

Spiritual Exchange

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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I've been tossing around the idea of secular spirituality recently. For many, the idea that secular humanists can be spiritual is inconceivable. The very word spirituality, they believe, belongs to the religious, the supernatural world of God and the ethereal domain of the dead. It evokes a non-substantive, transcendent realm that humans cannot quite know, a sphere that only can be approached through prayer and other religious behavior. "Secular spirituality" seems to be an oxymoron, a Combination of concepts that cannot be conjoined.

Yet, people living very secular lives, driven by rational thought, logic, and science, say that they are seeking spirituality, although they have difficulty describing what they anticipate. Certainly, they do not hope for a mystical experience that involves God or spirits. Rather, to them, spirituality seems to suggest comfort, connection, support, guidance, peace, and, most importantly, happiness — all ideas that are easily reconciled with their secular lives. Their spiritual dimension must be found in their daily lives, in their connections to something greater than themselves and within themselves, in the things they experience through their senses – in all that they see, smell, taste, hear, and touch.

I recently read a blog that listed 101 questions for self-discovery. Self-discovery being a loaded phrase, and because normally I would groan and keep moving, I was surprised when I took the bait and started reading. By question eight I was feeling a very crunchy granola, tree hugging, rose colored glasses, kumbaya singing, daisy wearing feeling. These are all fine but my personality detests perkiness, Mary Poppins, and new age balderdash. I wasn't able to spiritually nor intellectually stomach the other 93 questions. Yet, I remain a seeker.

In seventeenth century England there existed what was called a heretical culture that had a strong emphasis on Biblical study, but specific doctrines that had "an uncanny persistence"; the rejection of Predestination and anti-Trinitarianism. The Seekers, or Legatine-Arians, as they were sometimes known, were a British Protestant dissenting group that emerged around the 1620s. Seekers considered all organized churches of their day corrupt and preferred to wait for God's revelation. The Seekers were not an organized religious group in any way that would be recognized today, not a religious cult or denomination but informal and localized. Membership in a local Seekers assembly did not preclude membership in another sect. Indeed, Seekers shunned creeds and each assembly tended to embrace a broad spectrum of ideas. Their collective witness demanded the church to be an entirely voluntary, non-coercive community able to evangelize in a pluralistic society. This sounds very familiar to us.

I'm sharing this bit of history with you so we can draw a line from early anti-trinitarianism to Unitarianism to being a seeker. These are our roots. The Seekers were aptly named and so we too are seekers within this faith. We spend a lot of time explaining what we believe and what we don't believe. The encouragement to seek the truth that individually speaks to us is likely how

we found Unitarian Universalism. How do we as seekers search for truth and discover that divine spark that is within each of us? You see being a seeker on a search does not only describe our journey of faith. Perhaps more important is our individual journey to the greatness within ourselves. We are granted a glimpse of this destination in these lines from poet Walt Whitman in the poem *Leaves of Grass*: “Would you sound below the restless ocean of the entire world? Would you know the dissatisfaction? The urge and spur of every life; the something never stilled?—never entirely gone? The invisible need of every seed? It is the central urge in every atom to return to its divine source and origin, however distant.” As seekers we have all felt this central urge to merge with the highest part of ourselves. We are called to return to our divine source and origin.

I know what some are thinking right now. He just used the words divine and evangelize. If he says God I'm outta here. Don't pretend to get up to use the bathroom just yet When I use the word divine in the context of our journey to the greatness within, I'm not directing us toward a deity. Rather, I'm directing us to the supremely good that lies within each of us. Surely, this is palatable for all of us. Some of us may be comforted by a deity as well. It is this search for the supremely good that sparks the search and inspires and encourages the seeker. The need for whatever it may be that we're drawn to is the yet to be realized presence within us of that very thing to which we are drawn.

