

**“Personal Spirituality” a sermon by Rev. Brian J. Kiely
Unitarian Church of Edmonton, November 21, 2010**

When we began the “On the Path” course on spirituality five weeks ago, we started with a little sharing circle on why we were there. One of the most common comments by participants was something like, “Well, I’m not quite sure what spirituality is and I am hoping to find out.” I imagine many of us feel much the same way.

That’s probably especially true with those of us who are somewhat uncomfortable with the idea of a god. Because the word spirit has been part of religious language for so long, and because most religions have a spiritual practice, it’s easy to infuse the whole idea of spirituality with the weight of fixed theologies and churchly rituals. For some, and for better or worse, spirituality is inextricably tied up with God. That can be a turn on or a turn off. For others spirit is tied to nature, or to wisdom and insight, or to service or to family or a host of other experiences.

There are a few qualities that make the whole idea of spirituality very slippery.

First, it’s not a thing. You can’t walk into Canadian Tire and buy an extra large plastic wrapped package of spirituality.

Second, it’s larger than any theology or philosophy. Like many things in religion and ideas, words literally fail to describe the spiritual experience.

Third, there is no single, prescribed path to spiritual experience. Okay, check that. There are lots of single prescribed paths, but the reality is that no one path fits all. Each spiritual moment is unique to the person having it.

Fourth, there are no guarantees. You can practice any discipline faithfully and rigorously and still not have that transformative peak “A-ha!” experience where one suddenly slips the bonds of time and space. And, that experience can just arrive in any given moment as a delightful and unexpected surprise.

Let’s take a deeper look at those four qualities. Spirituality is not a thing. Adam and Lynne earlier read a few entries from a list of 25 ‘definitions’ we looked at in the course. Each approached the idea of spirituality differently, yet none completely captured it.

Most of us, I expect, have done some kind of personality test like Meyers-Briggs or Eneagrams or Personality Dimensions – that’s the one with the colours. Some will recall John Pater describing Theological Worlds from this pulpit in recent years. All of these show that there are several ways to process information and experience, to demonstrate leadership, to learn, to see the world.

Each of us has a preferred way of taking in information. Some absorb best when they read, some by hearing, others prefer visual or the experiential learning. The point applies nicely to spirituality. Each of us is more comfortable with a definition that speaks to our personality strengths and preferences. Fortunately the idea of the spirit is large enough to accommodate all that variety. The good news is that there is a spiritual experience available to every person. The bad news is that you kind of have to go find it for yourself. You can’t buy it off the shelf at Canadian Tire. Of the 25 different definitions we considered in class, I bet than none of us picked one and said, “That describes my view exactly!”

My other points are that spirituality transcends religion and practice, that no one way works for everyone and that even if you are faithful and disciplined, there are no guarantees. If there is a common theme, it is that spirituality is an uniquely personal

experience of some kind that transforms an individual in some way, even if it is only for a few moments.

Because it is so personal, it cannot be fully captured by words or images. Religious and spiritual leaders, gurus and the like have tried to share and teach their experience over the centuries. Some of those teachings have become codified into practices like prayer forms and rituals. