

READING FOR SESSION 10

Now, for the final session of this program, we consider what it might mean to have a "Spiritual Check-Up." Beliefnet sponsors an online religious inventory. Here is their interpretation of the scores:

25–29: Hardcore Skeptic—but interested or you wouldn't be here!

30–39: Spiritual Dabbler—open to spiritual matters but far from impressed

40–49: Active Spiritual Seeker—spiritual but turned off by organized religion

50–59: Spiritual Straddler—one foot in traditional religion, one foot in free-form spirituality

60–69: Old-fashioned Seeker—happy with your religion but searching for the right expression of it

70–79: Questioning Believer—you have doubts about the particulars but not the Big Stuff.

80–89: Confident Believer—you have little doubt you've found the right path.

90–100: Candidate for Clergy.

One student of spirituality cites the symptoms of spiritual health:

- a tendency to think and act spontaneously rather than from fears based on past experience
- an unmistakable ability to enjoy each moment
- a loss of interest in judging other people
- a loss of interest in interpreting the actions of others
- a loss of interest in conflict
- a loss of ability to worry (this is a very serious symptom!)
- frequent and overwhelming episodes of appreciation
- contented feelings of connectedness with people, places, and things—especially with nature

- frequent attacks of smiling
- an increasing tendency to let things happen, rather than trying to make them happen
- an increased susceptibility to the love extended by others, as well as the uncontrollable urge to extend it

In Unitarian Universalism we do not give out spiritual report cards. That would be an act of presumption. It is not a bad idea, however, to undertake a periodic self-examination.

The question is not "how are you feeling?" but "how's your soul?" or spirit or psyche?

Spirituality is one of those squishy words. The more you try to define what you're talking about, the more elusive it becomes. We enter the dangerous and mysterious world of the intangible, the subjective. Being spiritual has been likened to "nailing down the air in a balloon." *Spirit* in Latin means "to breathe"; in the Hebrew scriptures it is life, breath, *ruah*; in the Christian scriptures it is *pneuma*, life force, vitality, and aliveness. The spiritual realm has to do with the invisible forces that create and sustain life, the very ground of our being. It is the inner dimension of things.

Unitarian Universalists would do well to attempt a personal and communal 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 says, "Computers are useless; they can only give you answers." Spirituality is more art than science. Oliver Wendell Holmes writes that "life is painting a picture, not doing a sum."

Learning to ask the right questions is crucial. A certain cartoon aptly sums up our dilemma. It pictures a large and impressive building, The Research Institute, with two signs at the entrance, pointing in opposite directions: In one direction the sign reads "unanswered questions" and in the other direction "unquestioned answers."

We make the assumption here that spirituality is a lot like health; we may have good health or poor health, but health itself is something we can't avoid. 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."

With our spiritual stethoscopes at the ready then, we ask each other and ourselves, "How are you feeling, spiritually?"

When you get out of bed in the morning, are you glad to be alive? Or like one of Charles Schultz's Peanuts characters do you "dread one day at a time"? When you go to bed at night, are you relieved that the day is over, or do you give thanks for yet another day of living?

Zest for living is a key spiritual health indicator. The word *enthusiasm* derives from the Greek for an extravagant religious emotion, literally possession by a god. Kathleen Norris writes in her "spiritual geography" *Dakota*,

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 writes, "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 you have a healthy sense of humor about yourself and the contradictions, paradoxes, and oxymorons of life? When in doubt, can you laugh at life?

In recalling her early life on the prairie, Kathleen

Norris notes her fundamentalist upbringing and her vision of a "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 you take yourself too seriously, the doctor cannot give you a clean bill of health.

Can you deal with the inevitable tragedies of life, including death, even your own?

Mary Catherine Bateson tells of her life with parents Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson and how they chose to die after they were both diagnosed with 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 concludes, "When the time came, neither of these world-famous scientists, it seems, found knowledge or rationality much help in facing the unknown."

Like how we live our life, how we face our death is an indicator of spiritual health. Religion prepares us for the worst, as well as the best, that life offers.

Do you manifest your spirituality in the world so that people take inspiration from who and what you are?

One member of an adult program class in "Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography" writes 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 your faith overflow into service?

Kathleen Norris gives a poignant and moving account of her little church on the plains, Hope Church, Presbyterian, at which 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 outhouse 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 donates for mission has increased every year. It now ranks near the top in per capita giving among Presbyterian churches in the state of South Dakota. 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 your spirituality lift you and your life into larger frameworks of meaning so that you see your life as a worthy project, so that you take joy in the work of your hands and heart?

For 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 art 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 pres-

ence 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 your spiritual health enable you to celebrate life?

In an interview with the television journalist Bill Moyers, mythology scholar Joseph Campbell tells a captivating story about ringing the great bronze bell at Chartres Cathedral:

I consider Chartres my parish. I've been there often. When I was a student in Paris, I spent one whole weekend in the cathedral, studying every single figure there. I was there so much that the concierge came up to me one noon-time and said, "Would you like to go up with me and ring the bells?" I said, "I sure would." 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. When it was over, he brought me down, and he said, "I want to show you where my room is." Well, in a cathedral you have the nave, then the transept, and then the apse, and around the apse is the choir screen. He took me through a little door in the middle of the choir screen, and there was his little bed and a little table with a lamp on it. When I looked out through the screen, there was the window of the Black Madonna—and that was where he lived. Now, there was a man living by constant meditation. That was a moving, beautiful thing. I've been to Chartres time and time again since.