In the Gospel of Thomas, yes doubting Thomas, surely one of our descendants, it is written “the kingdom of Heaven is within you, and whosoever knoweth himself shall find it.” The hidden nature of almost all that we do is the direct, but unseen, effect of this one great unconscious desire to search out what we believe will complete us. We do experience contentment as seekers, but isn't this often temporary? Our reward may be a momentary sense of fulfillment that, in most cases, passes from sight as soon as do the temporary conditions that provided it for us. Kind of like me at 3:00 am standing in the light of the icebox for just a morsel of that cake. I'm only momentarily fulfilled—at least until I step on the scale in the morning. After this temporary state we return to our search. The mind that wants to know the truth of something and that's willing to do the work required of a seeker, will inevitably find that for which it is searching; our highest aspirations are reflections of unrealized possibilities. Within each of us already dwells everything that will ever be known. Some of might need to dig deeper than others, no names mentioned, you know who you are, but it is there. I understand the idea of everything that is ever to be known dwells within us is a challenging idea or concept, especially for the sturdy Unitarian-and particularly for seekers. We mustn't forget or ignore the possibility.

It may seem clichéd now, but there's a reason that mystics have lived alone, that spiritual people have gone on retreat for centuries. Poet Robert Weston writes about the slow days of summer, when we “might turn to examine our own lives.” He calls us “unfinished clay, half-molded, that still waits on us to think what we have been and as we are still yet have to become.” There's a sense of promise there, an expansiveness in the idea that we may become many things yet. We may shape ourselves, and be shaped, and we may find that the new shape suits us so well that we realize we must have always been that way, in some sense. And when we are out here on retreat, breathing in the late summer air and watching the sun set on the sea, we have the space to shape ourselves, to examine ourselves, to wonder who we have been and who we might become. To wonder who we are, what we are, that we haven't yet discovered.

If you are here this morning you are a seeker. What are you seeking? What is it you're searching for. Ask yourself these questions. If you truly accept that you are a seeker then this sermon becomes more than airy fairy good stuff. It honors and encourages the foundation of your Unitarian Universalist self to continue the journey, revelation is not sealed, to pay homage to individual freedom of thought and worship, to intellectually, spiritually, and otherwise search for the supremely good in yourself and in others. This is spiritual exchange. You will call on what we are holding up this morning. You inevitably will. The search of the seeker for the sacred is a hallmark of our faith tradition and can be a wild ride. Seek, search. Let go of the notion that nothing more can be revealed. This is in opposition of our claim to holding the search for truth and meaning sacred. Everything is sacred. My heart tells me the truth of this. My whole self sinks into the bliss of it. Every moment, every breath, every thought, every word, every action. All Sacred. Even the moments when we aren't our best. Even the actions we didn't think through. It's all sacred.

One of those big truths that we know is only part of the bigger truth, yet is such a heart-opening idea that we need to spend more time with it. Everything – every moment, every person, every breath – is sacred. So many of us are looking, asking, seeking, hoping. Constantly, fervently, persistently. The specifics we seek may vary between us. Peace, freedom, love. Enlightenment, the divine, God. By all of these names and more, we seek. Spiritual teacher Guy Finley writes, “There is a storehouse of sanity. A vault of love. A treasure of kindness. All bursting at their seams. Can't you feel the pressure just to be light? Don't the walls of your heart ache to break loose and open the floodgates of freedom? You have riches untold, but have lost the map to the upper regions of yourself where you are always overflowing. So, forget this world with its intermittent streams whose waters begin and end, search out the ocean, and stand in her surge until the waves wash away the shores of your soul.” Where will you go to seek the sacred? Where will your search lead you? People still seek sacred spaces and sacred connections. Faith traditions seek sacred experience in temples, synagogues, cathedrals, congregations, and mosques. The sacred can be clarity, inspiration, or solace. To face life's challenges we seek and enjoy sacred experiences on mountaintops, in fields, or in other peaceful and natural settings. And possibly most important, we find sacred connection through fellowship with others. Some will continue to seek, confident that they will discover their own “secular spirituality.” Others will avoid the word *spirituality*, preferring to use more precise words such as *happiness*, *connection*, *beauty*, *morality* and even *sorrow*, to describe the feelings some might construe as spiritual. Perhaps, as modernity unfolds, the word *spirituality* will come to have a meaning more in concert with the secular path we've chosen. Let us seek, search, and embrace the sacred.

May it be so.