If we are conventionally religious, it is easy to “confuse acquaintance with theology and church history with commitment and the life lived in the secret sanctuary.” What’s important is not how much knowledge we have, but how much we are oriented to the “divine source” for direction in using our knowledge.

Jesus said we lose our life to find it. If we are not acquainted with this deeper life, such statements seem meaningless or even crazy. But if we have embraced the paradox of “divine orientation” it takes on great meaning.

Well, what is it like swimming in the deep end?

First, we see beauty everywhere, because everything seems suffused with that “presence” that so disturbed Wordsworth. The maker of the film *American Beauty* captured it so well with the filming of a plastic bag dancing in the wind.

Beauty is everywhere: in nature, in changing light, in the face of a troubled or troublesome congregant, or a besieged and grumpy store clerk or a homeless stranger. Reality opens up when one lives life on the deeper spiritual level. There is less that needs to be pushed away. And yet it is also simpler because it is easier as Lao Tzu advises “to choose this, and let go of that.”

There is also greater intellectual and emotional freedom. We are not held so tightly by words, or by one meaning of words. We can be more open to others’ spiritual journeys, not so quick to reject their experience, not so quick to judge them as crazy or “off the deep end.” There comes a spaciousness, a hospitality of spirit which says, I receive you, accept you as you are.

It is possible to love our own faith, and not judge or reject others. The outer covering, the language, the rituals, may be different, but at bottom, we are all human, encountering the boundaries of our knowledge and the mystery beyond.

In the spiritual depths our emotional lives also open up, in that we have less need to define ourselves over and against others, or against rules and customs. Pema Chodron, the Buddhist nun, helps me to understand that what happens to us is much more about the stories we tell than the facts of the case. When we are feeling persecuted, it's because we've created a story about what's happening, about others' motives. The same can be said of joy. These are our own projections. If we watch them long enough, they will change or fade.

There is also freedom from fear down here in the spiritual depths. When we open to the possibility that there is more to this world than our version of it, more to our lives than a blip of consciousness, we can transcend fear, because we know our spirits are part of Brahman, or World Spirit. It may or may not be that we exist as separate consciousness after we die. But it matters less, because we entrust our small selves to the larger self. I'm amused that the Western Bible says, 365 times, "Be Not Afraid, or Fear Not." Once a day, I guess.

In the deep end, we learn that swimming is not so much "pushing the river" or pushing against the river, but surrendering to the current. There is a vast difference between talking about swimming while standing on the bank, and wading into the deep water. Real spiritual depth is out there in the middle--immersed, fully wet, fully surrendered and trusting. It's a whole body, whole self experience, bringing not necessarily ecstasy, but serenity.

The deep end? Come on in. The water's fine. :-)

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