

*Watching in the Dark<sup>1</sup>*  
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*Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church*

*Time For All Ages:*

Today we are talking about spirituality.

Spirituality is a word for how we experience the Mystery of Life.

All of us experience the Mystery of Life, but we experience it in different ways.

Today we will learn about four different spiritualities, with help from Wacky Quacky and her three friends: Davy the Dog, Hank the Horse, and Oaky Dokey Croaky the frog. Since our friends only talk in their own language, we have four translators who will tell us their words.

Let's see what Davy the Dog has to say:

*Davy the Dog (barks)*

*Translator:* My spirituality is all about love. I am a dog, and I love my person so much! I also love God, I love the earth. I love everything. Mother Teresa said, "It is not how much we do, but how much love we put in the doing." I give unconditional love to everyone I meet, but especially the people who need me. As we say in our affirmation, we believe in love.

Thank you! Let's see what Wacky Quacky says:

*Wacky Quacky (quacks)*

*Translator:* My spirituality is my quest for truth. As a duck, I fly high above the earth and I like to see the big picture about where we are going. I want to understand life. The Buddha said, "Be a lamp to yourself." I use all the tools I have to find the way, to see how everything fits together, to understand. As we say in the affirmation, we believe in truth.

Thank you ! Let's see what Hank the Horse says:

*Hank the Horse (whinnies)*

*Translator:* My spirituality is about Service. I am a horse who likes to work in the fields, or carry a rider or pull a carriage, so that the work that is needed will get done. Just like how in religious education you are helping others. Hsun-tzu [*sun-sue*] said: "Though the road is short, if you do not step along, you will never get to the end." If everybody does their part, then the whole community will have what they need. As we say in the affirmation, we believe in helping others.

Thank you! Let's see what Oaky Doaky Croaky says:

*Oaky Doaky Croaky (croaks)*

*Translator:* My spirituality is about change and growth. As a frog, I started out as an egg, and then grew into a tadpole, and then a big change happened, and I became a frog. Octavia Butler said: "All that you touch You Change. All that you Change Changes you. The only lasting truth is Change. God is Change." I move from the water to the land and can even leap into the air. I can believe many truths at one time. Who knows what I might discover in the future? As we say in the affirmation, we believe all souls will grow.

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<sup>1</sup> Copyright 2018 by Rev. Myke Johnson. This is adapted from a chapter in my book, *Finding Our Way Home: A Spiritual Journey into Earth Community*, (Portland, ME: Small Bird Press, 2016)

Thank you! Each of us expresses our spirituality in different ways too. Think about your own life.  
Are you more like a dog, who expresses it in love? (*dog barks*)  
Are you like a duck, who expresses it in the search for truth? (*duck quacks*)  
Are you like a horse, who expresses it by helping others? (*horse whinnies*)  
Are you like a frog, who expresses it in growth and change? (*frog croaks*)

All of us are different, and we can find our own spirituality that works for us. This week, think about how you experience the mystery of life. Maybe you have more than one way.

### *Sermon*

When I was a young Catholic child, I learned about the saints who had visions of angels or the Blessed Mother Mary or even Jesus himself. I wanted to have a vision, too. I prayed for Jesus or Mary to come and show themselves to me and speak to me directly. I believed spirituality should include a holy being coming down from the sky and standing in front of me. It never quite happened that way. Why not, I wondered? Why tell us those stories if we could not have those experiences?

Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed something similar in 1849.

The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes.  
Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?<sup>2</sup>

When I was growing up, it seemed only a few special people might have such a personal experience of the *Divine*. But now I believe I was confused about what I was looking for. Let me use an analogy. I was looking for something like a trip to a great auditorium to see “*The Divine*” in concert; but the *Divine* really emerges more like the sound of a tune in one’s own imagination. A *spiritual journey* is a search for our own “original relation to the universe.” It is a search for our own face to face, personal experience of “*God* and nature.”

I am reminded of a story of Elijah in the Hebrew Bible. He was told to wait out on the mountain, Mount Horeb, because his *God Yahweh* would be passing by. Then there came a mighty wind, so strong it tore the mountains and shattered the rocks, but *Yahweh* was not in the wind. After the wind came an earthquake. But *Yahweh* was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire. But *Yahweh* was not in the fire. After the fire there came a sound like sheer silence. When Elijah heard this, he covered his face with his cloak. He realized in this utter stillness, *Yahweh* was near.

