

"Is Spirituality Enough?"

a sermon by
the Rev. David S. Blanchard

September 14, 2003

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Syracuse

"If your religion does not change you,
then you had better change your religion."
-Elbert Hubbard

I would be a rich man if I had a dollar for every time someone says one of these three statements to me. Maybe at a dinner party, a wedding reception, a meeting in the community, at intermission in the lobby of a theatre, I can almost guarantee that I will hear at least one of the trinity of trite and true comments. They are these: 1) If I went to a church it would be a Unitarian Universalist congregation, 2) I've always been meaning to come to a service at your church, and 3), the classic, 'I'm not a religious person, but I am spiritual.'

I have developed a simple response to the first two statements. I just smile and tell them they'd be welcomed anytime they were able to be among us. I tell them it's a great congregation to be a part of. They smile, nod, and change the subject.

Now the third statement is another matter. "I'm not a religious person, but I am spiritual." I smile and I nod. (You can tell there's lots of smiling and nodding in ministry.) I try to look understanding and empathetic, but what I am really thinking is this: "Why are you telling me, a professionally religious person, that you are not religious?" I want to ask, and maybe next time I will, "would you like some help with that?"

I believe that I understand where this sentiment comes from. I suspect that there are many people here right now that would make the very same claim for themselves. "Religion" has, shall we say, baggage. Every bad experience anyone has ever had in the institutional church is a strike against "religion." "Religion" oppresses women, conceals the abuse of children, foments terrorists, denigrates gay and lesbian people, and as we all know in our own culture, produces really bad television. The anti-authoritarian impulse that is so much a part of an individualistic society like ours, distrusts the enterprise of "Religion" in the guise of any corporate expression. Unitarian Universalists have a tendency to distrust our own "Religion" whenever it can be traced back to 25 Beacon Street in Boston. We get our backs up, and remind each other that no one is going to tell us what to do... Large groups of adults become teenagers again when they think that Boston is going to try to pull a fast one on us... 'Develop a social justice program?' Don't count on it... 'Establish guidelines for congregations safe from sexual abuse?' Hey, we're not Catholics you know...
You get the drift.

Whereas 'spirituality' strikes our ears as a more personal, intimate, and private enterprise. The assumption seems to be that, in the case of "religious" people, it is self-evident. If tried, there would be sufficient evidence to convict then on the charge: check ledgers with payments made out to a religious institution, church nametags discovered on the tops of bureaus or in the glove compartments of the car, newsletters affixed to refrigerators, coffee breath on Sunday afternoons... that sort of thing. But spirituality, is practically speaking, nobody's business but our own. On that, we just have to take each other at our word. Generally speaking, religion is most typically viewed as representing a pattern of external behaviors; and spirituality is a more interior, more opaque, more individual response to the world about us.

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not picking a fight with spirituality as an expression of the religious impulse. I understand my own self as a 'spiritual' person, and have made of many elements my own hybrid spirituality: uniquely mine, distinguished from anyone else's. Part theology. Part prayer. Part poetry. Part personal history. Part practice. Part mystery. In a word, I almost understand my "spirituality" as a hobby. I work on it when I can. I improve it when it's weak. I talk to others who share the hobby. But mostly, I do it alone. And if it were sufficient, if it were "enough," I wouldn't be standing here.

This morning's reflections grew out of two things I read this past summer. One an interview with Huston Smith – scholar of world religions and once a professor at Syracuse – and the other, the newest work by Elaine Pagels on the Gospel of Thomas titled Beyond Belief. I'll start with Smith and end with Pagels.

In the article, Smith suggested that while spirituality does good in people's lives, that the damage to the culture comes when spirituality replaces religion as the primary allegiance for people's souls, and position itself as superior to the earthbound realities of organized religions. To tidy up the train of thought I'm on, I ought to offer at least my own grasp of the two principal terms – Religion and Spirituality. Spirituality, to me at least, describes a sensibility, an attitude, a lens even, through which one views and interprets existence. I think of "spirituality" as a mode of perception, and thus, it is often qualified by a noun: "earth-based" spirituality, "feminist" spirituality, "queer" spirituality, etc. etc. Religion, on the other hand, stems from linguistic sources for the notion of "binding up" or "binding together."

It represents an integration of story and myth, ritual and scripture, sacrifice and service, worship and rites of passage. But perhaps most essentially, it represents the binding together of the beloved community – past present, and future – merged always in the now. Or to put it all into Huston Smith's beautiful simplicity: Religion is organized spirituality.

Religion is a hard sell to many in this day and age. It's thought of as dogmatic and moralistic. Its historical shortcomings are legion: the Inquisition, the genocide of native populations, the negligence of the AIDS crisis, and the silence in the face of the Holocaust. Such anecdotal evidence would make organize religion a one-dimensional monster. But, of course, it's more than that, and remains a consistent source of strength and service in the world. But we all know it's a human institution, and is subject to every flaw know to, well, mostly men.

