

READING FOR SESSION 3

The seriousness of the Unitarian Universalist spiritual quest goes back to the seventeenth-century Minor Church of Poland. Its adherents stressed church discipline, by which they meant the frequent reminding of individuals of their duty as faithful people in a religious community.

Each member was subjected to a quarterly moral and spiritual examination, followed by exhortation and correction from ministers and laity alike. Each member was expected to make an accounting of his or her stewardship. Although this religious faith was very influential in Polish history, it never grew significantly because its moral and spiritual demands were too strict. Such a practice probably would not fare well in contemporary Unitarian Universalist congregations, but it is not a bad idea for each of us to undertake a periodic self-examination and to ask not "How are you?" but "How's your faith?"

Spiritual life is often compared to a journey, as in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. We are forever taking trips, we mobile Americans, and we usually take adequate provisions. We have travel club maps and advice. We have first aid supplies in our glove compartments, games to keep the kids happy, and National Public Radio. We have a full-size spare tire, jumper cables, an emergency kit, and of course, the computerized global positioning system. We've arranged for neighbors to feed the cat. We pronounce ourselves ready to go.

Spiritual hunger, according to some, is the almost exclusive province of baby-boomers, who have been labeled "a generation of seekers" by Wade Clark Roof. One critical observer thinks this vantage point is limited. Joe Wakalee-Lynch sarcastically writes that, in this view, "Anyone born between 1946 and 1962 who ever had a thought beyond the next meal is a seeker."

Ultimately we are all travelers, all seekers—regardless of generation and regardless of theology. Soul-searching is the work equally of those who believe the finite soul needs connection with the infinite and those who believe we live alone without God in a random universe. Spirituality exists for the doubting soul as well as for the believing soul. Faith and logic converge in our quest. Even at our rational best, we observe that the most powerful cosmic forces are invisible—wind, heat, cold, the turning of the seasons,

human affection, and devotion to a cause. We can observe their workings but not determine why they do what they do. A creative power not completely comprehensible to reason and science is at work in the world. Human? Divine? Both? Neither? Perhaps we cannot know.

But what are we seeking? We seek at least to avoid a sort of sleeping sickness of the soul—the loss of seriousness, enthusiasm, and zest for living. In the story "Knights and Dragons" by Elizabeth Spencer, one character experiences an awful day and believes that he is the "world's most useless citizen . . . an impractical cultural product, a detached hand reaching out, certainly changing nothing, not even touching anything." The scene concludes with these suggestive words: "He longed for his white kitchen table and his wife's warm brown eyes, under whose regard he had so often reassembled his soul."

Reassembling our souls. Now that presupposes we have a soul—a debatable proposition at best—especially in a theological company of theists and atheists, deists and agnostics, humanists and pagans, scientists and free-thinkers. In Greek thought there is a bifurcation of body and soul, soul belonging to a divine, eternal realm, that undying, indestructible part of humanity that is confined to the body during life on Earth. An old Greek proverb reads, "The body is the prison-house of the soul." In Hebrew thought body and soul are indistinguishable. The word *nephesh* means "breath" and is often used to designate "a living being." In this tradition humanity is formed from the basic stuff of Earth. We are, in a literal and poetic sense, "clay that speaks." In Latin, *spirit* means "to breathe" or "to blow"; in the Christian scriptures it is *pneuma*, life force and vitality. The spiritual realm has to do with those invisible forces that create and sustain life, the very ground of our being. It is the inner dimension of things. The Buddhist doctrine of *anata* or "non-soul" denies the existence of a soul or any spiritual substance at all. Instead, human life is likened to a flame passed from candle to candle. Human life is ephemeral; our impermanence is like the grains of sand in a sand pile.

But these discussions of soul are too ephemeral, too poetic, too subjective. In our materialistic time, if we cannot measure something, it simply

does not exist. *Soul* is simply one of those words that defies definition. Marcus Aurelius's colorful interpretations of body and soul suggest that the human race consists of "spirits dragging corpses around with them." Graham Dunstan Martin calls the soul the "ghost in the machine," or "the Angel in the Engine." Sir Cyril Burt writes about "perfectly healthy bodies staggering under the weight of dead minds" and "a carcass loosely coupled with a ghost."

