

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York  
**How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Spirituality**

Rev. Meredith Garmon September 27, 2015

## Reading

I recently became aware of a phenomenon called Atheist spirituality, which may sound like an oxymoron, like jumbo shrimp or plastic glasses.

Let me give you a couple samples.

First, here's Andy Walters describing his Atheist Spirituality on his blog:

"As a spiritual atheist, I mean that I reject the supernatural but affirm the reality and value of what most people usually mean when they say 'the divine.'... [The divine is transcendent love, and] Transcendent love is valuing others' interests above your own.... Practicing respect, humility, compassion, and altruism, for example, is intensely gratifying.... It is the divine -- the part of me that "transcends" my ego....

Second, by "divine", people also mean inner peace – being unafraid of what is, has been, or will be....When I experience it, I am flooded with a sense of "all-rightness" with myself and my circumstances. Although it is a sense of acceptance, it does not rid me of the desire to better myself and my circumstances....Awe is the final component of what people usually mean when they speak of the divine. Divine awe is a sense of utter astonishment and wonder at the mystery of existence.. .the degree of awe that can come from observing the mystery of existence....For thousands of years, humans have mapped out the divine and many have explained it in terms of the supernatural.

With the advent of modernism, however, that language no longer makes sense. But that doesn't mean that the divine isn't real -- it only means we need a different vocabulary to describe the same reality. I call it spiritual atheism.

The second sample is from a video I found called, "My Spirituality as an Atheist"

"...I'd have to consider myself a spiritual person. I'm not talking about some ghostly, ethereal soul...inside my body.... I'm talking about the essence of human...: the action or ability to see beauty, to feel wonder, and to be in awe.

The Grand Tetons.... A pile of stars...still and perfect....At times I can be so overwhelmed by the sensation of being alive that I cry or I laugh or I scream or I just breathe deeply.

Being humble is simply the feeling of recognizing the reality of one's small significance to a universe so massive. Being grateful to be alive doesn't require a person to be grateful toward.... I am one with the universe.

I am as much the universe as a supernova: made of the same particles, governed by the same forces. I am genes that mutated randomly then were selected naturally based on their success in survival. And I love apple butter on a biscuit. I collapse in awe at the magnificence of this place....I breathe appreciation for it all. I have to — with all my essence, with all my spirit.” (end of quote)

Yup.

“It is now, and here it is, and here we are, so this is it.”

There's something very pure about each moment, just one chance to experience it: blossoms and sunshine and one morning's journey together. This is it.

## **Sermon**

I'm the first-born child of rationalist humanist academic parents. I grew up and went into the family business: being a rationalist humanist academic. I was in fourth grade in a small town in Georgia when I first heard the word “atheist” — and asked what it meant. Shortly afterward, I decided I was one. This was a scandal to my classmates. From then on through high school I was “the class atheist.”

After a while they got over being scandalized. Apart from a few kids who were hostile, and a few others who undertook to try to save me, my classmates by and large politely ignored our differences of theological opinion. If there was a disconnect between us because of religion, looking back, I'd say the distance-making, the wall building, came more from me than from them. As a child and teenager, my sad heart hardened and chose contempt as its protective strategy. I did not go for “spirituality” — did not use

that word for my experiences. Nor did I think in terms of sacred, divine, transcendent. Wasn't so keen on awe, mystery, or wonder either.

So what I want to tell you this morning is how I learned to stop worrying and love spirituality. Some of you might remember Stanley Kubrick's 1964 movie, "Dr. Strangelove." It was a black comedy satirizing the prevalent fear of the time: nuclear bombs. How many of you have seen the movie? The subtitle was, you may remember, "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb." Life sometimes hits like a bomb, blows up the world as we have known it: the loss of a loved one, traumatic tragedy.

Bombs are fearful things: the nuclear bombs with which nations threaten whole populations, and the little explosions inside handguns that propel bullets for neighbor to kill neighbor, and all the varieties of in between bombs that terrorize our hearts, that shake and sadden our souls. Life also explodes in beauty: the birth of a child, the arrival of spring, an act of kindness.

How do we learn to ease the worry and bring love to the bombs we fear? How do we learn to stop worrying and love: everything; even the hard parts? It calls for development of such virtues as equanimity and compassion.

Those are spiritual virtues — and even if they are entirely a matter of getting our neurons wired a certain way, the circuitry draws on but is different from purely cognitive intelligence — draws on but is different from emotions. Native disposition — genetics — accounts for some of a person's spiritual virtue.

Can you cultivate the spiritual virtues beyond your native disposition? Maybe. Sort of.

So what is spirituality?

It's a term that encompasses transcendent love, inner peace, "all-right-ness," acceptance, awe, beauty, wonder, humility, gratitude, a freshness of experience; a feeling of plenitude, abundance, and deep implicitness of all things; "the oceanic feeling," Sigmund Freud spoke of, calling it "a sense of indissoluble union with the great All, and of belonging to the universal."

