

The Spirituality Gap

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Some of you who only see me on Sunday may think I wear this collar all the time. No, it is not tattooed on me. While on occasion I wear it on a hospital visit or when participating in some public event like the gay pride parade, the only time I regularly wear it during the week is on Sunday mornings. The rest of the time you will find me more informally attired. My reason for wearing it is to remind myself of my role, like an actor putting on make-up and her costume. It is a spiritual discipline. My reasons for not wearing it are numerous, but mostly to avoid conversations with people who want to explain why they don't go to church, because they are "spiritual but not religious." My usual response when I have failed to avoid such a conversation is to paraphrase Will Rogers: "I don't belong to an organised religion, I'm a Unitarian."

During our recent canvass conversations about creating our future I was reminded of what a tricky word "spirituality" is. Some people expressed the desire for us to be a more spiritual community. I suspect some of the humanists started getting nervous. That came out in expressions of concern about our even being called a church. Some would prefer our being a meetinghouse or society. I get their concern. "Church" has for many a connotation that is far from positive. And certainly what happens in worship here is not what people think or imagine happens in "church". The problem for me is that the alternatives do not suggest we are in the business of spirituality.

I grant you that some don't think that is our business. They are in good company. The pioneer Unitarian Humanist, the Rev. John Dietrich, raised the same question in a 1929 sermon, "What Does it Mean to be Spiritual?". "A word may become a delusive phantasy of the idea for which it once stood," Dietrich said; "and the feeble or the more dissipated the intelligence of a person or a generation, the greater the chance that mere words will pass as coin. Such a word pre-eminently is 'spirituality'." No one knows what it means, Dietrich claimed, and yet "it suggests at once an unction, an exaltation of emotion, a superiority which are associated with hardly any other words in the English language."

I suspect part of the confusion is the word "spirituality" has accumulated many layers of meaning over time. It was first used in the 5th century to refer to the biblical understanding of a spiritual person being animated by God, driven by the Holy Spirit as opposed to someone who wasn't.

By the 11th century it came to refer to the mental aspects of life versus the material and sensual aspects of life: the world of light versus the world of dark. Inside the church was light and outside was dark.

In the 13th century "spirituality" acquired a social and psychological meaning. Socially it denoted the territory of the clergy: the ecclesiastical against the secular authority, the clerical class against the secular class. Psychologically, it denoted the realm of the inner life: The purity of motives, affections, intentions, and inner dispositions.

In the 17th and 18th century a distinction was made between higher and lower forms of spirituality: A spiritual person was one who was Christian more abundantly and deeper than others.

In the 19th century Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transcendentalists played a major role in giving spirituality its more modern understanding. He challenged his Unitarian co-religionists' rationalism that had left the church "corpse-cold." He challenged the idea that spirituality was the purview of the church or of the clergy. He claimed spirituality was accessed through our human intuition. He denied that some were spiritual and others weren't. We are all part of God and God is part of us. He laid the foundation for distinguishing spirituality from religion. Until then they had been used interchangeably.

Two weeks ago in my discussion of Transcendentalism I said trying to define Transcendentalism is like trying to describe an ice cube while holding it in your hand. No sooner have you grabbed it than it begins changing shape. And the longer you think about it and talk about it, the more it changes until you have nothing left.

It is tempting to go to a dictionary at this point for a definition of spirituality to find out if the word has any meaning left, as Dietrich argues it doesn't. But those in our canvass meetings who want more "spirituality" clearly mean something about what they are looking for and it is probably not in the dictionary. The problem is there are probably as many definitions of the word as there are people trying to define it. I suspect trying to pin it down to simply one meaning is less than useful, but that said let me offer one by Doug Muder, a columnist and editor at UU World. It resonates for me and maybe for you, even if you are a humanist. It explains why there are so many understandings of the word and why it even that changes for us over time.

He suggests that, "spirituality is the awareness of the gap between what you can experience and what you can describe." Notice that it is a humanistic definition. No gods or souls or spirits or afterlives are required, only people seeking a kind of awareness.

