

THE UU WAY

A Sermon By
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A week ago Saturday I woke up from a terrible dream. It was a dream of death, of encountering the truth of non-being with all its brutal reality, in a deep-into-the-bones sort of way that only happens in dreams. I knew that death awaited me, but I fought it anyway, rejecting it and at the same time, completely unable to.

That day, pondering the dream, feeling its residual fear and sorrow in my heart and soul, I remembered. I remembered the last time I had felt this confrontation with death in such a personal way. As a minister, I sit with death regularly, walk with its reality, but only touch its horror occasionally. The last time I felt this soul-searing Truth, with a capital "T," was the day I was told my brother Wendell had died. That was thirty-five years ago, and for thirty-four years I've been remembering him on January second. This year, for the first time, I had forgotten. So I dreamed, and reconnected with the event that had changed my life and set me on my spiritual journey.

The Rev. Forrest Church tells us that "Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." This past year, Church has had to confront his own death, having been diagnosed with terminal cancer. So he told his congregation in New York City, and wrote another book, this one on *Love and Death*.

Whether we are at the beginning of our adult lives or nearing the end, we still yearn to understand, at the deepest level, what life and death is about. After my brother died, I decided to go on a spiritual quest, and explored other paths, such as the Sikhs, yoga, aikido and tai chi, transcendental meditation, Buddhist meditation, chanting and nature. A kind teacher saw my brokenness and taught me to meditate in another way that helped to heal me and strengthen me. And in the end, I came back to Unitarian Universalism, having never really left, since my faith is as tied to me as my heart.

There is something that starts us on our spiritual journeys in life: it could be death, or trauma, a decision, or a revelation. At that point in our lives, though, we consciously decide to search, to look for the clues to the meaning of life. We seek direction wherever we can, and start collecting the Truths we find. We don't have to go far from our selves; in fact, even though some do go on physical journeys to parallel the spiritual, it is within ourselves, within our daily lives that this journey takes place.

The story of the Buddha is one I love to remember. When this man encountered death for the first time, and hunger, and suffering, he left his family and home to travel around and search for understanding. But nothing he did brought him nearer to the Truth. So one day, having finally given up, he sat down under a tree, and it was at that moment, when he stopped, when he gave up the search, that he found enlightenment, became enlightenment. And the first thing he did was go back home to the family he had left, to the people who were his.

The true search happens within us, the understanding comes in its own time, and the work to be done is with the people who love us, and not just to teach, but to be taught. Spiritual journeys open us to the meanings we find everywhere and in everyone we encounter. It is never

an endpoint, but a condition in which we find ourselves able to engage with the life around us in new and deeper ways.

Perhaps Lao Tzu explained it best:

The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao.
 The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name.
 (*Tao Te Ching*, by Lao Tzu, 2008 Legge transl.)

We speak of journeys, paths, the way, but these are physical metaphors for what happens inside us as we search for the meaning of life and death. And when we think we can name what we find, the naming itself is inadequate, useless, an inept tool for communication which very often only creates confusion. This is a very old religious truth which we find today in the Jewish tradition of not writing the name of G-d, and in the Islamic tradition of the ninety-nine names of God. What we find is a mystery, and must remain a mystery, as the ancient Tao says, "Where mystery is the deepest, there is the gate of all that is subtle and wonderful."

Unitarian Universalists have taken up that joy of encountering the mystery, allowing the mystery, as part of our faith tradition. We reject dogmas, or literal interpretations of religious texts, and confound the general populace who believe that religion isn't true religion if it doesn't tell you what to believe. Some of you grew up with the Nicene Creed, which you had to recite every Sunday in church:

We believe in one God,
 the Father, the Almighty,
 maker of heaven and earth,
 of all that is, seen and unseen.
 We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
 the only son of God, etc. etc.
 [and] We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
 who proceeds from the Father [and the Son], etc. etc.
 [and] We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
 We look for the resurrection of the dead,
 and the life of the world to come. AMEN.

This creed defines the nature of God, and this is not unusual. Unitarians are called Unitarians because they rejected the Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit defined in the Nicene Creed, believing in one God, and as they began to read the Bible for the first time during the Reformation, they did believe in a literal interpretation of it which quickly became impossible for them. Our Unitarian ancestors realized that reason, which was a god-given human trait, was needed to understand the Bible. And as the centuries passed, that reason led us to wider and deeper understandings of the Truths we encountered in life, even to the teachings which Emerson and Thoreau took up and called Transcendentalism, that God could be found in nature and all things, as well as ourselves. In those years, the mid-eighteen hundreds, they had to argue with the Unitarian clergy of the day to encourage them to consider religious truth beyond the Bible, and in all religions found in the world.

