The Spirituality of '76

Is it Enough to Base our Religion On?

by

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My college philosophy professor, Wallace Roark, who was also a Southern Baptist minister, frequently said, "Believing in God is nonsense." What he meant is that there is nothing tangible to validate one's belief in God. Although a believer in God himself, Dr. Roark liked to speak in paradoxes and did not mean, as the term "nonsense" is often used, to imply that believing in God is silly. He literally meant that there is no material proof to substantiate such a belief, and that those who claim to be believers ought to understand and become comfortable with this fact. Believing in God is believing in something there is no evidence of.

I believe the same can be said of the word "spiritual" and its derivatives, like "spiritually" and "spirituality." *Spirituality is nonsense*. There are dozens of differing definitions of this word, which makes its meaning vague to begin with, even though it is often spoken as if everyone understands it in the same way. "I want something more spiritual." "She's a very spiritual person." "It was a spiritual experience." Or, as I've often heard said of me, "His sermons are not very spiritual."

I don't wish to offend, but in the *spirit* of honesty, I usually take this word to mean "nonsense," and that's what I hear when it's being used, unless its users define what precisely they mean by it. Theologian Matthew Fox, for example, coined the term "Creation Spirituality," which refers specifically to being inspired by and devoted to the natural world —which is not nonsense but the very source of sense itself. *Nature is sensational*. But, without such qualification, most of the time it is used, as its synonyms suggest, to mean something *nonmaterial, incorporeal, disembodied, intangible, unprovable, spirit, ghost*, and so forth. As such, I am in complete agreement with those who criticize me or my sermons for not being very "spiritual." I strive to fashion and present sermons based on sense not nonsense, and that are based on empirical evidence, reason, and research, not on untruths or unprovable ideas that induce positive feelings and fool some into thinking they've had a profound experience.

Sometimes I hear, "Your sermon was so good, it moved me to tears." Occasionally my sermons move me to tears, too. But crying is human, not spiritual. In fact, humans are the only known species that shed tears. Be they tears of joy or grief, crying is the biological signature of an entirely ordinary human experience, as are the various physiological expressions of all our emotions, like frowning, smiling, wide eyes, and changes in heartrate and respiration. What some consider a spiritual experience is really an emotional shift, which is human and physical; ordinary not extraordinary. Granted, the point of a church service is to create a space where our thoughts and feelings can shift. But, as a Unitarian minister who respects the autonomy and dignity of others, it is never my intention to manipulate your feelings or beliefs. Our church services—my sermons, our songs and

music, the readings, and other rituals—are about opening our minds and hearts to new possibilities and new ways of seeing things, not directing your thoughts and feelings in specific ways. And all these elements are based on sense, not nonsense. So, it is more accurate to say that a particular service, sermon, song, or music "was moving" or "moved me."

Emotions are physical experiences that can be traced to our biology and neurology. They are not spiritual, meaning they are not non-corporeal or nonsensical events. If by "spiritual" some mean they want to go to church and feel something, then they should say so, and, more importantly, be aware that this is really what they are seeking—a neurochemical reaction, a dopamine rush—not a disembodied spiritual occurrence that transcends or defies what it wrongly and sadly dismissed as ordinary and mundane physical earthly embodied reality. To my mind, the entire 13.7-billion-year history of our Universe has achieved its greatest accomplishment thus far in the evolution of life, sensation, and consciousness, and there can be nothing more real, more profound, awesome, or more inspiring than this.

The 20th century Jesuit priest and scientist Teilhard de Chardin famously said, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience." But what's wrong with just being human beings having a human experience? From what little we know of our Universe, how extraordinarily rare an opportunity it is to be human during our brief lives, the only creature to shed tears and that has achieved such extraordinary levels of consciousness; that not only speaks, but rhymes, and sings, and writes; that not only walks and runs, but dances and runs marathons; that not only adapts, but creates art and builds rockets and thinking machines; that not only laughs, but makes jokes, celebrates, and makes merry; that not only dreams while sleeping, but dreams while wide awake about better ways of being, "a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'" We dream dreams that move us to act in the real world. So, I do not wish to trade my ordinary human experiences for nonsense, but to fully inhabit this world while I can and to grasp it and love it and ground myself in its reality, including its hardships, challenges, and suffering. While here, I wish to develop my fullest capacity to be human, not to transcend it. Transcendence will come with my death, even if I'm only transformed back into earth, and it will come all too soon as far as I'm concerned. For I do not wish to be a spirit, but a man.

