



Reflections on a Spiritual Journey

Maria Hayward © 24 May 2026

What is a Spiritual Journey?

According to AI, “a spiritual journey is a personal, non-linear quest to deepen self-awareness, connect with a higher purpose, and find inner peace”. The definition continues: A spiritual journey “involves shifting from ego-driven living to authenticity, often marked by meditation, mindfulness, and self-reflection. The process often starts **at the heart**, nurturing **compassion** and a deeper connection to the cosmos.”

I quite like that definition – although a connection to the cosmos might not be the words I’d use. And churches or religion are not mentioned. I also think that it doesn’t matter whether our spiritual journeys include a concept of God or religion or church. These are all personal worlds and we make our own decisions about which aspects of spirituality have relevance or meaning for us. It doesn’t matter that there are differences in our spiritual journeys or beliefs or credence. In my opinion, what matters is **how** we live our lives. And how we make **decisions** in our lives – what guides us? It is interesting to hear the variety of spiritual interpretations and journeys that we’ve been hearing over the last few weeks.

Today I’ll share my journey. Mine is not so much about waka jumping (or faith/church swapping) – it’s more about that ethereal thing, the development of my moral compass, perhaps, that steers or guides me in my life. This is today’s ‘take’, the theme or topic for today’s service.

My Spiritual Journey

There is a whakatauki: “He Ātua, he Tangata”: We are both Divine and Human. This speaks to both our human-ness and our spirituality. I’ll come back to this whakatuaki later ...

For today’s kōrero, I set out to write a linear story about my journey from Catholicism to atheism to agnosticism, to no labels (i.e nothing), and somehow eventually to Universal Unitarianism. But I found myself writing something quite different. However, according to the AI definition I read earlier, it does fit under that **broader** definition of a spiritual journey.

My journey is about a goal to become a good person, or at least, the best person I can possibly be. I’m not going to apologise if this sounds smug or sanctimonious or even fatuous. I don’t mean this statement in a grandiose way - just in the sense of this being a journey.

I also want to talk today about the journey towards developing the degree of **strength and courage** that might be needed for **becoming** the best person I can be, and also for **developing the type of strength and courage** that might be required for making the right decisions at those critical life moments – the extreme of which might even be a life or death decision (I’ll explain more about this later).

So, my kōrero today is **not** about spiritual ‘waka jumping’ or moving from one ‘religion to another’. It’s about what I need – to become that thing that might be mocked by some (and I don’t care) – a **good person who contributes positively** to the world. This is the spiritual journey I want to talk about.

I think this journey began many decades ago for me.

When I was in my teens, there was a very powerful television series called 'Holocaust'. As you will know, or can guess, it was about the Jewish extermination during WWII. The series resulted in a seminal shift in my understanding of humanity. It was when I first saw and learned about **evil**. I clearly recall my parents being silent during the programmes, which must have been very triggering for them, as both had been young teenagers when Germany occupied the Netherlands in 1940.

I also remember having quite impassioned discussions with my parents after the final episode. I had so many questions. "How could this all have happened? Why didn't people stop the Germans?" and so on. My parents, my father in particular, gave me very thoughtful and detailed responses.



"Many people", he said, "didn't actually **want** to **think** about what was going on – the rounding up of Jewish people didn't affect them, they **turned a blind eye**". And he added: "**Some** Dutch people felt too **scared** to do anything – they knew they might risk their **own, or their family's lives**". And my parents also told me, "A few people were actually **pro-Hitler** – it wasn't just a 'flaw' in the **German** character". I recall my father also saying: "You have to be careful about leaders like Hitler. His army had fancy uniforms; he made people feel he was sorting out Germany's problems, and with these reassurances many people didn't '**hear**' his

really dangerous messages”, my father said. This was my introduction to what fascism was, its effects and, I suppose, its appeal.

I was about 15 at the time and I think it might have been the first time I started **‘thinking critically’**. So, this was a pivotal moment in my **moral** development. And I was certain, at that youthful age, that I **would** be the brave warrior opposing evil, **fighting and risking my life** for good, should I find myself in a major crisis. As I got older, I started wondering, how I could be sure that I **wouldn’t** be the person who, as my father had mentioned, was either too **scared to act** or **who turned a blind eye to evil**, or who didn’t **notice “the dangerous messages”**. I figured that there was some sort of mental preparation I would need to do, so that I **could** have the strength to be a moral person and to act with courage.

I continued to think about good and evil. My reading, my thinking, my studies (at school, but mostly at Uni), discussions with peers, amongst other things, all comprised (even if accidentally) – all comprised this mental and spiritual work and contributed towards developing characteristics that I hoped would help me make the **right** decisions should a moral dilemma – large or small, occur in my life. This was my resolve.

A few decades later, I had to revisit that resolve and question my moral courage. A group of former refugees I was teaching posed this question to me: “What if someone threatened to ‘hurt’ (they meant rape) your daughter, if you didn’t give them what they wanted (like telling them where certain people were hiding), what would you do?”

I became aware that some decisions might be **really** hard and, if the choice was between one of my **children** or contributing to evil, I’m pretty sure I’d save my **children**. But I decided I would still need to be as strong

and ethical as I **possibly** could be. There could be other situations, not as difficult, where I **would** want to do the right thing.

My thinking **now** is that we will never know for **sure** how we'll react in a moment of crisis. Nevertheless, I think that we have a **better chance** of responding with **moral courage** if we **plan to do so** beforehand, if we have thought through the process of moral decision-making. And what that TV series did for me a long time ago, was to start my wish to **develop** a strong moral compass to enable me to not only lead a good life and to make good decisions, but also to contribute to **humanity** in a positive way. This is the spiritual journey I am talking about today.