A spiritual journey is simpler than we think. Not to say it is easy—Elijah traveled for forty days and forty nights before he got to the mountain. But it is so simple, if we don’t pay attention, we can miss it entirely. I invite you to experiment with me, starting with an exercise I’ve adapted from the writing of Starhawk.

*Start by noticing the energy level within you at this moment.*  
*Are you alert? Fatigued?*  
*Calm or tense?*  
*Engaged or relaxed?*

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2 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Introduction,” *Nature: Addresses and Lectures* (1849).

*Now, sit up as erect as you can without straining.  
Notice how the energy level changes.*

*Now I invite you to breathe deeply,  
breathe all the way down into your belly.  
As you breathe in and out,  
let go of whatever might be on your mind.  
Just pay attention to your breathing in and out,  
as you sit quietly for a minute in the silence.*

*Now pay attention to the energy within you.  
Do you notice any changes?<sup>3</sup>*

The very beginnings of a spiritual journey are in the practice of paying attention to the energy of the present moment.

When we are first born, we see and hear everything around us without definition or understanding. Gradually, we come to assign meaning to shapes and colors and sounds. We say mama, or daddy, or ball, or doggie. We separate the world into smaller objects we can name and grasp. Perhaps we learn about *God* as a kind of separate object we might name and grasp. But once we assign such names, once we divide the world into objects, we sometimes forget to see what is actually before us.

When I was in high school, I took several drawing classes. Our first lesson was to stop drawing objects, and to start sketching out shadows and light. In order to draw, we had to see at a different level from the level of objects. To pay attention, spiritually, is like that. We are shifting our consciousness from smaller separate objects to larger connecting energies.

As we grow older, we begin to understand non-object realities such as the air, or electricity, or heat. We experience the invisible air through clues such as blowing leaves, or the feeling of its force on our faces in the cold, or the tug on a kite as it rises into the sky.

The word *spirituality* comes from the Latin root *spirare*, which means *to breathe*. When we breathe, we are alive. We are in relationship, through the air, to the world around us, to all other breathers of air: all the human beings, all the animals and the birds, all the trees and the plants. It is first of all a very material, chemical exchange. Breathing is life shared among many beings. We have to use our imagination to perceive the air, but if we stop breathing, we die. Breathing might be called the first prayer.

There are many forces of connection so ever present we might never notice them without flashes of insight or the work of science. Another of these is gravity. We expect to remain held to the ground, we are used to the directions of up and down. Let's take a moment to pay attention to the force of gravity.

*As you sit, feel the pressure of your back and bottom  
where they touch the surface of the chair.  
Notice how your muscles are compressed underneath you.*

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<sup>3</sup> Breathing meditation adapted from Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1979), 43.

*Notice the heaviness or lightness you experience.*

*Now, imagine floating up out of your chair into the air above you.  
Try to do it.*

*(Do you need more time?)  
Can you feel the pull of the earth keeping you attached?  
What would it be like if we all floated off the earth  
into the vast reaches of empty space?*

If we wish to begin a spiritual journey, we need a way to shift our attention, to tune in to the mysterious forces that connect and uphold life, to the larger reality of which we are a part. A method for shifting our attention is called a spiritual practice.

For example: we can't see the radio waves that surround us all the time. But if we turn on a radio, and tune into a particular frequency, we will hear the sounds of music. The radio waves are always there—it is we who need to tune in to hear them. Spiritual practices are like radio tuners that help us to tune into the music of the universe. We are trying to move beyond our ordinary experience of everyday life, into a different channel of consciousness.

Historian of religion, Karen Armstrong, writes about how, in premodern cultures, there were two recognized ways of acquiring knowledge. *Logos*, or reason, “was the pragmatic mode of thought that enabled people to function effectively in the world.” *Mythos*, or myth, “focused on the more elusive, puzzling, and tragic aspects of the human predicament that lay outside the remit of logos.”<sup>4</sup> How do we access that which we cannot understand or explain by logic? We must shift to the playfulness of the symbolic mind. Mythic language uses story and imagination and drama as a doorway into that which is beyond logic.

The modern world is devoted to scientific reason, and it has lost track of the meaning of myth—in fact, myth is now defined as something that is not true. But in pre-modern times, myth was the common language of spirituality, and helped people to wrestle with the challenges that were not so easily solved by reason. Imagination is one of the mythic tools of spiritual practice. Imagination can awaken a deeper part of our consciousness than reason. One way that imagination can be activated is through an invitation or invocation.

