

*Spirituality for Agnostics<sup>1</sup>*  
*Rev. Myke Johnson*  
*September 26, 2010*  
*Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church*

Our first reading today was called *Certainty*, by Tukaram, a 17<sup>th</sup> century religious poet in the Hindu tradition of India. This version was a translation by Daniel Ladinsky.<sup>2</sup>

Excerpt:

Certainty undermines one's power, and turns happiness  
into a long shot. Certainty confines.  
Dears, there is nothing in your life that will  
not change - especially your ideas of God.

Our second reading is *September Meditation*, by Burton D. Carley<sup>3</sup>

I do not know if the seasons remember their history or if the days and  
nights by which we count time remember their own passing.  
I do not know if the oak tree remembers its planting or if the pine  
remembers its slow climb toward sun and stars.  
I do not know if the squirrel remembers last fall's gathering or if the  
bluejay remembers the meaning of snow.  
I do not know if the air remembers September or if the night remembers the moon.  
I do not know if the earth remembers the flowers from last spring or if  
the evergreen remembers that it shall stay so.  
Perhaps that is the reason for our births -- to be the memory for creation.  
Perhaps salvation is something very different than anyone ever expected.  
Perhaps this will be the only question we will have to answer:  
"What can you tell me about September?"

*Sermon*

How many of you ever got into trouble at Sunday School, or a religion class, because you asked too many questions?

Maybe you've heard this comparison: To have a few doubts is normal. To have many doubts is a crisis of faith. To have constant doubts is a conversion to Unitarian Universalism

Sometimes we can tell a lot about a religion by the jokes people tell about it:

A visitor to a Unitarian Universalist church once sat through the sermon with growing incredulity at the heretical ideas being spouted. After the sermon a member asked the visitor, "So how did you like it?"

"I can't believe half the things that minister said!" sputtered the visitor in outrage.

"Oh, good -- then you'll fit right in!"

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2 From *Love Poems From God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West*, versions by Daniel Ladinsky

3 From *1997 UUMA Worship Materials Collection*

And one of my own personal favorites:

Q: How can you identify a Unitarian-Universalist extremist group?

A: They burn a question mark on your lawn.

Unitarian-Universalists are known for cherishing our doubts and our questions, and in that sense, all of us might be called agnostics, by a broad definition of the term. But *agnostic* also more specifically refers to someone who asserts that we can't really know the truth of things that aren't able to be tested and proved. Since the existence of God, or an afterlife, and other such religious or supernatural ideas, cannot be demonstrated or proven, therefore, we cannot know the truth about them.

The term was coined by an English biologist, Thomas Henry Huxley in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote that “agnosticism is not a creed, but a method,” based on one principle: “that it is wrong for a man to say he is certain of the objective truth of a proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty.”<sup>4</sup>

Agnosticism has a longer philosophical history, but in modern times it was particularly a response to the Christian approach to religion, which demanded of its followers an unquestioning acceptance of many beliefs, expressed in creeds and dogmas, said to have been divinely revealed. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, emboldened by the progress of the scientific revolution, philosophers attacked the reliability of divine revelation as the source of truth. They claimed that knowledge about human life and meaning could better be discerned by the methods of empirical observation, logic, and research. This Enlightenment philosophy influenced our own Unitarian beginnings, and was the beginning of the modern world outlook.

I would guess that most people who identify themselves as agnostic are coming from that modernist and scientific perspective. However, there is also a kind of post-modern agnosticism. Post-modernists question the possibility of pure objectivity. They would suggest that all claims to “truth” are relative, and dependent on the perspective of the one making the claims. In other words, even so-called objective observation cannot be completely separated from subjective experience.<sup>5</sup>

But, acknowledging the many ways we might raise our questions and doubts, how do we then interpret that part of our mission, and the underlying UU principle, that “encourages spiritual growth?”

Some of the problem arises from the definition we give to spirituality. In traditional Christian churches, and some other religious traditions, spirituality has been based upon a belief in God and the realm of supernatural. So for those who reject or doubt supernatural realities, it has seemed necessary to reject spirituality as well. But, spirituality does not have to be tied to particular beliefs and creeds, or to the supernatural. Other world religions reveal to us quite a different approach to spirituality.

