

Forty years ago, “spirituality” --as distinct from religion--became an increasingly hot topic for disciplines such as psychology and social work but spread to many others. Thirty years ago, I started writing about spirituality from a clinical perspective. As a social worker and minister supervising and teaching at a psychoanalytic training facility I brought insights from several disciplines to the effort and spoke to a number of hospital social work staffs and social work schools. Twenty years ago, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) instituted Standards Related to Spiritual Assessment that said a comprehensive assessment of patients must include “the resident’s spiritual status and needs, including spiritual orientation and the concerns of an individual faced with death such as hope, despair, guilt, or forgiveness.” Increasingly, spirituality is seen as a relevant variable in the fields of psychotherapy, social work, psychology, nursing, etc. The helping professions are seeing spirituality as increasingly important because increasing numbers of people are self-describing as “spiritual but not religious.” This cultural shift has important implications for religion.

#### Definition of spirituality:

Spirituality conventionally refers to religion or clergy, and a “sensitivity or attachment to religious values,” often sentimental or nostalgic. But “spirituality” more specifically describes the characteristics of a WHOLE person’s RELATIONSHIP to that which they consider to be SACRED, such as ultimate meaning, and values. William James referred to it as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individuals in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.” He then explained this as covering a relationship with anything that is “godlike, whether it be a concrete deity or not,” a “total reaction upon life . . . behind the foreground of

existence.” We could all spend a lifetime on defining the object of faith, but for a general description of spirituality we need to transcend the differences between Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, etc., and the differences within religions. Some say the divine is God, or several gods, and a client of mine, when asked to choose a Higher Power in a 12-step program, chose the Communist Manifesto. That functioned pretty well for her until the breakup of the Soviet Union stimulated a crisis of faith. William James, once commented about someone, “He believes in No God, and that is his god.” Even atheists and agnostics have a spirituality, often holding sacred a No God or a value such as Truth, Love, an Ultimate Way of Being Ethical, or The Ability to Choose Freely from the Menu.

Here’s a story and a conclusion: Long ago, I was walking down Fifth Avenue with Chandler, the slick marketing manager for the religious institution where I was a pastoral counselor. Chandler wore expensive suits and Gucci loafers; he was connected to an American political dynasty. He always ignored me except when he wanted a grant from the Unitarian Universalists, and I became his good buddy. At the corner of 31<sup>st</sup> and Fifth, a white-haired man lay sprawled on the cement while pedestrians streamed by on both sides of him. Mr. Marketing knelt on the cement and gently asked how this groggy but conscious man was; he helped him get up, called a cab, and paid the fare for him to get to his son’s apartment. I realized he had a work mode he thought was necessary and a personal way of being. Sometimes, when you see behind the mask, it is scary or disappointing, but not this time. Spirituality is the process or HOW one acts, feels, thinks, speaks—as a WHOLE person—to one’s self, neighbor, the universe; it colors and screens the perceptions of what one hears or sees as well.

By contrast with the personal process—the HOW--of spirituality, religion is WHAT, or content. Religion refers to community worship of the divine, the organized social and institutionalized structure in which particular forms of spirituality may be preserved and furthered through ritual or instruction. In social work terms, “religion refers to formal institutional contexts for spiritual beliefs and practices, and spirituality refers to the human experience of discovering meaning, purpose and morality. This distinction implies that spirituality can be expressed outside of a religious context.” The personal/spiritual and institutional/religious are complementary but not identical.

On the one hand this is a radical, individualistic notion in a world where the overwhelming majority of people are born into and never choose their religion. On the other, common sense recognizes that people can develop a different, perhaps more mature spirituality as they age, much like St. Paul saying that while a child he thought as a child but as an adult he put away childish things. All other relationships can develop in depth and complexity; if spirituality did not, we would have the simplest and most superficial views for our most central concerns. Individuals may develop their spirituality and either change religions as they grow into adulthood or stay with their religion but choose differing congregations or schools of theology as they age. For example, a client who had left his rigid, demanding and restrictive religion but retained his values of service to humanity said that as a fervent believer: “Heaven’s the end goal and I knew how to get there.” Now—after much turmoil, confusion, and struggle--he tries to help the poor and oppressed in a secular context. The difference is that instead of demanding that the poor believe as he does, he wants to be of service to any poor person, regardless of their religion. In our humble acceptance of maturing as we age, we might increase our

acceptance of others, acceptance of ourselves in adverse circumstance, and pursuit of higher values.

