Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Grappling with Spirituality,

Second in the personal journeys series

Kate Lewis © 10 May 2026

A few weeks ago Ruby introduced our series of talks on personal journeys of spirituality. She titled her talk Grappling with Spirituality, which is perhaps an appropriate title for the whole series, since here we all are in the Auckland Unitarian Church, and most of us did not start our religious or spiritual lives as Unitarians.

After volunteering to do this talk I started to wonder if I am, in fact, a spiritual person. What does that word even mean? It reminded me of teaching and lecturing at the university; there's nothing like teaching a subject to make you realise you do not understand it at all.

So I looked it up. The discussion of spirituality on Wikipedia is very long and has 183 references. The definition starts with this:

> *There is no single, widely agreed-upon definition of spirituality. Surveys of the definition of the term, as used in scholarly research, show a broad range of definitions with limited overlap. A survey of reviews by McCarroll, each dealing with the topic of spirituality, gave twenty-seven explicit definitions among which "there was little agreement".*

It goes on to say about spirituality:

> *In modern times the emphasis is on subjective experience and the "deepest values and meanings by which people live", incorporating personal growth or soul transformation, usually in a context separate from organized religious institutions. Spirituality can be defined generally as an individual's search for ultimate or sacred meaning, and purpose in life. Additionally it can mean to seek out or search for personal growth, religious experience, belief in a supernatural realm or afterlife, or to make sense of one's own "inner dimension".*

It's possible to induce or dampen spiritual experiences with psychoactive agents, so "some leading theorists … speculate that spirituality may be a benign form of psychosis." I think the main lesson here is how dangerous a little bit of information can be when taken out of context from Wikipedia.

Based on my reading, spirituality can encompass religion or not; you can be spiritual and religious or spiritual but not religious. In any case it illustrates the point that there is no single, widely agreed-upon definition of spirituality.

In my case spirituality is tied up with religion because I have always explored them in tandem.

I grew up in the Episcopal church, which is the American version of Anglicanism. My parents were not fervent believers, but they were disciplined, and we went every Sunday. The church had two Sunday services, one at 9 and one at 11. The 9:00 service was in the parish house, the building adjacent to the church, in a room next to the kitchen where breakfast was served to homeless people on weekdays. We set up a circle of folding chairs with a table in the middle to act as an altar. We sang hymns, accompanied by a guy named Harold on an aging piano, had readings, and no sermon. The sermon was a discussion based on the readings as inspiration to whomever wanted to speak. For communion someone brought bread – homemade was the best, including my father's; old pita bread from someone's freezer was the worst. The priest blessed it and the wine, and we passed the plate and the cup from person to person around the circle.

The priest was a bit of a firebrand, and the way we were Christians was by embracing social justice. It was a city church, and people came for food, clothes, housing, counselling, and a warm place to sit. The church welcomed gay men when AIDS was terrifying, and people were dying. We had all kinds of people in that church, which was challenging at times, but a lesson for life.

By contrast my mother's parents were Methodists, so on holiday, when we drove the 9 hours from Baltimore to Jeromesville, Ohio, to visit Grandma and Grandpa Glasgo, we went to the Methodist church.

At that time Baltimore had 800,000 people, over half of whom were Black and ~20% lived below the poverty level. By contrast, Mom grew up in a town of 500 people in rural Ohio and didn't meet a non-white person until she was a university student; my grandparents still lived there.

In the rural United States at that time, and possibly still, some Christians believed that drinking alcohol, or certainly drinking to excess, was forbidden in the Bible. In Jeromesville, only the Catholics and the sinners drank alcohol. My mother told me that she and her friends dared each other to climb up and peek in the windows of the one bar in town to see who was in there. When my parents got married in January of 1968 in the middle of a blinding snowstorm, my great aunt Nelson, who had come from Baltimore for the wedding, made family history by sneaking out to the freezing car during the wedding reception to drink bourbon from a hip flask.

So by the time I was 18 my experience of religion was a bizarre contrast between an urban church serving the poor where we stood in a circle and passed a hunk of crumbly bread and a chalice of wine for communion and a rural one with a formal service where one of the most important principles seemed to be not drinking alcohol, so we sipped grape juice out of tiny paper cups. The consistent thing was that everyone in my family went to church every Sunday.

At that time, going to church was familiar and comforting. However I already knew that I did not believe that the resurrection was real. I did not believe that people could come back from the dead, even Jesus. In the Baltimore church this was acceptable; the resurrection could be seen as a symbolic event. In the Ohio church it was not.

The year that I graduated from high school my parents, younger brother, and I moved to Hungary, where my dad was part of a teacher exchange. This was 1988, so we were solidly established behind the Iron Curtain. While we were there my parents did not insist on going to church, presumably because we couldn't understand the language and nothing even remotely familiar in practice. Practicing religion was legal at that time but strictly supervised by the state. Many Hungarians were Catholic, but only small numbers went to church.

I joined the university choir and fell in love with a young, devout teacher who had considered being a priest. I started going to church with him but resented that I was not allowed to take communion because I had not been baptized Catholic. I added another layer to my religious experience, feeling excluded and unworthy, the opposite attitude of the Baltimore church. This was my first experience with religious and nationalist fanaticism; I would never be able to marry that man because I was neither Catholic nor Hungarian. It was certainly a blessing in the end, as he is a very conservative xenophobe and surely an Orban supporter.