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4 Quoted from <http://atheism.about.com/od/aboutagnosticism/a/huxley.htm>

5 Some definitional help from <http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/gen gloss/postm-body.html> and [http://www.essortment.com/all/postmodernphilo\\_rorp.htm](http://www.essortment.com/all/postmodernphilo_rorp.htm)

According to Buddhist tradition, for example, the Buddha encouraged his followers to take nothing on faith. Rather, he suggested that they experiment with his principles, try out his methods of meditation, and see whether they relieved the sufferings of life, and brought enlightenment and joy. Most strands of Buddhism are non-theistic, not dependent upon a belief in God. The Buddha, like many agnostics, felt that questions about metaphysical realities were unanswerable, and therefore unproductive. No wonder that many UU's find an affinity for spiritual practices that originate in Zen or other forms of Buddhism.

I would suggest we might define spiritual growth as a process of coming into wholeness—a process of integration within the self, and bringing the self into right relationship with the larger world. Spirituality is in that in-between place of connections and relationships. And conversely, spirituality often begins in the gaps: when we experience disconnection and brokenness. Often, we begin to consider the question of spiritual growth when we find ourselves feeling loneliness, or experiencing a broken relationship in our personal life, or trying to make sense of the suffering and pain of others. Spiritual growth is a journey to bring together the fragmented parts of ourselves, and to mend the broken relationships between ourselves and the wider world.

Within that definition of spirituality, any practice that works toward wholeness can be a spiritual practice. Even asking questions! But it is more challenging that it might seem at first. Because spiritual growth calls us continually to expand beyond those aspects of life in which we are comfortable, and venture into the parts that are more unwieldy or mysterious. If I am someone who asks hard questions easily, who prides myself on my intellectual rigor, spiritual growth might involve delving into the realm of the emotional or physical. If I am a solitary introvert, it might demand me reaching out to other people. If I am inclined to be very serious, I may need to tell jokes. I mean, Why did the Unitarian-Universalist cross the road? It was to support the chicken in its search for its own spiritual path.

There are two spiritual practices that seem to me to be especially engaging for agnostics, and I would like to take a little time to introduce them today. These two could be called the Way of Service, and the Way of Beauty.

We live in a culture that is defined by consumerism and self-promotion. The Way of Service is a practice in which we find wholeness through the gift of time and attention that we give to other people or other beings. Service is not merely doing things for other people's benefit. To serve others begins with a recognition of our relationship to others. True service, as a spiritual practice, shapes the way in which we do things for others, imbuing it with compassion and connection.

I am thinking about the soup kitchen at Preble Street, where our church members volunteer on the fourth Tuesday of each month. Everyone is invited to participate, including children (over a certain age), who are often eager to be of help, and can find much joy in the practice of service. Some of the work at the soup kitchen is to handle food and beverages, wipe counters, and wash dishes. But much deeper than those tasks is an acknowledgement that those who are homeless or hungry are our fellow human beings. Even though our external circumstances may be different, each of us is full of the same inherent worth and dignity. When I smile or shake your hand, when

I ask you about your day, or listen to your stories, I am acknowledging that dignity, and restoring a broken connection.

Years ago, I was a full-time volunteer for a house of hospitality for homeless persons. It wasn't always easy to be kind and respectful to our guests. Some people who were homeless were also con artists, and others were drinking and easily provoked to violence. There were situations in which I felt fear and anger and just wished I could walk away. But when I could stay open-hearted, I learned many deeper lessons about myself. I recognized that I, too, had the capacity for manipulation, or honesty; that I had to choose between hurtful words, or respectful speech. I saw how a tender and affectionate response could shift the energy of the room toward cooperation and camaraderie. I saw kindness and generosity practiced by those who had almost nothing.

The Way of Service challenges us to move beyond a me-first attitude into a sense of “we,” into the spirit of community. In our chalice lighting today, we affirmed that “Service is our prayer.” In the recent edition of the *UU World* magazine, Rev. Erik Wikstrom explores the spirituality of service in the context of our service to our congregations. He points out that “work devoted to something greater than yourself lifts you out of the narrow sphere of individual concerns, enlarges your perspective, and provides context for the joys and concerns of your own life.” Rev. Gary Kowalski noted that “people who come to Unitarian-Universalism seeking spiritual goods are likely to be disappointed so long as they have the outlook of consumers in search of material goods. ...they have to give up the consumer mindset and begin to think of themselves instead as shareholders, ...co-owners in what happens in church, just as the parties in a marriage see themselves as partners...”<sup>6</sup>

