

“Spirituality” (Fifth in the series ‘Roots of our Faith’)

Rev. Leland Bond-Upson, given at 1st Unitarian Honolulu, 13Mar11

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The Zen Buddhist koan is created to take us out of our customary rationality. It consists of a question or story, the meaning of which cannot be understood without recourse to intuition, or dreaming, or a leap of faith. Probably the most famous koan known in the west is “what is the sound of one hand clapping.”

Our Opening hymn, “Come, Come Wherever You Are,” has some of that quality in it. What is a “lover of leaving?” Why shouldn’t ours be a “caravan of despair.” I think the writer, the 13th C. Persian poet Rumi, wants to help us reach a contemplative state.

Another koan is "Without thinking of good or evil, show me your original face before your mother and father were born."

The Buddha told another one: A man travelling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming at a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed after him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, down below, another tiger was waiting for him to fall. Only the vine sustained him.

Two mice, one white and one black, little by little started to gnaw on the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted!

This last one is not a koan but a story that speaks to the power of contemplation and visualization:

In the early days of the Meiji era there lived a well-known wrestler called O-nami, Great Waves.

O-nami was immensely strong and knew the art of wrestling. In his private bouts he defeated even his teacher, but in public he was so bashful that his own pupils threw him.

O-nami felt he should go to a Zen master for help. Hakuju, a wandering teacher, was stopping in a little temple nearby, so O-nami went to see him and told him of his trouble.

"Great Waves is your name," the teacher advised, "so stay in this temple tonight. Imagine that you are those billows. You are no longer a wrestler who is afraid. You are those huge waves sweeping everything before them, swallowing all in their path. Do this and you will be the greatest wrestler in the land."

The teacher retired for the night. O-nami sat in meditation trying to imagine himself as waves. He thought of many different things. Then gradually he turned more and more to the feeling of the waves. As the night advanced the waves became larger and larger. They swept away the flowers in their vases. Even the Buddha in the shrine was inundated. Before dawn the temple was nothing but the ebb and flow of an immense sea.

In the morning the teacher found O-nami meditating, a faint smile on his face. He patted the wrestler's shoulder. "Now nothing can disturb you," he said. "You are those waves. You will sweep everything before you."

This story of course carries us to Japan, where now, as we sit here, the people there are trying to find the thousands of their dead and missing.

Let us, as our first meditation, imagine our self there, as a Japanese, experiencing catastrophe, perhaps in shock, perhaps despair, perhaps horror, wondering why this is happening, wondering what it means. Let us imagine, and let us pray for them.

** * Singing bowl begin and end * **

The word spirit comes from the same root as 'to breathe.' We think of 'respiration.' There are several dozen meanings for the word. #1 in the dictionary is:

the vital principle of conscious life in humans, animating the body, mediating between body and soul.

Every religion contains within it a spiritual tradition:

In the **Jewish**, the practice of Kavannah directs the heart to maintain awareness of God and inner strength.

In **Islam**, salah, ritual prayer, is a practice that quiets extraneous thought and concentrates solely on Allah.

In **Hinduism**, spiritual practice is called sadhana. A common practice is the repetition of a mantra. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness is commonly called the Hare Krishnas, but that name is actually part of their most famous mantra: hare Krishna, hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare. Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare.

In **Buddhism**, the word 'yoga' can be translated as 'spiritual practice.' It's no wonder that George Lucas named his little enlightened Jedi Master "Yoda."

Meditation is called 'zazen.' The invocation nam-myoho-renge-kyo is the Japanese translation from Sanskrit and Chinese. It means "to devote oneself to the mystic law lotus sutra." It was established in 1253, the same time Rumi was teaching in Persia. It was made pre-eminent because in the view of the ancients it contains the ultimate truth of Buddhism: that everyone without exception has the potential to attain Buddhahood.

In **Christianity**, we are familiar with those who live the life religious—the ascetics and hermits, brothers and nuns, some of whom live to pray.