The next year, back in the U.S. I started university. I went there thinking I would study science, but I hated my biology class and loved history and culture. First I was an African American Studies major. Then an anthropology major. I lived in Senegal, in West Africa, for a year and was intrigued by people's religious beliefs. There was no problem for my Senegalese friends being Muslim and also believing in elements of traditional local religions, even though that was strictly forbidden in Islam. I found it confusing but also fascinating. I became particularly interested in Islam because of the multitude of ways it is observed around the world from Senegal to Indonesia.

Finally I became a comparative religions major because what got me excited about my African American studies classes, anthropology, and my experience in Senegal was when we were talking about religion, what people believed and how it influenced what they did. As part of my major I studied the Old and New Testament from a cultural and historical perspective, which led to my conviction that the Bible was a human creation, a work of both literature and political jockeying. At my home church I confessed that I didn't really believe any of it anymore, and they said,"You'll make a great Episcopalian. Everyone has a skeptical phase."

After college I lived in Hawaii on an internship at the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory. This got me started on my volcanology career, and I loved the Hawaiian stories. Pele is the goddess of the volcano and has battles with her sister Nāmaka, the goddess of the sea and indigenous beliefs and volcanology.

I discovered that there are indigenous Hawaiians who follow traditional beliefs and practices. This has a significant emergency management component when the volcano erupts and lava flows cascade like rivers along unforeseen paths. Some native Hawaiians said, no, we will not interfere with the lava flows by putting up walls or digging trenches to divert the flow. If Pele wants to take our house then she can; that is her right.

The importance of my travels to Hungary, to Senegal, to Hawaii, and finally learning more about Māori history and culture, was that they were my first direct interactions with people whose religions were threatened by larger societal forces, money, and power. In my limited sphere of experience it was impossible that someone would come in and say, we disagree with what your church is saying, so it's illegal now, or, like in Hawaii and New Zealand, we'll ignore your beliefs because they are inconvenient to developing our more advanced society. Or, in Soviet Hungary, we'll watch you to see what you practice, and if it goes beyond our limited tolerance we'll arrest you.

Over the next years religion continued to catch my imagination. In 2001, Muslim extremists demolished the two World Trade centers in New York City, killing thousands and upending the world. George W. Bush declared war, and we are still dealing with the fallout of that today. Seeking violent revenge and focusing it on the religious beliefs of the people who wronged us. Now Trump embraces fundamentalist Christians and somehow, incomprehensibly, fundamentalist Christians embracing Trump.

And here is where I discover my religious roots going back to that urban church in Baltimore, where people embraced people who were different from them. I have been deeply outraged by people who call themselves Christians supporting Trump. People saying he is on the side of God and protected by Jesus himself. I struggle because my relatives in Ohio are so-called good Christians, and I know they voted for Trump at least once if not twice. It is painful and difficult for me to accept this hypocrisy in people I love.

It is not an intellectual debate for me; I feel it deep in my body, and I am filled with rage. I thought I had let go of Christianity years ago, but it turns out I haven't because in my heart I believe that Christians are meant to be good people, that they should practice their religion as good people. Just as, in all my study I have found that ALL religions want their adherents to be good people. It is pretty universal, and of course widely distorted, that being a good person does not include using your religion to hurt, to hate, to condemn others.

Saying it out loud sounds so simplistic as to be naïve and childish. I guess it's the difference between knowing something in your head, having always known that organized religions have been used for bad, compared to how it makes you feel. I know all the intellectual complications around human behaviour, but in my heart I have strong beliefs around how we are supposed to treat people, no matter what religion or spiritual belief we subscribe to, and I guess coming to that clarity has been a big step along my spiritual path.

Because it's Mothers Day I'll share one story about my mother and her sister. As I said earlier, we lived in Baltimore and had lived in other places before that; when my mother married my father it led to a very different life from her childhood. By contrast her sister Judy married a teacher and stayed in rural Ohio. Mom and Judy were best friends and talked every week.

When my mother was dying Judy came and stayed for a while so she could visit the hospital. While generally the conversation was not challenging (this has always been a family that avoided talk of politics and religion), at some point Mom let drop that she didn't believe in heaven; she figured that when we die we're just dead. Later, Judy confided in me that she was deeply distressed by this; she couldn't believe that Mom didn't believe in heaven, while to her it was a fundamental and crucial part of her faith. She needed to know that when she died she would be reunited with her parents and sister. I think the fact that Mom didn't believe it made Judy fear that she wouldn't be able to go, and that led to genuine sadness and grief. I like to think that if there's a heaven, then Judy and her parents will be there, and so will my Mom because Judy, and her mother before her, believed it to be so.

I see religion through so many lenses, through my father's family history of wealth and power and slaveholding, through my mother's family of working class conservative Methodism, my childhood in an urban church, my times abroad, my university major full of history and theory, and for the last 18 years in New Zealand, and for the last 4 in the Unitarian church. It is inseparable from my sense of spirituality.

The one constant in all of this, when I feel most spiritually whole, is when, like many of you, I am filled with awe and wonder about the natural world. I read that poem by Mary Oliver because I share that sense that in order to be whole we need to be out and listening to the natural world. We can find wholeness there.

Meditation / Discussion Questions

- What have you heard today?
- How does what you believe influence what you do?