



Spirituality in these times.

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Sermon October 2, 2016

The conversations about spirituality - what it is and how it manifests itself have shifted a bit in the last ten or so years. In the beginning there was the notion that spirituality was not connected to religion, to church, to anything other than the pursuit often to the individual of happiness and bliss. Spirituality was associated with meditation, retreat centers, Yoga, personal guru's, private sessions, and/or the back room of book stores that had sections for "new age" explorations. Spirituality and associated spiritual practices was sometimes thought of as the way to be removed from the world and all its workings. And spirituality was not thought to be a part of religion- its practices, its teachings, its way of being. Fortunately, that is changing and I think there is more of an interdependent relationship.

I remember, one time, driving in upper Vermont with a Catholic friend of mine. We stopped to admire the view of distant monastery. When I asked about it my friend said, it and the priests inside, were set apart from any human contact other than those who managed the day to day running of it, the priests did nothing but sit in meditation and prayer twenty hours day, praying that the world would be healed. I was totally puzzled. The land was beautiful, the place well cared for and it was obvious that it took a lot of resources to keep it functioning. I asked my friend how in the world with all that land, all those resources, a group of men could just sit around and pray for the world and not get their hands, feet and bodies dirty doing the work of the world. The answer was that they were tasked to be a religious community to offer prayer for the saving of the world. That religious community he explained was established centuries ago and the brothers who

entered the order did so knowing that they would not be part of the muss and fuss of the world. It really baffled me and this was even before I had become minister and thought about all the things that religious people are called to do, but just sitting in prayer made no sense to me -to be so uninvolved in the world didn't seem right.

Yet on the other hand I do understand the need to step back sometimes and get a new perspective, and the need to be removed from the hustle and bustle of life. I suspect that somehow or other there is a balancing act between a spirituality of removal from the world and the religious act of joining together to be in the world. I like to think that Unitarian Universalism is the religion that strikes that balance.

Psalms 61 is an ancient reading that points out this balance- the need of removal from the struggles of the daily world by finding a place of safety and spirit renewal. But the spiritual practices we need today, in these times, requires that we find a way to move back and forth- not total isolation as those priest, not spiritual practices that only look inward and not so engaged in the world, so into the dirt and dust that we forget to feed our inner spiritual self too. From a book, *Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness*, I share these words of Psalm 61:

Hear my cry, oh merciful one, listen to my prayer.

From the depth of my being

I call to you;

For my heart is faint.

Lead me to the Rock that is my strength,

For you alone are my refuge,

Your steadfast love conquers my fears,

Let me dwell in your heart forever

O to be safe under the shelter

Of your wing,

I shall sing praises and blessings

To your name, as

I abandon myself into your heart

Moment by moment.

For you are the love and mind

Of our galaxy! ⁱ

It is not my intention to focus on the differences between spirituality and religion. In fact, I want to offer my opinion that these two concepts need **not** be at opposite ends of the spectrum but instead brought together in ways that will offer us a way to live a rich and rewarding life in these times. Spirituality without involvement in life is not a spirituality that I want a part of. The spirituality I want a part of is one that brings me an intense sense of aliveness, of awareness, of connection. Spirituality does not remove me but provides me with tools, mindset, heart strength so that I can be awake. Awake no matter the circumstances.

I barely have enough time to do the basic things of life lately and I know I am not alone in this feeling. So rather than looking for a way to withdraw I would like to find a way to reconnect the disparate parts of my life and find balance. I remember as a child having a deeply spiritual attitude to living. Do you remember that too? I invite you to take a couple moments now and reflect on this question about your earlier spiritual life. Where you more awake to feelings of wonder and mystery and awe when you were a child than now? What is the difference of how you experience spirituality as a child to now?

Spirituality as I said is being awake. Awake means I am aware and I take in all aspects of life, good and bad, wonder and joy, and that I don't run from fear and trouble but find a rock to sit on, wings of love and compassion that will encompass me. Do I have to adopt some belief system of religion to do so, I do not, do I have to believe in some divine source to have a rich and full spiritual life? I do not, I am full of doubt and questions. In fact to be open enough to doubt the nature of the universe, the nature of humanity, the cause and effect of being, the love and mind of the galaxy, is about the most important state of mind we can experience to begin to explore a spirituality in these times.

Maybe I need to tell you what I think these times are. Globally, we are facing unprecedented economic, environmental disasters, nationally we have an upcoming election- the likes of I have never seen and I have seen some odd election cycles, nationally we are facing an increasing multi-ethnic, cultural, racial, religious world and we don't know how to manage the tensions with the known and the unknown, with the stranger and the friend, in a world that is strange and

different. Locally people are struggling with heroin overdose, homelessness, personal loss and illness, personally we are going through our own struggles of health, loss, grief, turmoil of heart and mind. These times are difficult and we need to find any and all spiritual sources and resources.

But to do this we need to be awake, fully awake and aware.

Take a couple minutes and think about some questions about being awake.

When in your life do you feel most awake?

Are you awake to the presence of mystery in your life, how do you experience that, can you explain it?

Has there ever been an event in your life, sorrowful or joyous that has been a source of your spirit awakening?

What effect did this have on your life, did that effect remain with you?

In closing, I want to go back to thinking about being spiritual in the world. How can we do that when the world is so challenging?

Mary Catherine Bateson, in her book, *Composing A Life*, proposes this suggestion. "On the street, you might try to imagine the people you pass as members of families. You pause, and picture their joys and sorrows, their loves and hates. You notice the fatigue on their faces, or the smile lines. And you begin to lower the barrier against empathy. Becoming aware of your bond with the human community..."

Imagine how much richer, warmer and fuller our lives could be, if we imagined those we passed on the street as friends we don't know yet, imagine them here in the sanctuary lighting candles of joy and concern and being with us. We are bound together with all of humanity. I repeat all of humanity. The spirituality we need to foster in this day and time is a spirituality wedded to a religion like Unitarian Universalism that reminds us of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, the gift of interconnectedness, and ways of truth, justice and love that bring us through the muck and mire of living.

May we act in ways to make it so.

ⁱ Nan C. Merrill, *Psalms for Praying*, Continuum, New York. P 113 Psalm 61