

READING FOR THE NEXT SESSION

At gatherings of Unitarian Universalist ministers, one person is usually asked to present an odyssey—a life story. Sharing a spiritual odyssey seems a tad pretentious. It is like repeatedly asking yourself, “Who am I?” Relating a spiritual odyssey involves making critical choices: what to include, how much time to spend on this or that, what transforming and frustrating experiences to share, what influential people to name. The essential must be separated from the non-essential, which is a working definition of the word “spiritual.”

There is no unanimity on what “spiritual” means. It can be anything from a “warm tingle in the toes,” to ecstatic religious experience, to being “born again.” By these definitions, there is clearly a felt need for something more than the thin gruel of rationalism that has no heart, for something more than a culture in the grip of technocracy where things predominate and objectivity prevails.

There are times when spirituality seems like just a fad. How often are ministers admonished to “say something spiritual,” as if one could flick a switch and do it. One veteran Unitarian Universalist minister and trend observer said that spirituality “could be the fattest cow currently waddling through our pasture.”

Stereotypes suggest that in order to be spiritual, one must be a monk, or someone who walks through life on air, or someone engaged in disciplined spiritual practice and goes on retreats to monasteries. But spirituality infuses each of us. It is not restricted to an enlightened few. We may even be spiritual without knowing it. Take the cartoon of two meditators sitting together. The Master, with profound wrinkles on his brow, says to the student, who looks a bit uncertain, “Nothing happens next. This is it.”

We know there is something more to life than the material—some reality beneath the surface of passing events. I delight in Woody Allen’s response to the question of whether

one can see the human soul under a microscope, “Maybe, but you’d definitely need one of those good ones with two eyepieces.” Getting a handle on this elusive matter of spirituality is something like trying to untie a wet knot while wearing boxing gloves, to borrow an image from the late novelist Peter De Vries. Another of De Vries’s characters finds the “atmosphere of philosophy so rarified that he keeps swallowing as he reads in order to pop his ears.”

In *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham cite a Jewish Hassidic tale: “When the disciples of Baal Shem Tov asked him how to know whether a celebrated scholar whom they proposed to visit was a true zaddik [teacher], he answered: ‘Ask him to advise you what to do to keep unholy thoughts from disturbing you in your prayers and studies. If he gives you advice, then you will know that he belongs to those who are of no account.’” The best medicine is found when doctors learn their patients’ conditions and resources and realize that patients often can heal themselves. This is even more true for spirituality than medicine.

I suggest a periodic spiritual check-up, consisting more of stories than of facts, more of questions than of answers. Diagnosis and prescription will not be high-tech. Pablo Picasso once said, “Computers are useless; they can only give you answers.” Spirituality is more art than science. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote that “Life is painting a picture, not doing a sum.”

Learning to ask the right questions is crucial. I think of a cartoon that aptly sums up our dilemma: Pictured is a large and impressive building, The Research Institute, with two signs at the entrance, pointing in opposite directions. In one direction is “unanswered questions” and in the other “unquestioned answers.” I make the assumption here that, in the words of Kurtz and Ketcham, “Spirituality is a lot like health; we may have good health or poor health, but it’s something we can’t avoid having. The same is true of spirituality: every human being is a

spiritual being. The question is not whether we 'have spirituality' but whether the spirituality we have is a negative one that leads to isolation and self-destruction or one that is more positive and life-giving."

How are you feeling spiritually? When you get out of bed in the morning, are you glad to be alive? Or are you like one of Charles Schultz's *Peanuts*' characters who "dread[s] one day at a time"? When you go to bed at night, is it with relief that the day is over, or do you give thanks for yet another day of living? The capacity to have zest in living is a key spiritual health indicator. Enthusiasm derives from the Greek, an "extravagant religious emotion," literally being "possessed by a god."

In her "spiritual geography" *Dakota*, Kathleen Norris wrote the following about gossip in the small towns of the Dakota plains:

My favorite gossip takes note of the worst and the best that is in us. Two women I know were diagnosed with terminal cancer. One said, "If I ever get out of this hospital, I'm going to look out for Number One." And that's exactly what she did. Against overwhelming odds, she survived, and it made her mean. The other woman spoke about the blessings of a life that had taken some hard blows: her mother had killed herself when she was a girl, her husband had died young. I happened to visit her just after she'd been told that she had less than a year to live. She was dry-eyed, and had been reading the Psalms. She was entirely realistic about her illness and said to me, "The one thing that scares me is the pain. I hope I die before I turn into an old bitch." I told her family that story after the funeral, and they loved it; they could hear in it their mother's voice, the way she really was.

One's attitude in facing each day is indicative of spiritual health or illness. As poet Stephen Dunn wrote, "To have any chance at a good life—a friend once said in a letter—you have to keep saying abracadabra even though nothing happens." Do we have a healthy

sense of humor about ourselves and the contradictions, the paradoxes, and the oxymorons of life? When in doubt, can we laugh at life?

