

Spirituality and Narcissism”

A sermon by Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, August 26, 2007

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

Several years ago (1991) the President of the American Centenarian Committee claimed that those who reach 100 “inevitably have a strong sense of spirituality.” He said, “I haven’t found a centenarian yet who’s an atheist.” I think he was a narcissist, in love with his own theistic beliefs.

If you would emulate Methuselah, you can try spirituality, but I doubt if belief in god will help you live longer. The man was speaking at the birthday celebration of a 112-year-old woman, Katherine Jones whose niece said her aunt “is a nice lady [who] has a good sense of humor [and] that’s why she’s lived so long.” I think a good sense of humor may be a source of spirituality, and it may help you live a long time. Or enjoy living.

There are many definitions of spirituality and curious theories about longevity. Some seem a little strange to me. Charles Mayo, the doctor who founded the Mayo Clinic, said he once received a letter from a spiritualist who wrote, “Ever since your late great father passed over, he has been my doctor. What do you say to that?”

Mayo wrote back “Fine! Please estimate what my father’s services have amounted to and send the money to me.” Who was truly spiritual, the person with the occult experience or the compassionate doctor, a skeptic with a sense of humor, who spent his life healing others?

Another, Isaac Newton, was badgered repeatedly by a woman who wanted him to use his spiritual power with the stars to help her find a lost purse. To get rid of her, he dressed in a strange costume. When she came again he drew a circle around himself and chanted: “Abracadabra! Go to the façade of Greenwich Hospital... On the lawn in front of it I see a dwarfish devil bending over your purse.” This is a true story. He said that.

She went there and came back with her purse. Newton scoffed at her and remained a skeptic about such things. His last words on his death bed were reported to be “I do not know what I may appear to the world. But to myself, I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.” That, for me, is a rational spiritual statement.

What is spirituality? Does it require miracles or is it a profound experience of natural mysteries? Is it transformational? Can it be both ordinary and an experience of the awesome? Perhaps it’s all of them. Isaac Newton was both a scientist and a devout believer in God even when he quarreled with the rigid dogmas of the Catholic Church.

Recently I shared a discussion of spirituality with a dozen UU ministers, trying to identify what might be our own unique UU spirituality. The leader, the Rev. Mary Grigolia of ERUUF, said she thought UU’s need to develop an understanding of our spirituality that goes beyond our usual objective rational statements.

We UU’s are a *heady* folk. We like to think and discuss ideas about things, the world and life. But living *is* more than thinking, and religion *is* more than ideas.

Mary said we start with being bodies, and secondly move into thinking, and then third into

“soul” and fourth into something she calls “spirit.” Your feeling and thinking start with your body, she said, and then it’s concentrated in mind as it is put into words and concepts.

When we integrate all of that into the experience that is unique to each of us, we become separate individual “souls,” Mary said. Her fourth step takes us beyond ourselves into a unity with everything that exists, in the interdependent web, into what she calls “Spirit,” the One.

This description of the UU journey is not exclusive to those who believe in god, or an oversoul, or whatever you wish to call it. The description belongs to the second stage of the thinking mind that uses words and concepts to define things, to make sense of living.

Mary observed that UU worship often stops there. She said we need to move ahead into experiential states of spirituality to find that which unites us as a *religious* people. Some UU’s follow spiritual practices like Tai Chi or meditation or yoga from other cultures and religious traditions. She said we need to develop our own *unique* ways, from our *own* UU roots.

I think our own way *is* found in services that bring together all aspects of the spirituality that she was describing with one further critical piece, forbearance. We accept one another even in our differences and gather as congregations to celebrate diversity. As congregations. It’s not enough to be individuals expressing UU spirituality.

We listen to ideas in sermons or talks. We sing hymns. We read responsive readings aloud together that affirm and challenge us. We listen to music that sometimes lifts us to higher emotional levels, even to reverie. We meditate in silence and sometimes to words and music. If it works, we are stimulated, moved outside ourselves to agree-disagree-explore it all. We feel alone-and-part-of others, and perhaps laugh a little at being human. All of that together *is* the UU spiritual practice.

It’s coming in and out of different kinds of experiences, alone and together. Part is quarreling (usually silently) with the speaker or with communal words, and then being okay with the differences among us. Part is feeling oneself a piece of the interdependent web, not bothered by knowing that others are different, or that we don’t know what the best answers are. Gee, we’re not even sure what the right questions are.