The Way of Service is paradoxical—when we move beyond ourselves through giving to others, we discover that we receive more than we give. I am reminded of the story about heaven and hell: some of you have heard this one before. A man wanted to see what heaven and hell looked like, so God granted him a tour. First they went to hell. There he saw a table piled high with every kind of good food imaginable, but the people seated around the table were in misery. There was a problem—every person had one hand tied behind their backs, and the other hand held a seven foot fork. As much as they tried, they could not get any food into their mouths; they were condemned to go hungry while gazing at all this food right in front of them. Then God took the man to see heaven. To his surprise, it was exactly the same scene, the same good food, the same seven foot forks. But at this table, the people were all feeding each other. Of course, this kind of hell and heaven exist right here on earth.

The Way of Beauty is another spiritual practice well-suited to agnostics. I think this practice is also especially helpful for people who tend to get in over their heads in service—some of us have jobs that are service-related, or spend much of our time caring for the needs of others. Parents with young children or teens at home can count themselves in that group automatically. If you are already worn out from tending to the needs of other people, the way of beauty is a way to find balance by nurturing your own soul and replenishing your spirit.

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<sup>6</sup> *UU World*, Vol XXIV, No. 3, Fall 2010, p.34. From *Serving with Grace: Lay Leadership as a Spiritual Practice*, by Erik Walker Wikstrom, Skinner House Books, 2010.

The Way of Beauty requires a conscious cultivation of gratitude and wonder. Every spiritual practice is a discipline that grows from daily practice. Beauty is all around us, but without paying attention, we miss most of it. What would happen if each day we made a note on our list of things to do: look at something colorful today! Or, listen to the birds today! The practice of beauty engages our senses—our eyes take delight in color and shapes, our ears are fed by music, our tongues love the taste of good food, our minds love eloquence of thought and speech.

When I think about all the beauty in the world I am amazed—there is so much about nature that is more than utilitarian, that is abundant and extravagant. The countless variety of flowers and fruits, the blazing of autumn leaves as they approach their end, the stars in the night sky, the creativity of human beings. The beginning of all worship lies in our experience of wonder. As Jacob Trapp put it, “Worship is the mystery within us reaching out to the mystery beyond.”<sup>7</sup>

Walt Whitman expressed it so well in his poem from *Leaves of Grass*, called “Miracles.” He wrote:

Why, who makes much of a miracle?  
As to me I know of nothing else but miracles,  
Whether I walk the streets of Manhattan,  
Or dart my sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky,  
Or wade with naked feet along the beach just in the edge  
of the water,  
Or stand under trees in the woods,  
Or talk by day with anyone I love, or sleep in the bed  
at night with anyone I love,  
Or sit at the table at dinner with the rest,  
Or look at strangers opposite me riding in the car,  
Or watch honeybees busy around the hive  
of a summer forenoon,  
Or animals feeding in the fields,  
Or birds, or the wonderfulness of insects in the air,  
Or the wonderfulness of the sundown, or of stars shining  
so quiet and bright,  
Or the exquisite delicate thin curve of the new moon  
in spring;  
These with the rest, one and all, are to me miracles,  
The whole referring, yet each distinct and in its place.  
To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,  
Every cubic inch of space is a miracle,  
Every square yard of the surface of the earth is spread  
with the same,  
Every foot of the interior swarms with the same.  
To me the sea is a continual miracle,  
The fishes that swim—the rocks—the motion of the waves  
—the ships with men in them,  
What stranger miracles are there?

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7 In *Singing the Living Tradition*, #441.

When we reach the end of the day, we can look back with wonder and gratitude. If we have children, we can invite them to talk about the beauty they experienced and what they feel thankful about. We can fall asleep remembering, not the things we didn't finish, or the worries we might carry in our hearts, but the “leaping greenly spirits of trees and a blue true dream of sky.”

Spirituality might be defined as our experience of the mystery and beauty of Life. All of us experience the mystery of Life, but we experience it in different ways. Spirituality is necessarily a subjective process, rather than an objective knowledge. The way of service and the way of beauty are just two options for spiritual growth among many possibilities. I encourage you –not to take my word for it—but to experiment, and see what brings greater wholeness into your life.