

Spiritual but not Religious



Rev. Dr. Susan Suchocki Brown

November 15, 2015

Reading by Sara Moores Campbell, from Into the Wilderness: a Meditation Manual. P 46 'The Growing Season'

I both like and dislike this reading. I like the acknowledgment of gratitude as response to creation, I like the idea of replenishment of one's soul found through gardening and harvesting. I like the idea of the expression of responsibility to life and growth through tending to living beings and things. I dislike the message though that somehow to be alone and tending gardening is a religious act; more fitting than sitting with others in a worship space. I dislike the implications that we can be religious without being engaged in religious practices together as a religious community.

I want us to continue to learn how to be spiritual together. The refrain "I am spiritual not religious" is writ large in that reading and the author is trying too hard to convince her readers that you can be religious if you just tend to a garden, or nurture your soul in singular ways. I think being religious requires being in covenant with others. It requires working with people who are as well as a delight to be with also difficult and who challenge us and force us to become, as Abraham Lincoln once said, "angels of our better nature". Being religious means we make a commitment to walk together through all the difficulties that occur in organizations, through managing the many pieces of a church. Believe me if I didn't think this way I would have given up ministry twenty years

ago. When I first came into the ministry I had had a fantasy that I would spend my days visiting at the bedsides of the ill, that I would spend my days reading all manner of philosophical, spiritual, religiously based books, I would be at public witness events and protest injustices, I would write poems, prayers and maybe even a book or two. Now I spend a large part of my days, looking at balance sheets, reviewing past practices to try to make good policies for the future, taking apart pipes in the bathrooms, turning up or down the heat, checking the water levels in the furnace, bringing out bags of food for the hungry drop-ins, plotting with staff how to manage the many groups that meet in the church and writing letters of reprimand when they don't leave the place clean and orderly.

But this too is spiritual work and is also what it means to be a spiritual person. It is also being a religious person. I think we Unitarian Universalist forget at our peril that when we say to others that we are spiritual and not religious this can cripple us and stop the process of being spiritual together. Throughout our culture this spiritual but not religious has led to a lack of interest in making a commitment to church as a place for life affirming soul nurturing religion. Spiritual I can do all alone or while engaged in some reflective, mostly solo practice that gives me inner fulfillment. Religious is what we do with others when we talk deeply about the tough things we have gone through, such as we did last week, Religious is what we do when we with intention meet as Parish Committee, Worship, or Growth and Vitality Committees, religious is what we do when we share candles of joy and sorrow, religious is what we do when we light the Chalice with words that call us to our purpose. Religious is what we will do when we meet in a Café style discussion after church to think about who we are and how we should be working together to meet our grand and beautiful vision to be an anti-oppressive, democratic community of justice, beauty, compassion and love for all of life. Religious is when we talk about what we believe and when we discover that we need not all think alike to love one another. We can bring our separate beliefs together into this place, we can think, believe and determine our own beliefs that make the most sense in our mind, given our experience and this place, nor do we fall apart if we disagree. Spiritual is when I go off to sit by the ocean and reflect on my destiny, my insignificance in the scheme of the majesty of the universe. Spiritual is when you do the same or go off to pray, or meditate or do yoga or to fill your spirit by seeing a play, listening to music, looking at a piece of art work. Religious is when I bring back my experiences after sitting at the ocean's edge, or you bring back your thoughts, your reflections on your experiences and we share them. We need both. Religion is a bond of coming together.

Religion need not dampen our spiritual self. Religion does not, in our Unitarian Universalist faith, say that we have certain teachings we must adhere to, or a specific way we must believe things occurred. Spiritual but not religious in my mind is not a way to strengthen, support or encourage deeper ways of connecting us to the circle of existence.

This trend, to be spiritual but not religious is not new to Unitarian Universalism or to our nation alone. A survey was published by the Gallup International and Worldwide Independent Network of Market Research recently. And it was reported on in the *Christian Century* magazine in its October 14, 2015 edition. This poll found Japan among the world's least religious countries. Yet the article goes on to state, that though 62% say they are not religious or are atheist, more and more Japanese are seeking some sort of spiritual connection. Most Japanese people are finding this through attending Buddhist festivals such as the festival of Bon when the living visit the graves of their ancestors and visiting the Shinto Grand Shrine, which is the most sacred place in the Shinto religion. In the last few years has seen a real resurgence of visitors. It is interesting too that when people are visiting the shrine they are leaving notes that read like prayers that could be heard in a church. Prayers for health of loved ones, prayers for peace in the world, prayers for jobs or improved economic conditions, prayers for healing of broken relationships, prayers to deceased loved ones, all types of prayers and petitions normally associated with church connection are the needs being expressed by a nation that professes to be spiritual not religious. A religious studies professor wrote, "Ordinary people don't think that behavior is religious. To them it's just customary."

Well I for one think that we are missing a time of engagement with others, of being spiritual together if we let that statement go without raising questions, without interrupting the conversation, without challenging the assumption. Yes it is good to have prayer and the desire for improvement, the desire for change for the better as part of our daily living, and it is good to remind and be reminded that being in a religious community is a good thing.

The effect on our culture about the changing nature of church and the lack of desire to be part of religion came home in incredibly personal way to Debra and myself this week. Andover Newton Theological School one of the oldest seminaries in the country has just announced that it must rethink its way of being. The entire campus is up for sale and there are two proposals out that are up for consideration. One is to completely

restructure seminary education and narrow the focus in profound ways. The other is to become part of another school. At this point a deep and earnest conversation is ongoing with Yale Divinity School. This was a shock of course and it will be two years out or more because there is a commitment to students for at least two years, but it is inevitable that a major shift will be occurring. The cultural shift away from religion as an organized and meaningful enterprise is certainly a part of this move.

For sermon illustrations there is nothing like timely, relevant and personal examples that connect the theme to real life. And I truly do think that our way of being spiritual but not religious is demonstrated powerfully in the actions that the Board at Andover Newton Theological School is contemplating.

Now the question is how can we make a religious community also meet the spiritual needs? How can we better do spiritual together I need some more answers, can you help?

Please may it be so. Amen,