For example, we might directly invite the divine mystery to be present to us. Years ago, when I was in college, my best friend and I were sitting in the chapel on our campus. I don't even remember now what I was praying. But I remember feeling a sense of loneliness as I noticed several of us all in our separate quietness around the room. I reached out to take the hand of my friend.

Later, my friend shared with me what she had been praying. She was very new to the idea of spirituality. She was challenging *God*. She said, “*God* if you are real, I need a sign. I need you to show me that you are here and that you care about me. It doesn't have to be a miracle, just touch me in some way.” That was the moment that I reached out and took her hand. Her invitation drew us both into an experience of the *Mystery* in that moment.

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4 Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2009), xi.

The Zen Buddhists say, words are like a finger pointing to the moon. “To look at the moon, it is necessary to gaze beyond the finger...”<sup>5</sup> Words and images about divinity are not meant to be literal. I wouldn’t ordinarily recommend that someone who is a skeptic ask the Mystery for a sign. But this experience taught me the power of invitation. Any time we invite the *Mystery* into our presence what we are actually doing is inviting our hearts to shift their attention. We are re-tuning our hearts to notice the *Mystery* that is already here. When we open the door, there is something that wakes up, something beyond what we can expect or explain. If we don’t open the door, we will never know what is out there, or in here.

Now, just in case I am losing you here, I want to remind us, as we learned from Wacky Quacky and her friends, we bring our diverse personalities to our experience of spirituality. We will not all resonate with every approach to spirituality. My colleague, Rev. Peter Richardson, outlined four possible approaches to spirituality corresponding to traits from the Myers Briggs personality inventory.<sup>6</sup> We all have natural inclinations to tune into different frequencies.

Those of a more intellectual bent may be primarily drawn to the search for great truths. Einstein is one such mystic of the scientific realms. He felt awe and wonder at the mysteries of life revealed through science. Those of a more practical bent may be drawn to the works of goodness. They might find inspiration in the path that Gandhi shaped, to live out the mystery of life by organizing for justice on behalf of the oppressed.

Those of an emotional bent are more likely to be drawn by devotion to divine images and other such beings. The Sufi poet Rumi wrote thousands of love poems to the divine Friend, whom he felt most closely through his relationship with his human friend Shams. Finally, there are those of an intuitive bent, who are drawn to the unfolding of the self through growth and transformation. Ralph Waldo Emerson might be a guide for those in this visionary orientation.

There is no one way to practice spirituality. But we can begin by being aware of the present moment, by inviting our hearts to pay attention. We can notice those activities that help us to feel a sense of wonder and gratitude, that help our hearts to feel most alive. We can invite the Mystery into our lives, by choosing to bring more of these activities into our daily lives.

One August night, I went outside to watch a meteor shower. I was in my driveway, sitting on a reclining deck chair, watching and waiting. Every so often, I would see a streak of light flash across the sky. But mostly it was quiet and dark. I looked at the Milky Way, and began thinking about how far the stars were spread out, and how long it took for their light to reach my eyes. I was thinking about the fact that the light from these enormous, distant stars was reaching my two tiny eyes in an ordinary driveway in Maine.

Suddenly the sky seemed so much larger than I remembered, and I felt so much smaller, an infinitesimal speck. And yet I was seeing everything, and what I was seeing was as large as the sky. How could something as large as the sky fit inside of me! And yet it did. I was a part of the *Mystery*.

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5 From a traditional Zen story, found in many places, including: <http://www.awakeblogger.com/2008/11/the-meaning-of-the-finger-pointing-to-the-moon/>.

6 Peter Richardson, *Four Spiritualities*, (Davies-Black Publishing, 1996.)

If I hadn't been watching in the dark, I wouldn't have experienced the mystery of that night. I had the intention of looking for meteors, but what I found was something beyond my intention. To embark on a spiritual journey is like finding opportunities to watch in the dark, however we might do that—waiting, looking for what we think we are looking for, but sometimes finding so much more.

The goal of any spiritual journey is to lead us into that depth, that place where the known crosses into the unknown. Part of the spiritual journey must be intentional, a practice. We must choose to watch in the dark. But a spiritual journey will move us beyond the capacity of our own intentions, to discover something larger than what we can imagine—a larger reality, a larger love, a larger *Mystery*.

