



Spiritual Journeys

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I don't know what a spiritual journey is and every time I try to come up with an adequate definition or try to feel that I am on such a journey, I end up dissatisfied. Nevertheless, having been asked to talk about mine, I'll do my best to comply.

To begin at the beginning, I need to acknowledge the tremendous influence of my birth family: My parents were honest decent people who tried their best to serve the truth, who believed in humanity in general, but were shy and reticent about individual human beings. They were both skeptics, but generally hopeful about the possibility of a better world. My brother, John, who died last spring, was also a powerful influence on me. He was a loving life partner, father, and grandfather, a committed pacifist, and Vietnam era tax resister and draft resister. He also was a lover of books and mathematics, and a bird watcher. He had a calmness and caring about him that led those who knew him to love and respect him. And while I have taken a somewhat different path than he, the path he took often helped reminded me of what was important.

Within this family, I was raised a Unitarian, a pacifist, a socialist, a (small d) democrat, and as a supporter of the struggle for social and economic justice. All of these were and are all of one piece for me – inseparable from each other. And growing up, I believed, naively, that this was true for all Unitarians. I now know that the range of belief among UU's is far more diverse than this.

But I do believe that the implications of our seven principals must lead us ultimately to a society more fair and just than the consumer oriented corporate capitalism that we live in today. Indeed, I think the power of corporate capitalism is profoundly damaging to the democratic process and the human spirit as it uses money to persuade politicians to craft policy and law favorable to the interests of the wealthy instead of the many and as it bombards us with advertising that fools us into believing that luxuries and frivolous purchases are necessities. Indeed for a while I had been moving toward the conclusion that the struggle for justice and democracy in this country had been defeated by corporate power. Lately though, the Occupy Movement has given me some hope again. Perhaps it's not too late for the country to change paths.

Now, this foray into a critique of corporate capitalism may seem to some irrelevant to a discussion of spiritual journeys, but it comes for me directly from my belief system and is of one piece with my spirituality. The struggle for a better world is at the core of my spiritual belief system.

In any case, when Karen Rohrer asked me to do this talk, she mentioned that she was interested in that fact that I grew up as a Unitarian. So let me say a bit more about that and how it has impacted my life. During grade school and high school when I attended First Unitarian Church in Columbus with my family, Unitarians were primarily rationalists as were my parents and while I have tried on a variety of non-rational spiritualities since, I find myself in the last ten years more and more drawn back to rational scientific ways of looking at the world, but adding to my understanding that a full emotional life is crucial as well. Seeing intellect and emotion not so much as opposites but rather integral parts of a greater whole. What I haven't found, except perhaps in tiny non-reproducible snippets, is a sense of transcendence that often goes by the name of spiritual or mystical experiences, or being one with the divine. Occasionally, natural beauty or solitude in the woods brings about something that suggests transcendence to me, but then, I wonder whether what I have experienced is divine or simply a natural biochemical process affecting my emotions that help leads to a feeling of calmness and peace. I don't know and am recently less apt to try to figure that out, but I love it nonetheless when that happens.

Whatever these experiences are, I am becoming a confirmed agnostic about these things and also an agnostic in the sense that fully understanding how the universe works in all its complexity, what some might call the divine, is not knowable fully. On the other hand, I do know that the universe includes beauty, love, joy, kindness, natural scientific law, and just plain blind dumb luck and I believe the human beings are innately good and desire more than anything the love and companionship of others, this, despite the terrible damage done to many people by a world of injustice and shortages of resources that leads many to violence. This leaves us, I think, with the all-important work of ending injustice and bringing adequate resources to all who need them, so we can all live in a world that reaches toward human perfection.

I want to end with a couple of brief readings. The first is an excerpt from the poem *To Be of Use* by Marge Piercy that reminds me of a crucial legacy I learned from my parents, reinforced by my wife Ginny and now seen in the lives of my daughters, Kate and Susan:

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

The second reading is the covenant that the First Unitarian Church in Columbus used when I was growing up. With its beauty, poetry, and truth, it is still my favorite:

“Love is the doctrine of this church, the quest for truth is its sacrament and service is its prayer. To dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge in freedom, to serve humankind in fellowship, to the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the divine, thus do we covenant with one another.”