Perhaps we might better think of the soul as poetry. We resort, or rise, to poetry whenever we're in too deep and cannot figure something out. Soul is poetry, best understood in flights of imagination or narrative. One of the most arresting portrayals of soul is in James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*. In "The Creation" he writes,

Up from the bed of the river God scooped up the clay; and by the bank of the river He kneeled him down; and there the great God Almighty who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky, who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night, who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand; this great God, like a mammy bending over her baby, kneeled down in the dust toiling over a lump of clay 'till he shaped it in his own image; then into it he blew the breath of life. And man became a living soul. Amen. Amen.

Both the scientific and the poetic descriptions of how we came to be are valid and both serve to inspire. Both have soul: The theory of evolution is majestic and Johnson's "Creation" is moving. One satisfies our reason; the other our imagination. We all know intuitively the truth in the words of Sophia Lyon Fahs: "We gather in reverence before all intangible things—that eyes see not, nor ears can detect—that hands can never touch, that space cannot hold, and time cannot measure.

Knowing all this, where do we go to reassemble our souls? Where do we go to catch our breath in a breathless time? Where do we go to weave together the strands of our lives? Where do we go to collect our scattered thoughts and fragmented feelings? Where do we find resting places for the spirit? Where do we go to center ourselves? We all need a touchstone, a place to reassemble our souls. We may do this reassembling with a loved and trusted one, in nature, or in solitary medita-

tion; it may be a special holy place like a monastery or in church. We all need some spiritual space in which to reorient ourselves to the life we wish to live, a sacred inner space that is inviolate.

Religious people must have a center; we cannot be all circumference. We need a transforming center from which we can move to the outer edges of our living. We need an orienting center from which to take our bearings in a world where, in Conrad Wright's words, the "lights are dim and the very stars wander." We need to explore our spiritual core in a world in which the old authoritarian gods are dead and we are in charge of our religious destiny.

How often have we heard someone say, "I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious"? A common distinction is made between the two. *Spirituality* generally refers to the private zone of human experience. *Religion* usually refers to the social zone. Spirituality is self-focused, while religion is community-centered. Spirituality, as stated by Philip Zaleski, may be thought of as the "inner lining of religion."

It is possible to develop spiritually both in isolation and in community, but much of contemporary spirituality deprives itself of an ongoing community of faith and is thereby impoverished. We have perhaps confused the container with the content. Religion can be seen as the outward form, the container, the worship service, the education program, the community outreach, the mutual ministry of the faithful.

Spirituality is that inner growth that happens in each of us, growth that is facilitated best when it is grounded in a community with a history, a world-serving mission, regular worship, and commitment to care for one another over the life span. Spirituality without religion can become amorphous, vague, and self-serving, just as water without a pitcher to give it shape spills uselessly on the floor.

To be sure, a deep spiritual hunger exists today. People want more meaning in their lives than they can find in the everyday world. But many seem to want spirituality on their own terms, without the rigorous ethical and spiritual disciplines of a community of faith like our Polish forbears. A church of one. No obligations save to themselves. Are today's spiritual pilgrims looking for the challenges of a deeper faith or are they merely searching for assurances that the way of life they are already living is pretty much okay?

This kind of spirituality is the flavor of religion without the substance. Spirituality is too often equated with personal success—whatever that means. However, life is about failure and success, victory and defeat, joy and sorrow, enjoyment and suffering. There is too much of the “feel good” mentality in what passes for the contemporary spiritual journey. Can it deal with the inevitable bumps in the road?

America is obsessed with spirituality; it is ubiquitous. Bookstore shelves groan with spiritually oriented self-help books. We are awash in McSpirituality: junk food for the soul, religion a la carte, or what the *Utne Reader* calls “smorgasbord spirituality.” We already have a book entitled the *Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators*.

Poet Kathleen Norris worries about treating the soul “as just one more consumer on the American landscape and spirituality as the commodity that fulfills its every whim. . . .” At its worst, spirituality becomes just another consumable in the quest for a more fulfilled life, like a gym membership. Such pop spirituality “does not content itself with sharing the commonalities of the human religious impulse but seeks to elevate our ordinary narcissistic impulses into a religion.” A friend told Norris of an address by a popular self-help author who defined “meditation as focusing on your plans for the day and thanking God for making them happen.”

Consciousness guru Ken Wilbur critiques the superficiality of some New Age spirituality in these words:

We baby boomers have to be on guard against the belief that we’re the only ones who ever got anything right. As if we’re about to bring in ‘a new paradigm’—whatever that means—that will heal the Earth and lead to the greatest transformation on the face of the planet. . . . That requires spiritual practice, not just mental thinking—and that takes many years to come to fruition. That’s not a very popular message at a weekend seminar where people want to hear about how earthshakingly important they are.