Did organised religion play any part?

I was already moving away from the Catholic church by the time I'd left school – but the one thing I **did** like about this religion was its emphasis on **social service**, that is: on helping and caring for those less fortunate. I took aspects from Catholicism as well as from my family's strong moral beliefs and just kept bolstering these throughout my adult life (well, that's been the plan). I became aware that being the person who stood up against evil at a pivotal moment, required not only a **deep personal conviction**, but also **knowledge** about what **strategies** might be effective in achieving this. Obviously, this didn't preoccupy my time and energy every single day or week or even month or year – but it was always there, somewhere, and I kept revisiting those thoughts whenever there was an outside stimulus or trigger. Working with former refugees really pushed me along in this journey. I heard many stories from people who actually had had to make those decisions, and many risked their own lives to make the morally correct choice. I was moved to hear how **many** people did this. How courageous and moral and kind and generous human beings can be.

Many years after that TV series, my father and I were having a discussion and he expressed how there were certain political decisions (both in NZ and further afield) that he **really worried** about. He believed these sorts of decisions or policies could lead to fascism. He was always a bit of a pessimist, and I argued, that we would **never** get fascism in the modern democratic world again. I stressed that we had **learned** from history. (Gosh, I'm glad my father is not alive today to see that he was right...). Now I see the seeds of fascism springing up even here in Aotearoa. And I do need to think about my commitment to take action against fascism and hate.

But, returning to my spiritual journey: I want to reflect on the more explicit, 'pou' (pillars or posts of support – usually in the wharenuī), the metaphorical pillars that I think can provide that spiritual and moral strength. I get **helped** in my spiritual journey along the path that Socrates called the path towards 'virtue' – and **helped** to be that warrior-type person by engaging in various tasks – and these constitute the elements (the pou) that have supported and still do support, my spiritual journey:

The **pou**, or things that support me in this spiritual journey are that I:

- try to surround myself, where possible, with people who have similar values – this gives me strength – I know I'm not alone. These people, these friends, also assist me with my thinking.

And, I am helped to be that warrior by:

- gathering authenticated facts and figures, scientific data, accurate **information – in other words, getting the truth** about social, political and other issues.
- and finally, by **listening** to people who challenge me **intellectually**.

And some of that I get from here, from this place, almost every week, this helps me get re-charged.

How else does Unitarian Universalism help me? I enjoy the challenging or inspiring talks, the 'friends-in-kind', the reinforcement of values, the social justice work. I like the way that people in this church care for other members, always mentioning those who are unwell, remembering those who have passed, thinking about anyone who is struggling (even the ones 'unsaid or un-named, but who remain in our hearts'). This seems like spiritual behaviour to me too. Maybe it's this stuff – in combination the souls coming together, the rituals, the music, the morning tea; but also the stimulation, the challenges, the provocation at times – maybe all that together is my connection to spirituality right now. But most important for me is how this process keeps me on track regarding doing good in the world and how it sometimes transforms me towards more compassion, more understanding.

And when I look at the **Unitarians**, especially in the US: what amazing social action many of the churches there are undertaking right now. The UUA website is full of political statements and stances the church is taking about what is happening in the US, and they are providing guidance for their followers. It's the direction of '**good people**': fighting for women's rights, fighting for the rights of minorities – immigrants and transgender people, fighting for justice and democracy, fighting ICE, opposing war-mongers, fighting fascism, and marching against would-be kings and tyrants. It's the 'action' that our principles urge of us and I'm very proud to be part of this group of people who don't just sit in churches and 'pray', even if they are **praying** for the right things.

My journey has also involved thinking about taking action. But I'm aware that none of us might not take that very important action:

- If we feel afraid or weak or vulnerable

And we also won't take action

- if we don't know **how** to – if we don't know what to do
- if we're not informed about **why** it is important.

And we don't take action

- if we feel we will lose too much by doing so (or own children)

and finally, of course, we don't take action

- if we don't **care** enough. If we're too egocentric or not affected **personally** by the threat.

Maybe an **institution** or **church** or **group** can help with overcoming some of these stumbling blocks. Or some of this work, individuals can do on their own.

Your journey will be different from mine. I left the Catholic church because it wasn't offering me any guidance, any inspiration – its emphasis and energy seemed to be on judgement, exclusion, punishment, sin, and blame (mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa – as we used to say when the Mass was in Latin).

And my concept of 'god'? That idea for me, **might well be kindness**.

But where else is there spirituality among the Universal Unitarians? There is the music, the singing, the candles, the ritual of our Sunday services. These create a spiritual ambience – they reach us in that place that Catholics call our 'soul'. This time in a spiritual space is sometimes a really calming time for me.

(So, that's why I pledge to the Unitarians – and that's my little pledge testimonial tucked in to this kōrero!).

I'll conclude now. I consider the pathway towards goodness instead of complacency to have been a **spiritual journey** for me. It's not about finding a religion or my idea of God. It is the journey itself that is spiritual for me.

And on that note, kua mutu taku korero – my talk is finished.

Meditation / Discussion Question

- Share one aspect of your spiritual journey with your group.

Discussion rules:

- Keep your comments brief
- Ensure everyone has a turn (or passes)
- Listen, but do not comment (you can affirm with a very brief comment during your own speaking time)
- You can add a further comment if everyone has had their turn to speak