Sister Wendy, who did so much to explain art to the English-speaking world, opens one of her talks by saying "my caravan doesn't look much, but it is my haven, when I can be alone with God, and one of the ways for me of looking at God is looking at art."

There's a new movie out called "Of Gods and Men," which tells the story of a group of monks faced with an existential crisis. Although there's no happy ending, their faith, born from years of contemplation and prayer, carries them through. Spirituality provides grounding, and therefore strength.

Before we take a look at Unitarian spirituality, let's take a break and read together a spiritual poem. Please turn to Reading # 670 toward the back of the gray hymnal. It's titled *The Way*, by Edwin Muir, the Orcadian poet. Not Arcadian, Orcadian. You may be wondering if Orcadian poetry is written by Orcs, those creatures in *The Lord of the Rings* that have such bad teeth and issues with their fingernails and complexions and personalities? No, not them. An Orcadian is someone from the Orkney Islands, which lie between the Scottish mainland and the Shetland Islands--where those cute shaggy ponies come from.

Friend, I have lost the way.	<i>The way leads on.</i>
Is there another way?	<i>The way is one.</i>
I must retrace the track.	<i>It's lost and gone.</i>
Back, I must turn back!	<i>None goes there, none.</i>
Then I'll make here my place—	<i>The road runs on—</i>
Stand still and set my face—	<i>The road leaps on.</i>
Stay here, forever stay.	<i>None stays here, none.</i>
I cannot find the way.	<i>The way leads on.</i>
Oh, places I have passed!	<i>That journey's done.</i>
And what will come at last?	<i>The way leads on.</i>

You know the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett? He wrote *Waiting for Godot*, among many others. I like the economy and propulsion of his writing—very terse. Compact. Memorable.

Just for fun, let's do this poem again, but in Beckett style, quickly, headlong, no pauses. Ready? Like this: Friend, I have lost the way
The way leads on.

Spirituality has had a revival within liberal religion. The revival has been underway now for about 20 years. I did a survey for Starr King in the middle of it's first emanation. The survey was titled SpiritUuality is BIG, but what is it? We sent out a thousand questionnaires.

The responses came back.

Surprisingly, a number of rhw respondents were angry. One wanted to know why there wasn't a choice available for the opinion that (in effect) "spirituality is a lot of hooey." Spirituality, some said, just doesn't have a place in their lives. Several thought it is being used as a tool in the hands of 'the women' to gain advantage in the battle of the sexes. For others, spirituality is dangerous, muddled nonsense cloaked in 'niceness' and 'feel-goodness'.

But for most of the respondents—even the doubtful ones—the idea of spirituality had some resonance.

There were six statement/question clusters that more than half the respondents agreed with:

1. Matthew Fox' statement that spirituality satisfies a "longing for greater connection and meaning." The word 'connection' was emphasized by two-thirds of the respondents.

2. The statement by the late Paul Sawyer, until recently our minister in Pasadena, "One must go deeply in, in order to do good with heart and sustained effort." A lot of people liked this way of putting it, and used it to address both the question "What need does spirituality fill for UUs?" and the question "What good purpose does spirituality serve beyond one's own pleasure?"

3. Spirituality is essentially personal (it means whatever we want it to mean). Not only did a majority agree with this statement, no-one objected.

4. Most respondents' said spirituality was more easily found inside themselves and in nature, but only a few found it in a group. This was surprising given all the attention at that time to the manifestations of spirituality in UU church services, but it is in line with the general agreement that spirituality is essentially personal.

5. The current spirituality phenomenon doesn't auger anything particularly profound for the future. The few who want it to threaten organized religion don't think it will. Regarding the possible merging of religious traditions, as Matthew Fox puts it, "born from and pointing toward a common experience of the Spirit", there was no consensus.

6. Regarding "Is spiritual practice another term for meditation, or communing, or prayer?" the most common response was "Yes, and more."

Most times, when the 'more' was detailed, it appeared to be a form of meditation or devotion (gardening, music, dance). One person said service was her spiritual practice.