In recalling her early life on the prairie, Kathleen Norris notes her fundamentalist upbringing and the "Monster God." "My uncle told me once about having his mother sit at the edge of his bed and tell him that Jesus might come as a thief in the night and tomorrow could be that great day when the world ends. 'That sucks when you'd been planning a ball game and a rubber gun battle,' he said. He would pull the covers over his head when she left, and try to shut out the sounds of Jesus sneaking around in the dark." If we take ourselves too seriously, our spiritual health is found wanting.

Can we deal with the inevitable tragedies of life, including death, including our own? Mary Catherine Bateson tells of her life with parents Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson and how they chose to die. Both died of cancer. "Though she had always insisted that life should include an acknowledgment of death, Margaret refused, in the face of incontrovertible evidence, to admit she was dying and engaged a 'healer' to treat her. Gregory died a planned death, surrounded by Zen students meditating day and night." A reviewer of Bateson's memoir concluded that "When the time came, neither of these world-famous scientists, it seems, found knowledge or rationality much help in facing the unknown." It is not only how we live our life, but how we face our death, that is an indicator of spiritual health. Religion prepares us for the worst, as well as the best, that life offers.

Do we manifest our spirituality in the world so that people take inspiration from who and what we are? One member of an adult religious education class in "Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography" wrote that spirituality is "the deepest inner core of my being; the source of inner strength, of endurance, of meaning, of awe; the life force that keeps me wanting to grow, to learn, to create, to change, to relate, and to love; my own unique bit of DNA, that at the same time connects me to the Life Force of

the entire universe; that stores up inspiration from nature, from all kinds of other people, and from all kinds of art forms; and that helps me to get through the hard things.”

Does our faith overflow into service? In *Dakota*, Kathleen Norris gives a poignant and moving account of her little church on the plains, Hope Church, Presbyterian, where she served as occasional lay preacher: “Hope Church gives the people who live around it a sense of identity. Hope is well cared for. Both the out-house and the sanctuary are freshly painted. As one pastor recently put it, ‘the thing that makes Hope so vibrant is that the congregation is so alive to the world.’” They conducted a study of the politics of hunger. In recent hard times, while Hope’s membership declined by nearly half, the amount the church donated for mission increased every year. It now ranks near the top in per capita giving among Presbyterian churches in the state of South Dakota. According to Norris, “One former pastor said, ‘It can be astonishing how tiny Hope Church makes you feel so strongly that you’re part of a global entity.’” Vibrant spirituality and social responsibility are a seamless web in which our gratitude for being overflows into service.

Does our spirituality lift us and our lives into larger frameworks of meaning so that we see our life as a worthy project, so that we take joy in the work of our hands and heart? In his book *Tales of the Hasidim*, Martin Buber tells us that “[F]or thirty-five years Paul Cezanne lived in obscurity, producing masterpieces that he gave away to unsuspecting neighbors. So great was his love for his work that he never gave a thought to achieving recognition, nor did he suspect that someday he would be looked upon as the father of modern painting.” Cezanne owes his first fame to a Paris dealer who chanced upon his paintings, put some of them together, and presented the world of art with the first Cezanne exhibition. The world was astonished to discover the presence of a master. “The master was just as astonished. Shortly after the exhibition opened, Cezanne, arriving

at the gallery leaning on the arm of his son, could not contain his amazement when he saw his paintings on display. Turning to his son he exclaimed, ‘Look, they have framed them!’” We all need to have the work of our lives framed in some larger context than the everyday. That is spiritual health.

Does our spiritual health enable us to celebrate life? I am captivated by the image of Joseph Campbell ringing the great bronze bell at Chartres, an experience he described in *The Power of Myth*.

So we climbed the tower up to the great bronze bell. There was a little platform like a seesaw. He stood on one end of the seesaw, and I stood on the other end of the seesaw, and there was a little bar there for us to hold on to. He gave the thing a push, and then he was on it, and I was on it. And we started going up and down, and the wind was blowing through our hair, up there in the cathedral, and then it began ringing underneath us—bong, bong, bong. It was one of the most thrilling adventures of my life. That was a moving, beautiful thing. I’ve been to Chartres time and time again since.

The opportunity to write a spiritual autobiography is an opportunity for a spiritual check-up that ought not to be missed. It is essential for our health and well-being.

Background Reading

Campbell, Joseph, with Bill Moyers. *The Power of Myth*. reprint ed. New York: Doubleday, 1991.

Kopp, Sheldon B. *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him*. reprint ed. New York: Bantam Books, 1988.

Kurtz, Ernest, and Katherine Ketcham. *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Journey to Wholeness*. reprint ed. New York: Bantam Books, 1994.