Part of it is moving beyond ourselves to bond with one another, feeling a unity with the universe and knowing our differences enhance us. Our Statement of Principles and Purposes points to typical UU behaviors. They are important, even necessary, but not sufficient in themselves to describe what our spirituality is all about.

Two years ago Mary and I went to a Unitarian church in Britain. I felt completely at home in spite of readings that meant little to me. A member who was Christian conducted the service. He reminded us that this was the fourth Sunday of Lent. It was clear from other readings and songs that one did not have to be Christian to be at home there, but that it also was okay to be Christian there.

His reading told about Jesus being tested by the Devil. I sat there charmed. I could not imagine reading the same verses in this church, but the verses were at home there, and so was I. Others shared readings about mothers, for it was “Mothering Sunday” in the United Kingdom (and the colonies). One was about the mother’s role in Islam. Like the one about Jesus it had nothing and everything to do with my life. I’m not Muslim. I’m not Christian. We did everything there we do here—and a little more.

Afterwards we recessed to the Vestry for coffee and tea. They were very friendly and excited to know that they had Unitarians from abroad among them. We felt at home. That's part of what UU spirituality is about, being at home in a congregation even when you know you are different. You don't have to be the same to be safe here. We want to be ourselves as we know ourselves to be.

Several years ago I conducted a survey among Unitarian ministers to find out what they thought "spirituality" means. Most were not very happy with the word. One said "People of two different religions can have the same spirituality. What bothers me is that UU's act like they know what they mean by it, and I don't think they do."

Another said "spirituality means experiencing life at the deepest level; it is work you do towards wholeness. Depth is the key. There are all different paths to open yourself to it, how I commit myself to what I do, not what I do. Every UU has a different definition," he said. A third said "it's a word I'm nervous with; it's a garbage word." He explained that people throw everything they want into it, everything that they like, and no one really knows what's there, what it really means.

I think spirituality for most UU's is ordinary, human, wholeness-creating, value-full, rational, very real, concrete, personal and interpersonal. Our mystics experience it as a transforming mystery. Our rationalists sometimes get spooked when we talk about mystery. Many of us feel it must flow back into the world in social action to be truly constructive.

After asking my colleagues about the meaning of spirituality I asked what they saw as its negative aspects. I asked "are there dangers in spiritual practices or the ways that people experience and use them?" Their answers varied widely but several repeated one concern: narcissism.

The Greek youth Narcissus saw his own reflection in a fountain and thought it the presiding nymph, the power there, a beautiful semi-divine being. He fell in lust with the image, jumped into the fountain to reach her, and drowned. When other nymphs came to take his body to pay it funereal honors they found only a flower in the fountain, the narcissus.

Plutarch said the name comes from the Greek *narke* for numbness. Eating narcissus flowers can cause *narcosis*, or numbness. Admiring one's own image too much produces numbness to others. Admiring one's own spiritual experience too much produces numbness to the value of others' spiritual experiences. It happens to all kinds of fundamentalists.

The narcissism in the "Me" generation led to glorification of the self and indulgence in personal desires to the exclusion of the needs and wants of others. I think that's a symptom of an anti-spiritual disease that can produce numbness to others. It's anti-spiritual for us UU's especially because anything that produces numbness to human values, wholeness, reality and the needs and values of others is anti-spiritual by definition.

Fundamentalism is narcissistic when it claims to be the only way to wholeness, to goodness or what it calls salvation. It falls in love with itself. America's religions certainly aren't unique in this. The awful carnage of Iraq's Sunnis and Shiites, the endless quarrels of Irish Catholics and Protestants and the violence among Indian Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs points to the same narcissism.

Our spirituality can be destructive of our deepest values if it deadens us to the needs, joy and anguish of others. That's true for UUs who think their way of being religious is superior to others' ways. I think our spirituality is healthy only when it flows from a spring at which anyone can drink, where no one feels she must be an Echo, and no one posts "No Trespassing" signs so he can keep the spirit to himself.

Our spirituality transcends narcissism when it's rooted in a vision of the common good that we work to share with others and when we respect the spirituality of others in practices that we don't choose for ourselves. I think we are most spiritual when we listen well to the voices of others and to the voice of the universe, however we hear it.

Take joy in the deepening of your own life and that of others even when it is most different from your own. If we were all alike there would be no way for us to grow.

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