In moments of heightened spiritual experience, the gap between self and world vanishes. The normal experience of time leaves us, and each moment has a quality of the eternal in it. Symptoms of developing spirituality include:

- increased tendency to let things happen rather than make them happen;
- more frequent attacks of smiling from the heart;
- more frequent feelings of being connected with others and nature;
- more frequent episodes of overwhelming appreciation;
- decisions flow more from intention or spontaneity and less from fears based on past experience;
- greater ability to enjoy each moment;
- decreased worrying;
- decreased interest in conflict, in interpreting the actions of others, in judging others, and in judging self;
- increased nonjudgmental curiosity;
- increased capacity to love without expecting anything in return;
- increased receptivity to kindness offered and increased interest in extending kindness to others.

By orienting toward the elevated — whether in compassion, ethics, art, or experience of divine presence — we transcend the ego defense mechanisms by which most of us spend our lives governed.

Psychologist Robert Cloninger and his team at the Center for Well-Being of the Department of Psychiatry of the School of Medicine of Washington University in St. Louis sought a way to define spirituality more definitely, empirically, and measurably. Their 240-item questionnaire called the “Temperament and

Character Inventory,” includes spirituality (they call it self-transcendence), as one of the dimensions of character. As Cloninger measures it, spirituality is the sum of three subscales: self-forgetfulness; transpersonal identification; and acceptance.

First, self-forgetfulness.

This is the proclivity for becoming so immersed in an activity that the boundary between self and other seems to fall away. Whether the activity is sports, painting, playing a musical instrument, we might sometimes lose ourselves in it, and the sense of being a separate independent self takes a vacation.

Second, transpersonal identification.

This is recognizing oneself in others -- and others in oneself. If you have ever found yourself looking at another person -- or another being -- with a feeling that you are that other, their body embodies you -- or if you have looked at yourself with a sense that your being embodies others -- then you have experienced transpersonal identification.

Spirituality involves connecting with the world's suffering and apprehending that suffering as our very own. Transpersonal identification goes beyond "there but for the grace of God go I." It's not that grace saves you from the unfortunate circumstances others endure. Nothing saves you because, in fact, you are not saved from those circumstances. If anyone is hungry, then you are hungry, for the hungry are you. That's transpersonal identification.

Third, acceptance.

This is the ability to accept and affirm reality just as it is, even the hard parts, even the painful and tragic parts. Spiritually mature people are in touch with the suffering of the world, yet also and simultaneously feel joy in that connection. "Acceptance" does not mean complacency about oppression, injustice and harm. Indeed, the spiritually mature are also often the most active and the most effective in working for peace and social justice. They are energized to sustain that work because they can accept reality just as it is, even as they also work to change it.

Because they are not attached to results of their work, they avoid debilitating disappointment and burn-out and are able to maintain the work for justice cheerfully. Because they find joy in each present moment, they avoid recrimination and blame. They see that blame merely recapitulates the very reactivity that is at the root of oppression.

Add together your scores for self-forgetfulness, transpersonal identification, and acceptance. The sum is your spirituality score.

Here's the thing, though. It's not a matter of will. It's not a matter of volition. It's not a matter of weighing the pros and cons and making a decision. You can't decide to be more spiritual or more spiritually mature. If you are low in spirituality -- that is, as Cloninger finds, you are practical, self-conscious, materialistic, controlling, characterized by rational objectivity and material success -- you can't wake up one morning and decide you are no longer going to be that way. It's who you are, and your

own rational objectivity will very sensibly point out to you that you don't even know what it would mean to not be that way.

What you can decide, what is a matter of will and volition, is whether to take up a certain kind of discipline called a spiritual practice.

I know that these days all kinds of things get called a spiritual practice. But let's differentiate spiritual practice from just something you do. Quilting, piano-playing, or hiking might or might not qualify as spiritual practice — that is, might or might not tend to produce the symptoms of developing spirituality. An activity is more likely to work as spiritual practice if you seriously treat it as one.

Treating a practice as a spiritual practice means engaging the activity with mindfulness -- focusing on the activity as you do it, with sharp awareness of each present moment. Treating a practice as a spiritual practice means engaging the activity with intention of thereby cultivating spiritual development — reflecting as you do the activity (or just before and just after) on your intention to manifest those symptoms of spiritual development in your life. Treating a practice as a spiritual practice means sometimes engaging the activity with a group that gathers expressly to do the activity in a way that cultivates spirituality — sharing each others' spiritual reflections before, during, or after doing the activity together. And most of all, it requires establishing a foundation of spiritual openness.

There are three basic daily practices for everyone that over time develop a foundation upon which some other practice can grow into a real spiritual practice.