The root of spirit, "spire," means "breath." This is what Rabbi Heschel understood when he said, "Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy."[1] Breathing, and thus embodiment in this world, living and breathing, is the most spiritual thing any of us can do. In her classic work on *Mysticism*, Evelyn Underhill wrote that the mystic surrenders "to the embrace of Reality."[2] This is why one of our own mystics here at the UU Church of Spokane, the late Rev. Dr. Bill Houff wrote, it is a "misconception that real mystics are softheaded and fuzzy

minded."[3] As a scientist turned mystic, a chemist turned Unitarian minister, he understood it is reality not spirituality, physics not fantasy, being, breathing, and living that give our lives meaning and purpose and agency in this world.

"Spire" is also the root of words like "spear" and "inspire." To be inspired is to be animated and alive, not only with breath, but by those insights and truths that move and motivate us. To be inspired is to be speared—penetrated—by values and principles and beliefs that guide our actions and goals in the world. In this sense, spirituality isn't something we experience temporarily when our emotions are occasionally stirred into a frenzy during a church service or some other ritual. Our spirituality, rather, is something within us that remains there for years, sometimes for our entire lives, guiding and directing us.

Some spirits are demons—thought not literally (because there's no such thing)—like greed, or the lust for power, or selfishness, that move us to live and act in destructive and heartless ways. Those possessed by these kinds of spirits are undeveloped, stunted individuals who have not achieved their full capacity as human beings to truly love themselves and others. Some of the most powerful people in the world are the most unevolved because they have been guided by an immature desire to connect with others by controlling them, rather than developing their capacity to truly love them. As social psychologist Erich Fromm once said, "love is a power which produces love; impotence is the inability to produce love."[4] He goes on to explain,

> It is hardly necessary to stress the fact that the ability to love as an act of giving depends on the character development of the person. It presupposes the attainment of a predominantly productive orientation; in this orientation the person has overcome dependency, narcissistic omnipotence, the wish to exploit others, or to hoard, and has acquired faith in his own human powers, courage to rely on his powers in the attainment of his goals. To the degree that these qualities are lacking, he is afraid of giving himself—hence of loving.[5]

On the other hand, Fromm says,

> Care, responsibility, respect and knowledge are mutually interdependent. They are a syndrome of attitudes which are to be found in the mature person; that is, in the person who develops [one's] own powers productively, who only wants to have that which [one] has worked for, who has given up narcissistic dreams of omniscience and omnipotence, who has acquired humility based on the inner strength which only genuine productive activity can give.[6]

From these definitions we understand that Fromm is not speaking of love, as it is often spoken of, as some "pie in the sky" sentiment that has no practical meaning. It is not a feeling at all, but a way of living and the only way of being fully human. To me it is devotion to this cause, to becoming fully human and clearing the way for others to do so through our care for, responsibility for, respect for, and knowledge of that is at the heart of our Unitarian religion. It was the devotion to establishing a society based on such love, idealistic as it may

have been, that ultimately led to the American Revolution in 1776, prompted by a historic Declaration of Independence:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

As imperfect and vulnerable a Union as it has turned out to be, the Spirit of '76 that motivated the American revolutionaries to fight from a more equal, free, and democratic society is the same spirit, the same spear, the same breath that fills our liberal religion today, or, at least, ought to. I fear the values that once defined, bonded, and anchored Western society at large are being forgotten and, even worse, consciously discarded by many, including many claiming to be Unitarians. So, it is my chosen purpose as a Unitarian minister to do my best to remind us of that which once moved and motivated our religion, the same centuries-old spirit that motivated the American revolutionaries to declare their independence, to fight for it, and to then work for its establishment; and not merely for the sake of Unitarianism, but for the sake of human civilization, which cannot achieve its fullest potential without a devotion to the principles that our liberal religion and our society are founded upon.

Yet I was asked just last week how I can describe Unitarianism as a religion when I'm an atheist and our church has no doctrines or dogmas. Firstly, I agree with philosopher Bertrand Russell's broad definition of religion. Russell said, "A complete philosopher will have a conception of the ends to which life should be devoted and will be in this sense religious."[7] In short, almost everyone is devoted to something, and the source of that devotion is one's true religion, no matter what church they go to. The fact that I am devoted to the Enlightenment principles that once defined Unitarianism—human dignity, reason, freedom, and tolerance—doesn't make me any less religious than someone who claims to be devoted to God, or to the Catholic Church, or to Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or any other mainstream religion.

Secondly, the notion that religion is defined by theology, by one's beliefs about God, stems from Christianity's notion of ideological salvation, that one is a good Christian if they believe Jesus Christ is Lord and have made this profession of faith. But, as theologian Karen Armstrong reminds us, today's major religious traditions, Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, which emerged 3,000 years ago, along with their "latter-day flowering … Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,"[8] all originally emerged in response to injustice and concern for the oppressed. "What mattered," in the beginning, Armstrong says, "was not what you believed, but how you behaved."[9] Regardless of it roots in and eventual emancipation from Christianity, Unitarianism has always been about how we behave, not what we believe.