We seem to reside in two different worlds—the outer world of the consumer culture and the inner world of the spirit. Dissatisfaction with the world of getting and spending seems to drive the passion for something more. Yet that something

more often seems little more than a blessing of the seeker’s status quo. Thomas More teaches us that we need a faith that helps us live “beneath the bottom line,” the bottom line being one of American culture’s transcendent symbols. We are inextricably enmeshed in bottom-line thinking. A poem by Fredrick Zydek closes with words that express our addiction to the conventional wisdom of this culture:

Once I had a dream. I stepped before the throne of God. He asked only one question: “Did you become what you were supposed to be?” “I’m not sure,” I told him. “But when I died, I had so much stuff, it took three days to find me.”

We have so much “stuff” that it distracts us from our pilgrimage. We might find the treasure right here among us in our religious community. For unlike forms of contemporary spirituality that glorify the private quest apart from connections with others, the Unitarian Universalist church provides a communal setting that ideally integrates an emphasis on personal search with a sharing and caring community. After all, one of our movement’s basic principles is to “affirm and promote . . . acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.”

The pilgrimage is complicated in our free religious movement, however. There are not many signposts along the way. But what should we take with us on our spiritual path? What are the intangible spiritual gifts without which we dare not make the journey? Shall we take the equivalent of the *Talmud* or the Internet? Here are some suggested provisions to consider:

A sense that life matters

Whether or not there is a cosmic eye observing our lives, it does make a difference what we are and what we do. Most ministers of religion speak of their “call” to ministry, some inner urging to give themselves to something beyond their own lives. It is a grave mistake to limit this sense of calling to professional clergy. Walter Brueggeman warns us that too many of us settle for “an uncalled life, one not referred to any purpose beyond one’s self.” Life does matter.

A sense of humor

Although life is serious business, we should bring along the ability to laugh, a way of gaining perspective on our finite selves in an infinite cosmic setting. Robert Frost writes, "Oh God, if you forgive my many little jokes on Thee, I'll forgive Thy great big one on me." As serious a man as Benjamin Jowett, master of Balliol College at Oxford University, writes, "We have sought truth, and sometimes perhaps found it. But have we had any fun?" If the trip isn't enjoyable, why go at all?

A sense of connectedness

We're only kidding ourselves if we think we can make it out here all alone. That sense of connection—to our fellow pilgrims, to the Earth, to the cosmos, to the Source of Life itself—is necessary for people of all theological persuasions. Poet Maxine Kumin describes herself as "an unreconstructed atheist who believes in the mystery of the creative process." The soul shrivels without connections.

A commitment to justice

Roy Phillips writes, "A sage once asked if there was more in his philosophy than meditation and quiet introspection. Was there a place for social action? 'Oh, yes,' he replied. 'That, too. Social action is another way of working on yourself.'" We cheat ourselves if we neglect the spiritual growth that comes through social action.

A conviction that the good life is necessarily messy

We must learn to live with ambiguity and love it just the same. *In Learning to Fall* Philip Simmons gives a moving account of living with Lou Gehrig's disease, a terminal and debilitating illness, and making a life of confronting it squarely. He concludes, "Some of us go willingly to the edge, some of us are driven to it, some of us find ourselves there by grace. But all of us get there at some time in our lives, when through the gateway of the present moment we glimpse something beyond. And when we do, may we open ourselves to wonder, may we surrender to the mystery that passes understanding, may we find ourselves at the threshold of this eternal life."

The actual world of imperfect beings, broken dreams, and illusory hopes is the only world we have. We must find whatever meaning we are able to pluck from life. The good life does not fall into neat patterns. Good and evil have no labels. We may not choose the perfect partner. Some problems cannot be solved. Not all stories have happy endings; most of them continue and end with a mixed blessing. Life is always unfinished business; it is radically uncertain. Muddling through is a virtue.

This is a spirituality for the doubting soul. Creation is not neat, no matter how scientists try to reduce it to its basic elements, no matter how philosophers seek to find reason in everything, no matter how theologians try to tie everything together in a divine package. It is full of caprice; surprise is around every corner—sometimes ecstatic, sometimes tragic. Creation wasn't really made for me or for anybody. It was just made. And we are fortunate enough to enjoy the beautiful messiness of it all.