As time passed, Unitarians found themselves on a parallel path with Universalists, who were called such because they taught that God was love, and a loving god would never condemn

human beings to eternal hell. Universal salvation was attained for everyone when Jesus died on the cross, and Universalists spread this saving message so well that many Christians have taken it up and incorporated it into their teachings. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Universalists and the Unitarians had merged. This was also the time when atheism and humanism rose to acceptance among us and became a strong and enduring influence in how we worshipped, the words we used, and the traditions we rejected.

One of the things many UUs had not taken up was the idea of a spiritual journey or path. The idea of spirit was even suspect, as a word, when I was growing up, so UUs have had a lot of work to do to fill this hole in our hearts. And it does, or did, feel like a hole. But we UUs did not lack spirituality; we just needed to define it for ourselves. Carolyn McDade was doing that when she wrote the beautiful hymn "Spirit of Life," which I first heard her play at a UU women's conference in 1981. It is a prayer for this century, for those of us who have a wider view of spirituality, with a new name for the mystery (although names create difficulties as always), and the importance of compassion and justice, the need for roots as well as wings. It is an expression of the yearning which is found in every human heart and is the seed of all religion.

I chose readings and hymns by Unitarian Universalists for this worship service as an example of the spirituality which is alive and well among us, and has been ever since Emerson, and longer. "Winds Be Still" is one of my favorite hymns, expressing that moment of clarity and peace that can come when we open ourselves to nature and its teachings. The author, Richard Kimball, is a member of the UU Church in Portland, Maine.

It was in the 1970's that UUs began to complain that we needed to clarify who we were and what we were about, so we composed our Purposes and Principles which are listed in the front of our gray hymnals, on approximately page six. These are not creeds, but values around which we covenant. A UU spiritual path should engage these principles and purposes so that we ponder them on a regular basis, allow them to shape our lives, grapple with them if we find them challenging, and in the end, embody them as best we can, to the extent that they make sense in our lives.

Right now, UUs are exploring what a UU spiritual path might encompass. Erik Wikstrom, the Worship Resources Director at the UUA, has been playing with an idea for what he calls "Eight Spheres of Spiritual Growth." Just like our physical bodies need nourishment from various food groups, thus the Food Pyramid guidelines, our spiritual needs (or that part of ourselves which engages the deeper meanings of life) must be integrated in various ways with aspects of life, inner and outer. The Zen Buddhists list "Eight Gates" on their spiritual journey: Zazen (which is meditation), study with a teacher, academic study, liturgy, right action, art practice, body practice, and work practice. (*Eight Gates of Zen: a program of zen training*, by Looi)

Wikstrom lists these Eight Spheres as meaningful for Unitarian Universalists: personal spiritual practices, communal worship experiences, spiritual partnerships, mind practices, body practices, creativity practices, life practices, and justice practices. I didn't attend the ministers' retreat in which he presented this last November, but I got his outline from my colleague, and I'm intrigued. For each of the spheres, I can imagine what might be meaningful on a spiritual journey, a UU way. But so can you.

In February, I'll be leading a class on The UU Way, and my hope is to begin to explore with you what spiritual journey means within the UU tradition. Everyone is drawn more to one aspect than another, to meditation or art, to thinking or exercising, to justice works or worship, to hybrids of one or all. But an aspect of spiritual journey that is important for UUs is that it be

what you make it to be. It should be consonant with your values, your experiences and understandings. For some, it should be a challenge. For others, it should be a connection or a letting go or a taking up. Wisdom is found in so many ways and places, and as the story of the Buddha shows us, the secret and power of spiritual journey is more often than not the stopping, the giving up, the opening oneself to whatever truth is there, and finding ourselves in the end.

The root of the word “spirit” means breath. Spirituality is the breath of life, of our deepest beings. As your minister, I love to engage with you on your spiritual journeys, and we created the Finding Heart groups as one forum within which you can explore what you care most deeply about, and get strength to live those values in your lives. Now we will add another dimension, and another after that. Together, I hope we will create a UU Way, and share the wisdom with one another which we have encountered in our lives.