There were four statement/question clusters that more than one-third of the respondents agreed with:

7. Many religious liberals are interested in spirituality because rationality and social action don't add up to a satisfying religion.

8. Spirituality is non-rational, and (to a lesser degree) rational, but not anti-rational or supernatural.

9. Almost half reported "I practice spirituality."

10. There is a close connection between modern spirituality and our historic Transcendentalism (which was a mid-19th C. revolt by young Unitarians against conventional and complacent institutional Unitarianism.

Transcendentalism "transcends sense experience . . . (and) . . . asserts the primacy of the spiritual as against the material."

My experience suggests that spirituality is both more primal and more transcendent than our habitual rationality and the knowing gained from our five common senses. It's more primal in that spirituality deals with imagination and care of the soul, and it's more transcendent in that it's openness to the ineffable ('ineffable,' words fail us) furthers one goal of the universe, which is to become ever more conscious, more awake. Why should

we exclude any way of knowing? Why shouldn't we use every tool, every avenue to help us make our way to the light?

Since that survey, from what I read and see and hear, what's changed is not a lessening of interest in spirituality, but in its expression. It seems to have lost some of its crusading fervor, and become what it is at base, and always has been, a way to reach deep inside and find a kind of peace. And the reaction against it has ebbed as well.

I know that many of you have a spiritual practice now. These practices take many forms:

Healing

Gardening

Connecting to water, such as swimming and diving

Parenting

Painting

Cooking

Visiting those who need company

Caring for the Earth

Singing or playing

Reading and writing poetry

Hiking and climbing

Walking on the seashore

Sculpting

Tai chi

Calligraphy

Working for fairness

Flower arranging

Playing with puppies or kittens

Breathing

Meditating and praying

Coming to church on Sundays not to listen to a sermon but to daydream about God and other important things, and then visit with friends.

And so many many more, these expressions of spiritual practice.

One of my practices, as I've said here at least once before is reading and sometimes memorizing poetry. Here's a short one from Wm. Butler Yeats, writing about an island in a lake near to his home in Sligo, in the far west of Ireland. The poet remembers, and longs to return. For him, it's a spiritual home.

The poem is marked by the use of long vowels as a poetic device—listen for the a's e's, i's, and o's :

The Lake Isle of Inishfree

I will arise and go now, and go to Inishfree

And a small cabin build there of clay and wattles made.

Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honeybee,

And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,

Dropping from the veil of the morning to where the cricket sings—

There midnight's all a glimmer and noon a purple glow,

And evening full of the linnets' wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore.
While I stand on the roadway or on the pavement gray,
I hear it, in the deep heart's core.

I like poetry because it's an avenue in to deeper consciousness and understanding. It's pleasurable. It's portable. It's useful in my work.

I'd like to close with a meditation. A three-minute one, twice as long as the earlier one. It will be a self-guided meditation, in the solitude of your own being.

Being a free religious people, you can do whatever you want, including checking your watch frequently. To those who wish to participate, I'd like to suggest that many of those who practice the contemplative arts find that a very good way to quiet the mind is to concentrate on your breathing. If you find yourself thinking about the usual busy things, just refocus on the breathing. Buddhism calls this stilling the monkey mind.

your breathing slow down. Your heart rate will follow. After a while, the part of your soul that has been shouted down or ignored will begin to emerge. When it does, you can encourage it by continuing to concentrate on your breathing. If the three minutes here isn't long enough, you can resume it when you get home, or get to a park, or the seashore.

It may take a long minute for you to get over the fidgets, but when you do, this is tonic for the soul. You may find your divine essence. I hope you'll stick with it, close your eyes, and breathe.

A friend of mine calls the things that emerge, including paying attention to your dreams, the best show in town. That's because what comes out of this is your unique stuff. As it is written in the Gospel of Thomas, "If you bring forth what is within you, what is within you will save you."

Let us begin

Singing bowl to being

Singing bowl to end