



Grappling with Spirituality

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Opening Words:

Today's service is part one of what we are aiming to be an ongoing series on spirituality, and addressing the question of what the spiritual needs of our congregation might be. I wanted to launch this series, because I think that a lot of us have a complicated relationship with spirituality, with religion, and with the concepts and language that surrounds them - I include myself in that group. Some people here are longtime members of either this congregation, or of other progressive religious traditions. Others, like myself and several of the other service leaders, come from backgrounds where religion was a painful and oppressive part of life. And yet, many of us have ended up here, because we're looking for *something* - something that I think we can loosely call "spirituality". I know that for me, walking into a church and choosing to spend time here was a difficult thing to do, and I don't think I'm alone in that. What I'm hoping to foster here today, is an ongoing dialogue about what we might mean when we use words like "spirituality" or other language associated with religion, and what role those concepts play in our lives. We have all taken different paths in getting here, and today I will share a bit of mine.

Sermon:

I titled today's sermon "Grappling with Spirituality" as kind of a placeholder, but it ended up sticking. That idea of wrestling with spirituality and with religion, has been a prominent theme throughout my life. In my early adulthood, I was a very strident atheist - and part of that was really looking down my nose at people whenever they used language that suggested a belief in the divine. But I have a very different perspective now, both about spirituality itself, and about how we might talk about it. So today I'm going to give you kind of the cliffnotes version of why it is that I ended up here, doing this sort of thing. Some of this stuff I've talked about before, but in a less narratively cohesive way - hopefully today I can put it all together.

I wasn't raised in a religious household. God didn't have a role in either of my parents' lives, nor within the lives of my extended family. But I couldn't escape growing up in an environment that was culturally Christian. Even in the early 1990's in relatively secular Aotearoa, I grew up being around a lot of Christian influences - as a baby, I was even Christened, despite my parents lack of faith. So despite the fact that we didn't go to church, or read the bible, or any of that other stuff, I still had a pretty good idea about who "God" was - the creator that I imagined in my head

was molded in that more or less Christian image. My first memories of thinking about God are around age six - I think this was around the time I had my first religious education classes in school. Those classes were opt out, but my mum explained to me what the classes were about, and asked if I wanted to go. I was a good kid, I wanted to learn, so of course I said yes.

I also had a friend at school whose parents were churchgoing. I don't remember how it came up, whether I asked, or my friend invited me, but one day I ended up going along to the kids church group with my friend. I remember going quite a few times. We'd sing songs while the youth leader played the guitar, sit and listen to bible stories, and then do arts and crafts. It was nice, not a bad way to spend a Friday evening for a little kid. And my mum probably needed the time to herself. By this point, my parents had broken up, and mum and I were living at my grandmother's house. We actually lived right next to the church that my friend's family attended, so it was really easy to just whip me over there for a couple of hours of childcare.

The idea that there was someone up there, keeping watch over the world - keeping score of what was happening, was a huge comfort to me. My early family life was full of dysfunction, and I suffered a lot of loss early on - two of my grandparents, and one of my great grandparents passed by the time I was 9. And, I knew that I was different from other kids - I didn't realise I was queer yet, but I still had a lot of trouble fitting in. So, I think what I needed more than anything else, was some kind of certainty that things were going to turn out ok. And a more or less Christian idea of heaven, and an afterlife, gave me that certainty. I needed a way of making sense of the fact that my loved ones were dying, and that I was living in a really difficult situation. So I never doubted for a moment that there was someone up there, with some kind of plan that made sense of everything - I just *needed* that to be true. It would have been unthinkable for it *not* to be true. I needed to know that someone loved me and was going to take care of things. I think this is also the mindset in which a lot of people come to religion and spirituality. God is the authority figure who offers hope that things are going to be ok - the way a good parent would. But for those of us who weren't well parented, I also think that this is where a lot of spirituality goes wrong.

Psychologist Gabor Maté talks about how a child needs two things to grow: *attachment* - which is the child's relationship with their caregivers, and *authenticity* - which is the child's relationship to their own inner wants and needs. However, as a child, you are totally at the mercy of your caregivers - you need them to feed you, to clothe you, bathe you, and protect you. Ideally, attentive caregivers do all this stuff, but they also foster a safe environment for the child to express authenticity. They hold you, soothe you when things get hard, and let you develop a relationship with your own needs, passions, likes and dislikes. The problem comes when attachment and authenticity come into conflict. When caregivers are chaotic or dysfunctional, it's harder for the child to get that feeling of safe attachment. We're hardwired for survival - every child is instinctively motivated to seek love and care, and making sure your caregivers are happy with you is part of that.

But of course, children aren't always perfectly behaved - learning to be authentic means learning to voice the things that you want, to complain when something is bothering you, and to

let people know whether you're happy or unhappy. Sometimes our needs are reasonable, and sometimes they aren't - regardless it's important for each of us to learn that we *have* needs. But when a caregiver isn't reliable or attentive, when a child isn't certain that their basic attachment needs are going to be met, they are left with a heartbreaking dilemma. A young child fundamentally lacks control over their circumstances - they can't leave their caregivers, nor do they have the ability to force their caregivers to act differently, or set boundaries with them. All the child can really do is try to squash their needs down, make themselves smaller, and less demanding, and hope that this will help to fix the situation - blaming the caregivers wouldn't help, it would be unthinkable, so the child learns to conclude that something must be wrong with them, and with the things they want and need. Basically, children will always sacrifice their authenticity in order to try to maintain their attachment.