By defining spirituality as "an awareness," the concept becomes subjective. Nothing in and of itself is spiritual. It can only be spiritual to somebody. Muder points out it "is not a place like Shangri-La or Brigadoon, where other people can go, but for some reason they can't tell you where it is. And it's also not an activity like meditation or prayer or chanting. Whatever activities raise your awareness of the gap between experience and description are spiritual for you—and not necessarily for anyone else."

Muder explains that this kind of spirituality naturally varies from person to person, because we each have unique abilities to experience life and to describe it—and both abilities change as we learn and grow. This would explain why I am sometimes confused by the request for me to give more sermons that are spiritual. For me, every sermon I give is spiritual.

Sometimes we learn to describe experiences that used to be indescribable. Muder gives a few examples: "The violent storm that strikes a stone-age tribe speechless might be a run-of-the-mill category-2 hurricane to a modern meteorologist—fascinating, perhaps, but not the least bit spiritual.

“In *Life on the Mississippi*, Mark Twain relates how sunset over the river had been an enrapturing experience, until he trained to be a riverboat captain:

“[A] day came when I began to cease from noting the glories and the charms which the moon and the sun and the twilight wrought upon the river’s face. . . . Then, if that sunset scene had been repeated, I should have looked upon it without rapture, and should have commented upon it, inwardly, after this fashion: This sun means that we are going to have wind tomorrow; that floating log means that the river is rising.

“He goes on for some while, interpreting every detail he sees, and then wistfully concludes:

“No, the romance and the beauty were all gone from the river. All the value any feature of it had for me now was the amount of usefulness it could furnish toward compassing the safe piloting of a steamboat.

“That once-indescribable scene was now pregnant with highly significant information, but it was no longer spiritual. Sunsets had not changed, but Twain had.

“Conversely, sophistication can illuminate indescribable depths that the ordinary person is blind to. Consider this curious little quote from the mathematician R. W. Hamming:

“I have tried, with little success, to get some of my friends to understand my amazement that the abstraction of . . . counting is both possible and useful. Is it not remarkable that six sheep plus seven sheep make thirteen sheep; that six stones plus seven stones make thirteen stones? Is it not a miracle that the universe is so constructed that such a simple abstraction as a number is possible?

“Rather than transforming mystery into mechanism, Hamming’s mathematical sophistication allowed him to experience counting as something strange and wonderful.”

Muder argues that, “The best test of a definition is how it illuminates common usages. Bad definitions make everybody sound stupid or crazy. Good definitions tune in meaning like a fine radio; static goes away, and you can hear what people are saying.

“Testing this definition against common usage, . . . it works pretty well. The cultural experiences that people commonly call spiritual all have indescribable depths. As Aldous Huxley said, ‘After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music.’ Another experience people describe as spiritual, being out in nature, is similarly indescribable. Anything you say afterwards—even the pictures you take—don’t really capture it.

“Because this definition focuses on experience rather than doctrine or dogma, it explains how you can be ‘spiritual but not religious’. Creeds and catechisms can get in the way of spirituality if they impose pat answers that crowd out mystery. ‘All sects,’ said the early American Unitarian William Ellery Channing, ‘have been too anxious to define their religion. They have laboured to circumscribe the infinite.’”¹

Because we don't put the God we believe in or the God we don't believe in, for that matter, in a box is why I argue that this faith community is in the spirituality business. We give space in a safe place for people to be aware of the gap between experience and the ability to describe it. That is what makes us spiritual. We honour that we are not all the same. We have different experiences but to encounter those differences in community are experiences in themselves. They create the gap that deepens our awareness, enabling us to grow, to find meaning and purpose and to heal.

We are also a safe place not to know. We are free and even encouraged to acknowledge we do not have all the answers to all mysteries. We come here not for answers but to immerse our selves in the wonderment of questions that challenge our understandings and open us to new possibilities. We come here for the gap, that moment of unknowing.

i Muder, Doug. "Before Words." <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/spirituality-humanism>