Let me also warn you about what may come next. If we watch in the darkness, we may discover within us a kind of inner darkness, a kind of emptiness or hunger. This hunger may feel like a hole deep in our being. But it does not mean we have failed in our search. This emptiness itself has been for me a part of the journey. It can feel like pain or loneliness, or sometimes like restlessness. It is difficult to sit with these feelings and I am tempted to find something that might fill up that empty place. However, instead of escaping or fixing it, I invite myself to be present with it, to surrender to it. I breathe into the darkness and let myself experience the hunger. I accept the feelings of my heart just as they are.

The Buddhist teacher Kinrei Bassis says the “deepest form of prayer is really just the willingness to be still and let the longing in your heart go out without defining or understanding where it is going.... Meditation is the willingness to let go and learn to trust so that we may enter into this seeming darkness.”<sup>7</sup>

And then, sometimes, the dark opens into something else. The emptiness disappears, and we dissolve into a larger awareness. The energies of the earth, the sky, the stars, the wind blend together. Alice Walker put it like this: “One day when I was sitting quiet it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it.”<sup>8</sup>

I think back to the image of the radio waves I spoke about. All the time, there is music moving through the air but we are unaware of it. However, if we tune our radio to a particular frequency, a whole invisible world opens up to our ears. In the same way, the larger reality, the *Divine*, the *Mystery*, is already here, all the time. We are the ones who need to tune in. An even better image is Wi-Fi or a cell-phone. It isn't just about hearing the voice of *God*, like music in the air, but also about our own voices being heard. We are connected. Someone, something, is paying attention to us, too.

There is another part of the Elijah story that speaks to me. Elijah heard the queen was trying to kill him so he fled into the nearby wilderness. He prayed, “*Yahweh*, I have had enough! I wish I were dead.” Then he lay down and went to sleep.

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7 Kinrei Bassis, “The Buddha Calling the Buddha,” *Parabola* 31 #2 (Summer 2006): 26.

8 (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982), p. 167.

A short time later, an angel woke him and said, “Get up and eat.” He looked around, and there at his head was a scone. It doesn’t say what kind of scone. Did they have cinnamon or raisin scones then? I like to believe if *God* was thoughtful enough to send a scone, it would be a favorite kind. The angel said, “Get up and eat, or the journey will be too long for you.” So he ate the scone, and then he was ready to make the forty day trip to Mount Horeb. My experiences of the *Divine* are like that. In the midst of my challenges, I get a taste of the presence of *God*, like a little scone, so I have the strength to make the long journey.

We might think we are insignificant tiny beings in a vast universe. Why would the *Divine* want to pay attention to any of us, prophets or otherwise? I’m not sure, but I do know there are moments when I feel paid attention to, when I feel seen, as if by the unseen. It might be as simple as walking down the road in the morning, and suddenly a feeling of warmth fills my heart, as if a familiar hand had just rested on my back. The Jewish tradition has a belief that what we call angels are the manifestations of *God* into our individual lives. Not huge earthquakes, but tiny sounds of silence that touch our souls. A still small voice. Some might call it synchronicity or serendipity. When I have opened my heart to the *Mystery*, the *Mystery* responds.

### *Meditation*

*As we begin a brief time of meditation,  
I invite you to notice the energy in your heart right now.  
If you wish, create an invitation in your heart,  
open your heart to experience the Mystery that connects and upholds all life.  
Then, be still. Be present to what emerges in your heart.  
If feelings come up, imagine your breath  
filling and embracing those feelings.  
If you feel emptiness, breathe into the emptiness.  
If you feel joy, breathe into the joy.  
If you feel confused, breathe into the confusion.  
Be present to what emerges.*

*End with:* The beginning and the ending of spiritual practice are in paying attention to the energy of the present moment.

### *Closing Words*

After an experience of *Mystery*, we come back to the everyday. In Buddhism, they say, “after the ecstasy, the laundry.” In pagan rituals, we must ground the energy. After church, there is coffee. We remember to eat food or have a drink of water. Author Jack Kornfield, says, “...spiritual practice is only what you're doing now. Anything else is a fantasy.”<sup>9</sup>

And so I invite you to join us for coffee, and for the chowder & chili sale, food which will warm up the people who eat it, and also provide warmth for the people who need help with their oil bills. May we be energized for kindness, compassion, peace, and humility. Amen. As we extinguish the flame of this chalice, let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.

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<sup>9</sup> Jack Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry: How the Heart Grows Wise on the Spiritual Path* (New York: Bantam, 2000), 126.