

Living with Ghosts

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Deanne Starr, one of our ministers, defined religion as that which helps you find answers to all of those questions you wouldn't have if you weren't religious. I seem to be incurably. After leaving Roman Catholicism at age thirteen, I practiced no organized religion, but was still curious about philosophical and ethical questions, and my mind was now free to roam. My explorations took me to the library, to late night discussions with friends, and in 1967 to the First Universalist Church of Wausau, Wisconsin, where I found my people, my spiritual home.

I was turned on by the intellectual stimulation of the place, and immediately connected with this community because we shared common values. They accepted me as I was—a non-believer—and they challenged me to keep learning, exploring what I could believe. I have come to believe again in many things, central among them is the essential value of a community of Unitarian Universalists, who keep me honest, learning, and growing.

As mentioned, after leaving traditional religion my exploration took me to the library. I learned there many things about the world, myself, what I believed, and didn't; I found some defining limits. Because religion was still of interest to me I checked out a book called *This Spirituality*. As we know that word means a lot of different things to people. I read the whole book but found once again a part of religion that I could not accept because it made no sense to me. This book on spirituality presented stories of séances, channeled spirits, charlatans, in my view.

I do not believe in spiritualism, doubt those who claim to speak for the dead, and resent the techniques they employ on gullible people. For example, while serving as the Assistant Minister at the Unitarian Church in Buffalo, New York, I stopped out in a hallway to listen to the medium who had rented our parish hall to conduct a large group séance of sorts. I remember hearing him say, "Who here has a relative that was an Episcopalian priest? I am getting a message from him." When no one of the 200 people in attendance answered, he used the old trick of blaming the victim. Instead of saying he was on the wrong channel, or that he wasn't really hearing voices, he said, "Okay, if you don't want to admit it, we'll move on to the next spirit." Everyone there doubted the person next to them instead of the con-artist in front of them.

My reason for sharing these memories is to make it clear that I sympathize with the Unitarian Universalists who think those talking about "spirituality" in our churches today don't know what they are talking about. One of our ministers, John Wolfe, wrote: "There is a lot of talk about spirituality these days. We talk about people becoming more or less spiritual. There is a great deal of interest in people learning how to become more spiritual in their lives. I must say I do not understand what people are talking about when they talk about spirituality. Spiritualism I understand: the belief in extra-sensory perception, reincarnation, people getting in touch with the spirit world, mediums...potions and prophecies. But I don't understand 'spirituality' per se. Do they mean being more sensitive to things around you? Is it a greater awareness of the deep things of life? Is it a patience with things, a willingness to wait for the tough times to pass in the belief that a better day will dawn? Is it charitableness, kindness, sacrifice? If that is what they mean, all right. Those things I know about; those things I can understand. But is that what

people mean when they talk about being more spiritual? ... I don't know." [Andrew Kennedy quoting Roger Fritz from *First Days Record*, March 1992]

Well, I don't know either, and the only way to know is to ask. It is easy, but not gracious nor intellectually honest to define something in a narrow way and then reject it. Unitarian Universalism affords us the opportunity not just to show we are the rationalists of religion, but to grow in understanding, to be open to the spirit of learning and love.

So it is our third UU principle calls us to affirm and promote the: "Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations." "Acceptance of one another" is difficult enough for most people; "encouragement to spiritual growth" is even more challenging for two reasons: one, our natural narrowness of mind and heart, and two, our differing definitions of spirituality.

There is a story about a religious leader which demonstrates this first problem well. In the version told by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, "One day a rabbi, in a frenzy of religious passion, rushed in before the ark, fell to his knees, and started beating his breast, crying, 'I'm nobody! I'm nobody!' [In some versions the cleric says, 'I'm not worthy! I'm not worthy!'] The cantor of the synagogue, impressed by this example of spiritual humility, joined the rabbi on his knees [and said] 'I'm nobody! I'm nobody!' The 'shamus' (custodian), watching from the corner, couldn't restrain himself, either. He joined the other two on his knees, calling out, 'I'm nobody! I'm nobody!' At which point the rabbi, nudging the cantor with his elbow, pointed at the custodian and said, 'Look who thinks he's nobody!'"

We may be able to tolerate other people, accept them in some role or way, but more challenging still is encouraging them in their growth especially when it is not as we would have defined it. Our narrowness of heart makes it challenging, our narrowness of mind makes it even more difficult. Indeed we do have different definitions and differences can lead to divisiveness as Alan Watts wrote in the reading this morning: We become partisans of prickle or partisans of goo instead of affirming our differences and learning from them.

All religious institutions have internal differences; our history is full of religious discussion and debates: we have argued about the role of reason versus intuition in religion, personal piety versus social responsibility. Now the rationality versus spirituality debate is foremost before that we debated whether we were a religion or not, and before that our definitions of God. We have learned in these discussions that things do not need to be set in opposition; we have worked our way through what others thought dichotomies to find more inclusive definitions. One of our adult history curriculums was called *The Disagreements That Unite Us*.

Indeed, we learn from one another. Acceptance of others is not just a nice thing to do; it is conducive to our own spiritual growth. As Unitarian Universalists we do not all agree on what spirituality means. We do all agree on the importance of growth; we have differing definitions of spirituality, and that is as it should be. Whereas traditional religions have historically defined things rather narrowly, we have encouraged broader understandings of these terms. In our way of religion it is not a question of having to fit into someone else's definition, but of developing your own.