1. **Silence.** 15 minutes a day being still and quiet, just bringing attention to your own amazing breathing.
2. **Journaling.** 15 minutes a day writing about your gratitudes, your highest hopes and your experiences of awe.
3. **Study.** 15 minutes a day reading "wisdom literature" — the essays of Pema Chodron or Thomas Merton, the poems of Rumi or Mary Oliver, the Dao de Jing, the Bible's book of Psalms — just to mention a very few examples of wisdom literature.

With these three daily practices building your foundation of spiritual awareness, then gardening, yoga, or throwing pottery are much better positioned to truly be spiritual

practices for you. Does this mean that if you do everything to ensure that your practice is a true bona fide spiritual practice, and you do that spiritual practice long enough — every day for a year, or 10 years, or 30 years — then you will exude equanimity and compassion, and unperturbable calm inner peace and beauty will continuously manifest as you gracefully, lovingly flow through your life?

Maybe. I can offer you no guarantees. I mentioned that it's not a matter of will. Strong muscles aren't either. You can't just decide to bench press 500 pounds, and then go do it. But at least with muscles, there's a fairly predictable timeline by which exercise increases strength. If you have a normal and healthy physiology, and develop a regimen of exercise, and stick to it, then you will get stronger. There's a smooth curve by which you'll progress toward the limit to which that regimen can take you.

Spiritual strengthening doesn't go like that. It's not a reliable product of putting in the time doing the exercise. The spirit has its own schedule. Committed serious spiritual practitioners can go for years when their practice just seems void and useless. Then they can hit a patch where they actually seem to be regressing. They're acting as cranky, unkind -- as withdrawn or as controlling — as they ever had before they started any spiritual practice.

There is no smooth curve of progress.

I started my primary spiritual practice for the worst reason: because an authority told me to. Fourteen years ago I was in Chicago trying to pass muster to become a minister, trying to prove I was good enough.

I had just finished my first year of divinity school, and I was meeting with the Midwest regional subcommittee on candidacy.

"Do you have a spiritual practice?" the committee asked me.

Before starting seminary, I had spent two years as the congregational facilitator and preacher for the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clarksville, Tennessee. Before that, I'd served as a president of our Fellowship in Waco, Texas, as Vice President of our church in Charlottesville, Virginia and had worked as the church secretary for a year at our Nashville, Tennessee church.

But did I have a spiritual practice?

I was a born-and-raised Unitarian Universalist. I had a Ph.D. I'd been a university professor of philosophy for four years. I could debate about metaphysics, metaethics, metatheology, poststructuralism, postindustrialism, and postmodernism. If it was meta-, or post-, I was on it.

But did I have a spiritual practice?

Well, no, I didn't.

"Get a spiritual practice," the committee told me.

It is contradictory to take up a path of self-acceptance and trusting in my own inner wisdom because an outside authority told me to. Yet that's what I did.

It is contradictory to judge myself for judging myself too much. Yet that's what I did, and still do, albeit somewhat more gently, usually. I've now had a chance to talk with a number of people on a path of spiritual practice. All of us, or so it seems, began, as I did, in some form of contradiction. We felt broken, wrong, inadequate, and we thought spiritual practice would fix us.

But spiritual practice isn't about fixing anything — which is why there's no smooth curve toward becoming fixed. Spiritual awakening is about realizing that we aren't broke and don't need fixing.

We aren't broken and from the beginning never have been. It's hard to really believe that in a culture that constantly tells us we aren't good enough, get better, buy this product, this treatment, this school, this exercise, this method.

Spirituality is about remembering the fact of abundance in the midst of the daily barrage of messages of scarcity. Will it happen if you do the practice?

I can tell you there will be more ups and downs than the stock market.

But over the long haul?

Probably, yes.

If you love just doing the practice, and you do it just because it is who you are, and not with any idea that you're gaining something from it — If judgment about gain and loss, progress and regress, falls

away and there's just you, loving who you are and loving the way you manifest yourself, and the whole universe manifests, in and through your practice, then, yes.

The fact of abundance will be clear to you. At the end of "Dr. Strangelove," the bomber plane is set to release its nuclear payload, which will set off a nuclear conflagration to end civilization, but the release mechanism jams. Slim Pickens climbs down into the bomb-bay to fix the jam. He succeeds, and the bomb is released -- while he's still sitting on it. In the film's most memorable shot, Slim Pickens is waving his cowboy hat and whooping as he rides the bomb down to his -- and what will ultimately be the planet's -- destruction. "Wooooo-hooooo."

Maybe that's what learning to stop worrying and love the bomb looks like. He does seem to be living in the moment. That was such a striking shot when I first saw it because I knew if I were falling out of the sky riding on a nuclear bomb, I'd be freaked out in fear and despair: "My god, my god, my god, I've only got maybe one minute to live."

But look at what Slim Pickens' character is doing with his minute!

Wooooo-hooooo.

That's us.

We're all riding that bomb.

Our time is so short before life blows up on us.

There's something very pure about this -- just one chance at every minute.

This is it.