Betty Cavanaugh

One Sunday morning when I was about 8 years old, I found myself sitting alone on a low wall outside the village church. I was crying. This was a fundamentalist Southern Baptist Church, and the minister was the harsh-voiced, pound-the-pulpit type. That morning, he had said, in very positive terms, that anyone who died without having accepted Jesus Christ as his or her savior would burn in Hell forever. At the same time, I knew the church was sending missionaries to Africa to teach people about Jesus. I knew, because I sometimes attended women's missionary society meetings with my mother. So that Sunday, I couldn't help but think, "What about all those little kids in Africa who had not even heard about Jesus?" If one of them died, it made no sense that he or she would burn in Hell forever.

Through the years, my parents continued to attend Baptist churches--but, although I went with them, I never actually joined. In my teens, I suffered from worrying about why cousins my age seemed to be happy with the denomination, and I needed to find a religious home, but felt like a hypocrite to even think of accepting membership.

Walking across campus at Indiana University, I remember saying to myself, "I do believe; I do believe," but for me, at least, it was impossible to make myself believe something that did not make sense. Once, as a teenager in Gary, Indiana, I was asked by the church folks to be secretary, which I did, and rather enjoyed, perhaps because it gave me something to do on Sundays. Finally, probably because it would please my mother, I said I would join. However, when the ushers came down the aisle to escort me to the front to join, I simply could not go; so as they stopped at my row, I shook my head and they left.

Actually, there were some things about Baptists I liked after reading more of the history. For one thing, a person could not become a member until he or she reached the age of "reason," which was thirteen, if I remember correctly. This meant that parents could not make the decision; it had to be the individual. And, of course, there is a vast difference between the fundamentalist Southern Baptists and some other much more liberal Baptist churches.

While attending Indiana University, I went to several churches in Bloomington, but it wasn't until after graduation while working in Indianapolis that I really spent a lot of time searching for a church home. I read everything on religion that I found in the public library, sometimes only getting three or four hours of sleep a night (Apparently this did not hurt my job proficiency too much, because some years later, I asked the woman who had been my boss and she said I did fine.) The result of all this reading was that I decided if I were anything, I was a Unitarian – and I've been one ever since. Also during this time, I discussed my dilemma with an aunt who lived in Dayton. Her husband had a great-uncle who was a retired Methodist minister, and they took me to see him, and left us alone to visit for an hour or two. When I told him how I felt, he said, "I don't see a thing wrong with anything you've said." That was a great comfort to me.

One thing that has puzzled me, and still does, is why this search for a comfortable religious home was so very important to me, yet does not seem to be a need for some people. Both of my husbands, for example, never seemed to worry about it at all. My first husband's mother was an avowed atheist. My second husband's mother used to tell him as a child that it did not matter which religion he followed, that they could never agree anyway, and he should just live a good life and not harm other people and he'd be all right. Of course, at age 65, SHE became a Mormon!

My goal to find a religious home where I could feel comfortable was successful when I found the Unitarians. Each Unitarian finds his or her own "truth," and some are very traditional Christian; others tend toward atheism; and no doubt there are plenty of other classifications among

Unitarians as well. I call myself agnostic, because I truly cannot say I do or do not believe in a greater power of some kind. I do not believe in a personal God who will answer my prayers, but I also cannot be sure that there is nothing. Science has taught us that physical things do not just disappear – that they each may change form, but still remain. What about non-physical things, then? Do all our thoughts, feelings, intentions disappear into nothingness? Or is it possible that they, too, change into another form somehow?

Helping me to decide that I am an agnostic was an old friend of Jerry's. The two of them had kept in touch through the years, but not always too frequently. Then they began writing more often, and I read the letters. The friend had become a Unitarian minister, and some of his letters indicated that his views lined up quite well with my own; so we began corresponding also. I well remember my reaction when he said one time that he thought agnosticism was the only thing that made any sense to him. "I agree," though I.

While I would never want to discourage anyone from a belief that gave him or her comfort during the cares of a lifetime, I also do not want anyone trying to cram other beliefs down MY throat. I've worked too long and hard to arrive at a comfortable place for myself.