We owe it to ourselves to understand spirituality so that our doubts and angers do not impede empathetic listening or lead us to jump to conclusions. In order to truly understand another person, it is helpful to know that our beliefs are not rising and falling on what someone else believes. If you remember slick Chandler, remember also it wasn't his whole story. Of course, our spirituality will develop as a result of comparing our beliefs with how we act. Our beliefs are threatened or expanded as we confront change, success, illness, and suffering. We owe it to ourselves not to become so wrapped up in one particular faith stance that we cannot appreciate the tragedy and beauty of another. I call it both tragedy and beauty because every religion is flawed and incomplete; every religion is true and untrue in some aspects, therefore all are limited. Our traditions, which take the insights of many religions as a source of value and meaning thus give us a range of choices to choose from rationally. A noble attempt and a failure at once, each religion is beautiful in its reaching out for peace and incomplete in the human impossibility of ever achieving total comprehension of the sacred.

Spirituality of any person is shown in the RELATIONSHIP of a person with one's self, one's neighbor, and everything else in the universe, as informed by ultimate meaning, ultimate values, and a perceived ultimate reality. I was once asked to meet with a church committee and a highly verbal congregant who had become obsessed with Parent Effectiveness Training, a form of responsive listening, as the key to solving ALL the world's problems. Nothing else was important. He had quit his job to proselytize for this listening program, regardless of his wife's and family's needs. I empathized with him

but also noted that the congregation was concerned that there are realistic limits to the program and his efforts. He changed a little and pretty much everyone heaved a sigh of relief at finding themselves freed from a quarrel to work together. A religious community can hold people to a transcendent value by observing emotional realities so that people do not veer off into the emotional and spiritual weeds of life. A religious community can encourage positively valued behavior and confront compulsions or delusions.

Congregations can exercise a breadth of intervention that far exceeds therapy.

Also, by repeatedly observing and encouraging transcendent ideals, we are drawn voluntarily to become better people. A congregation can challenge us to articulate our social justice or personal commitments by asking clarifying questions. This is what Philip Berman and Gautama Buddha referred to as “the middle way” that encourages us to “experience the true fruits of love, self-transcendence.” While the grind of everyday survival may tend to keep our eyes focused on the road, a religious community can help us refocus on the goal of journeying forward.

Adherence to organized—or, in our case, barely organized—religion has been in decline for decades. All religious institutions—Catholic, Jewish, Evangelical Christian, etc.--report decreased identification and attendance at services and meetings. U.S. membership in Unitarian Universalism has decreased by more than a third. In the past year, the UU ministry has gained a total of only three new clergy. Our access to possible UU’s has narrowed with the U.S. having more people working more hours weekly than any other society and so few supports for working mothers that weekends have to be devoted to shopping and maintenance. Further, families with young children are

worshipping at the altar of Youth Sports. A family with three children might have two sports practices for each child during the week and two games per child on the weekend.

So, stop blaming yourself and each other for fewer people being here today. People who identify as “spiritual but not religious” are at least a third of the U.S. population and growing. Mindy Fullilove, a couple of weeks ago, noted that we are all displaced by climate change; large disasters scatter people; great changes in the distribution of heat and water make people move from their previous comfort zones and lose touch with their religious communities. The pandemic has played a big part in accentuating what the “spiritual but not religious” folks report is their way of enhancing spirituality—meditation, yoga, and walks in nature. Zoom, blogs, and the internet generally have fueled a very individualistic form of worship—alone, looking at a screen. These natural, interpersonal, and technological forms of climate change have displaced us from our building and our previous social context.

Mindy suggested that we can partly counter the exhaustion of displacement by holding tightly to our UU principles. That is a partial solution and something we embraced in September. Mindy also suggested that we be of service to the surrounding area. Perhaps that is more possible here than at 25 Old Jackson Avenue but is a lot more than simple geography. How we interact with the surrounding area is now online and on the streets; we must use our imaginations to discover the many new Main Streets.

Mindy said: “Find your community and take the story of your journeying forward that helps all of us.” Journeying is the crucial term here; we have been journeying emotionally and physically for months and will continue to feel the effects for more months. Our joint identity as members of the First Unitarian Society of Westchester is

being stressed, tested, and stretched. It is important that we respect the comfort we feel about discussing issues considerately. It is important that we respect the many ways we have been present for each other, the many times we have empathized with the glory or pain of each other, and the many ways we are bonded with each other as with a large extended family.

Mindy asked, “How do we take care of our people?” That means: how do we take the way we treat each other right here and now and live it out in a larger community and the interdependent web of all life. As we model in the wider world the lessons learned here, some people will recognize that as something they want. Some people will know us as distinct from the wider, displaced culture and see us as examples of values they wish to emulate. In any case, as we live our principles faithfully, we shall thrive, we shall feel that we have a home in the world.