But why most of our contemporaries critique organized religion is its occasional hypocrisy... when they fail to “walk the talk,” when the espoused values seem optional, or are selectively employed. It’s a grave problem, but the nature of religion provides an effective remedy. A community bound together is ultimately accountable to itself. People can call each other into accountability. It is not easy work – but look what the laity accomplished in the Boston Archdiocese.

The Achilles heel of “spirituality” is that it can drift toward narcissism. It’s a little like living in one of those little snow globes. It’s very pretty. Nothing changes. The seal keeps the inside and outside from ever mingling. Meanwhile, we’re still in the company of what Hafiz called “the ten-thousand idiots.” Accountability is limited by our own self-awareness and ego. There are few forces to bring about balance, no influences demanding a self-connection to perceptions that are too narrow, too partial, too restricted.

When I ask, “Is Spirituality Enough?” it’s not an either/or question. In no way do I want to make it seem like we have to choose between our spirituality and our religion. It is like almost everything else in creation, a matter of balance; of creating a conscious blending of solitude and community; of reflection and action; of wisdom and of work. For all it offers me, all it has come to mean to me, I know that my spirituality is not enough for me to live a life that is whole. I need to – with regularity – experience the “binding up,” the “binding together,” that my religion gives me.

In community, I am forced to acknowledge all that my spirituality would rather forget. It’s my religion, and not my spirituality, that has the power to make me confront my own limitation, my own inconsistencies, my own private hypocrisy – and change. My spirituality would prefer our first principle was “the inherent worth and dignity of people who think like me.” My religion doesn’t let me get away with that.... It calls me to uphold that same essence in every person... and to mean it. Religion is hard work.

It’s my vision that we would work to make our religion, as Smith put it, and expression of organized spirituality – in which our spiritualities inform our religious practice, and our religion is a literal embodiment of our spirituality.

It was not a random choice of those who placed that bomb – 40 years ago Tuesday – in the stairwell of the 16th St. Baptist church in Birmingham Alabama. There were dozens of other black churches in town. But the 16th St. Baptist Church was the church where there was some “organized spirituality” going on in the great struggle for civil rights. It was strong and powerful religion working to transform the soul of a nation. When it was bombed I imagine there was for many a spiritual awakening – but what mobilized for justice was religion. As one elderly woman responded when asked what good she thought she was doing to march, she just said, “My feet are praying.” Now that is organized spirituality. That is religion.

The Smith interview helped me to understand what I think about the subject. The Pagels book helped me to know what I feel about this collective venture of religion, and its embodiment in congregations. Pagels writes of a time in her life when she was more interested in the history of religion than its practice. She had degrees from Stanford and Harvard. She was a best-selling author. She had a husband and a child. But at 2 ½ her son was diagnosed with a rare lung disease, one that was invariably fatal. The next day, she went out jogging, and without forethought, found herself standing in the back of a church. This is how she described that experience:

Standing in the back of that church, I recognized, uncomfortably, that I needed to be there. Here was a place to weep without imposing tears upon a child; and here was a heterogeneous community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine. Yet the celebration in progress spoke of hope; perhaps that is what made the presence of death bearable. Before that time, I could only ward off what I had heard and felt the day before.

I returned often to that church, not looking for faith but because, in the presence of that worship and the people gathered there – and in a smaller group that met on weekdays in the church basement for mutual encouragement – my defenses fell away, exposing storms of grief and hope. In that church I gathered new energy, and resolved, over and over, to face whatever awaited us as constructively as possible for Mark, and for the rest of us.

The details of doctrine seemed to me then to have little to do with whatever transactions we were making with one another, with ourselves, and – so it was said – with invisible beings. I was acutely aware that we met there driven by need and desire; yet sometimes I dared hope that such communion has the potential to transform us.

Her words, her story, reminded me of the “binding together” that happens when religious community forms. It feeds us in way our solitary spirituality cannot. It is here we come, sometimes to simply be in the presence of a “great cloud of witnesses” that have gathered in this place seeking understanding, belonging, strength, and courage.

We sit here with those both present and absent,
who here have grieved, who here have summoned courage,
who here have experience grace, who here have silently borne unspeakable loss,
who here have witnessed the holy,
who here have been forgiven and found it in themselves to be forgiving,
who have here learned to recognize the touch of the hand of God.

Some days we arrive in need. Some days we arrive able to give. But every time we gather here, there is someone like Pagels in a pew towards the back, watching us closely. There is always someone standing at some distance, needing us, really needing us, to be here, as religious people, to help carry them across to the other side of their struggles. And most of the time, we never know it's going on among us.

See you next week...