My definition of spirituality comes out of my experience. When I am stuck, if I calm myself, I feel more confident in my abilities, connected, in line with the whole process of life, more trusting, hopeful. That change, transformation, doesn't just happen because I tell myself to

“calm down” nor because I feel it; it comes not separately from my thoughts or feelings, but from a third part of me, a third way, which may just be connecting the other two, but which elicits another word, “spirit”, connoting something more, something mysterious, something not completely in my control, but which I can utilize with practice, that something I call “spirit”.

What is spirit, the breath of life as the Hebrews labeled it, I don’t know exactly, but I do know its value, its influence. I’ve seen team spirit in action. I’ve seen the difference when people are in high versus low spirits, and I’ve seen people who have a spiritual depth versus those who are shallow. And, I know I need more of that calm centering feeling, and that inspiration, the hope, of the spirit that comes when I let go of my usual grasping after control, let go, be open, calm, trusting something more—the spirit!

Developing spirituality is taking the time to be open to the Spirit of Life and Love that I have come to call goodness, and sometimes, if necessary, God. The reason to be open to the spirit of life is in order to feel one with it, to feel whole, and effective. Spirituality can empower us, imbue our lives with meaning, while at the same time teaching us humility, which is necessary to be part of the whole. Much of our experience is of conflict, dualism, divisions; spiritual development serves to help us transcend, or transform those differences. But, being humble and open as we have seen is no easy thing to do even when we think we are.

And that brings us back to ghosts. I trust it is clear that when we are talking about spirituality I am not talking about ghosts as spirits of the dead who haunt us, but now I will use the word to apply to the people and experiences in our past that influence us, but which we tend not to acknowledge. We may want to ignore these ghosts, deny or exorcise them; we can also choose to live with them and learn from them.

For example, take the ghosts of our previous religious affiliation. Years ago a man in the middle of a sermon talk back denigrated me, and my past religion by saying, “You can take the boy out of Catholicism, but you can’t take the Catholicism out of the boy.” Of course my feelings were hurt, and later I was angry and resentful. But with time I made peace with him and my religious past. I have clearly identified that it is not consonant with who I am and what I believe; it is no longer a fit for me, but to the extent I can acknowledge and learn to live with its positive as well as its negative influences on me I am free. I believe such freedom is a sign of spiritual growth; and freedom is one of my highest UU values.

As psychology has demonstrated sometimes the ghosts which we fear and try to keep in abeyance are really manifestations of our shadow side, that which we have denied. By owning, acknowledging and learning to live with the multiple parts of our being we become free.

There are other kinds of ghosts that influence us such as our past definitions and interpretations of things. Bringing them out of the closet and examining them, learning to live with or changing them helps us be free. The ghosts we live with are more under our control than the ones we deny.

A Unitarian Universalist community encourages us to do these things. The open and honest people in our congregations have accepted, supported, and challenged me; through this process of support and challenge, I have learned, changed, become a better person because of my participation in Unitarian Universalist community.

I trust that this fellowship has changed over the years as well. All of our congregations have been exploring the meaning and relationship of rationality and spirituality. Some UUs have said

of spirituality, “If you can’t define it you shouldn’t do it.” Others, feeling something missing in their lives, can’t quite define “it”, but wanting something more; feeling a need to find a calm center, they are open to an journey seeking wholeness and its effectiveness, and some of them use the word “spirituality” to speak of what they want. For example, I meditate; it helps me go to sleep; it calms me, centers me, helps me see more clearly, be more effective; I’m hoping for that spirit, that strength, to grow in me, but I need more practice. Some find spirituality in nature, in looking out these windows at the beauty of the natural scene we are in; some find spirituality in action, social action and service; we all need more practice.

There seemed to be a big difference between those who were searching for spirituality and those who wanted nothing to do with any such thing, but as we share our different definitions, our needs, and hopes we find that we are not as far apart as we feared; we have more in common than we thought. We are learning from one another; we are changing. The end result is that today our religious communities are more theologically diverse, able to accept more, and to encourage more. That, I believe, is good.

We are different from other ways in religion because we are more inclusive than most, we encourage individuals to develop their own definitions, and we offer a community that brings out the best in us because it encourages both honesty and continuous growth through maintaining a commitment to both rationality and spirituality instead of forcing us to choose one or the other.

We believe in growth of all kinds: mental, emotional, physical health, and moral; and just as it seems necessary to study in order to grow intellectually, so we need to study spiritually in order to grow ethically and in understanding. We need to develop the spirit that exemplifies and underlies openness and growth.

In conclusion, I think it is no coincidence that the two parts of this our third principle was put together: to encourage spiritual growth we must accept one another with our varying definitions of what that means; and to truly accept one another would require spiritual growth.

This principle brings together two related actions: “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth.” Both are essential. We are asked not just to be inclusive for there are limits to how inclusive we should be—and those limits are determined by the second half of the principle: that spiritual growth is facilitated. What our congregations offer is not just inclusion, but that challenge to keep growing until the person sitting next to you nudges someone and says, “Look who thinks their being spiritual!”

Until then let us with Donald Johnston say, “Here may no one be altogether stranger, no honesty of thought ignored, no depth of feeling easily dismissed, no life belittled and no life shut out. May whatever clarity of mind and heart we bring be humbly treasured, brought to bear toward word and person. May fellowship be treasured most of all, and paths to its sustaining and renewing sought and found. May growth of mind and spirit be our purpose; such new understanding as shall lead us to new ways in which to blend our lives together.” Amen.