This is why it was our religion that passed the first religious toleration law in history, the Edict of Torda in 1568, guaranteeing "Preachers shall not be molested, nor any one persecuted, on account of religion; no one is permitted to remove from office, or to

imprison, any one because of his teaching." This Edict, passed by the Unitarian King of Transylvania, John Sigismund Zapolya, was inspired by an earlier decree crafted by his mother, Queen Isabella, in 1557, when he was only seventeen years old, stating "that each person maintain whatever religious faith he wishes, with old or new rituals, while We at the same time leave it to their judgement to do as they please in the matter of faith, just so long, however, as they bring no harm to bear on anyone at all."[10] Even way back then, when Unitarianism was a decidedly Christian religion, it was still about how we behave rather than what we believe. It was about respecting one another, freedom of belief, the right to reason for ourselves, and tolerance for those with whom we disagree.

Not only is this enough to base a religion on, it is what our religion has been based on for more than 450 years! Yet today, tragically as far as I'm concerned, there are many Unitarians, especially Unitarian Universalists, who find these values uninspiring, who say they just aren't "spiritual enough." The Unitarian Universalist Association, which has been the main hub of our religion since it was established in 1961, has completely abandoned our liberal principles and, more importantly, our liberal behavior. Last summer it adopted six euphemisms centered around ill-defined love, none of which are dignity, freedom, reason, tolerance, independence, individualism, or democracy, those values that define what it means to be liberal. They've even stopped calling themselves a liberal religion. Now they are a "covenantal" religion.

In retrospect, none of us should be surprised by these changes. Since 1961, due to the Association's failure to adequately merge two different religions into one, Unitarianism and Universalism, UUA members have increasingly felt it necessary to put descriptors in front of Unitarianism Universalism. "I'm a Buddhist UU," they say, or a "Christian UU," or a "Pagan UU," or a "Humanist UU," and so on. But this was not the case earlier on, according to a survey of 12,000 members from 800 congregations, conducted by the UUA in 1967, only six years after the merger, less than 3 percent claimed to believe in a "supernatural being," 28 percent considered God "an irrelevant concept," 57 percent did not consider ours a "Christian" religion, and 52 percent preferred "a distinctive humanistic religion."[11] Almost 40 years later, in 2005, the UUA's Commission on Appraisal conducted another survey asking members what they think holds Unitarian Universalists together. The responses were all over the place. After more than four decades, we stopped knowing what we are about. The Commission's report concluded with, "Despite consensus within the church that the liberal message of Unitarian Universalism is important in this troubled world, we find it difficult to articulate that message clearly."[12]

They can't articulate the message clearly because they no longer have a clear message, which has left our liberal religion susceptible to those attracted to its openness who want to come in and define it for us (or to redefine it, as some have succeeded in doing). It's too late for the UUA. It's no longer a liberal religion and no longer represents our liberal values. But it's not too late for Unitarianism. In fact, we now have an opportunity to reclaim the values and principles that once defined us, human dignity, reason, freedom, tolerance,

independence, individualism, autonomy, and democracy. These are the values my life is devoted to, and I am in this sense religious, deeply religious as far as I'm concerned. Yet I am still just a human being having a human experience, which gives my life purpose and meaning. I guess this makes me a no-nonsense kind of guy, and that's good enough for me.

[1] Fox, Matthew, *Original Blessing*, Bear & Company, Santa Fe, NM, 1983, p. 42.

[2] Underhill, Evelyn, *Mysticism*, Dover Publications, Mineola, NY, 1911, 2002, p. 75.

[3] Houff, William H., *Infinity in Your Hand*, Melior Publications, Spokane, WA, 1989, p. 132.

[4] Fromm, Erich. The Art of Loving (p. 23). Open Road Media. Kindle Edition

[5] Ibid., p. 24.

[6] Ibid., p. 30.

[7] Russell, Bertrand, *The Art of Philosophizing*, Philosophical Library, New York, NY, 1968, p. 34.

[8] Ibid.

[9] [7] Ibid., p. xiii.

[10] Bumbaugh, David E., Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History, Meadville-Lombard Press, Chicago, IL, 2000, p. 46f.

[11] Robinson, David, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1985, p. 177.

[12] UUA Commission on Appraisal, *Engaging our Theological Diversity*, UUA, Boston, MA, May 2005, p. 3.