You see a lot of this in how people approach the idea of God - there's a lot of guilt, shame, and self-recrimination. When I tell people that I used to pray to god like this as a child, that I'd apologise for being a "bad kid", that I'd worry about going to hell, they sometimes ask "Oh, were you raised *Catholic*?" Well, no, but I did learn to blame myself for a lot of things from very early on. I think this has pretty much become the predominant Western view of spirituality, or at least spirituality as connected to organised religion. Words like god, church, sermon, sacred, worship, prayer, faith, etc - all conjure this image of a rigid and unforgiving authority figure; someone whose commands need to be obeyed, *or else*. Someone before whom you need to grovel and beg.

I kept a kind of vague belief in a higher power through most of my adolescence. I was a lot more skeptical about the bible itself, and the stories it contained. A lot of this was owing to the fact that I was a complete dinosaur nut as a kid, so I knew for *sure* that the Garden of Eden and Noah's Ark were both bullshit. I got really into Egyptian mythology at age 10, and then Greek mythology a year later, so I became aware that there were lots of different belief systems that predated the Christian one. This also began to intersect with what I'll call "the gender stuff" - I started to wonder why Christianity had a male god, when more ancient belief systems had goddesses as well - sometimes I'd lay awake at night and imagine god as a woman. When I think about that period, I can really see the beginnings of who I am today. Of course, 9/11 happened in the middle of this as well, and that taught me about concepts like religious extremism. And, as I grew through my teens to the realisation that maybe I was different to my peers in *other ways*, I started to see religion as something repressive.

But I still had that desperate need for connection that I saw in religious communities. When I was about 16 I made friends with a group of conservative Christian girls at school. I ended up going to church with them for the rest of the year, and even went to a bible camp in Taranaki just before Christmas. I started praying again, spent time with my new friends and their families, and honestly considered formally joining the church. But I couldn't shake my skepticism. And more than that, it was becoming increasingly obvious to me that if I were honest about a lot of the things I was feeling inside, I wouldn't have been welcome there. I stopped going. By 17 I had fallen into a deep depression, given up on any belief in any kind of higher power, and become extremely antagonistic about the idea of anyone having any kind of religious belief. I

was relentlessly committed to the idea that I was being rational, logical, and reasonable whenever I talked down to someone based on their spirituality, even when that worldview represented a whole lot of bitterness, resentment, and self-loathing on my part.

The road between where I was at 17 with spirituality, and where I am with it at 35 is too long and winding to fully unpack today. But transitioning definitely played a role in changing my perspective - I was put in the situation of explaining something about myself that was deeply personal and hard to comprehend for a lot of the people around me. Throughout that journey, I've had to balance how I've felt about spirituality as an abstract concept, versus religious institutions that are very often deeply oppressive. But one thing I've noticed is that a lot of the people I held up as role models in my late teens, really aren't very nice people. A lot of the scientists and public intellectuals who claimed to be acting in the name of pure rationality against the oppressive forces of religion, are actually quite happy taking up deeply regressive political positions. Now obviously I think rationality is *frequently* a good thing, but I don't think it's an *absolute* good. There are plenty of things that we miss in life if we go around trying to endlessly rationalise the human experience rather than living in it. Most dangerously, it becomes easy to write other people and their perspectives off as irrational and therefore worthy of contempt. We each live a life full of rich subjective experiences that are, I think, impossible to render in purely rational terms.

Which brings me back to my earlier point about the language of faith. Because words like god, church, sermon, sacred, worship, prayer, faith - those words still make me uncomfortable. But for me, that discomfort is complicated - it isn't just a matter of wanting to reject those words because of the regressive political connotations they often carry. These words are also uncomfortable because I wanted so badly to be able to use, and to own those words when I was younger. Like that child who has to sacrifice authenticity for attachment, I learned that those words weren't for me, and that any attempt to authentically express myself through them was hopeless. And once I realised in my late teens that that attachment to a Christianised concept of god was no longer viable for me, I didn't immediately rediscover my authenticity, I just broke. Now, if religious language just doesn't do anything for you, that's fine. But I've found that when I let my disdain for those words take over the steering wheel in the name of rationality, that I end up writing off whole swathes of the human experience.

Now of course we can come up with new language for these concepts, that's fine too. However, I think there's tremendous power in reclaiming words as well. For example, *queer* is a reclaimed word, one that would have been considered a straight up slur within the lifetimes of many of the people in this room. I think there's a strong case that reclaiming the language of faith is actually a social and moral good - if we say that this language is irredeemable, then those words and the concepts they represent are left up for grabs by the likes of Brian Tāmaki. So, for me, being a Unitarian isn't about fleeing an association with religion, even though that association often makes me feel a lot of uncomfortable stuff. Sometimes I get down from talking up here and I feel kind of queasy - this involves exactly the kind of authenticity that I had to suppress when I was younger.

But, that's exactly what makes it important — and why I have to keep doing it, especially when it is difficult.

Meditation / Discussion Questions

- Are there any religious or spiritual words that you feel a connection to, but struggle to use?
- If you were being truly authentic, how would you engage with the language of spirituality?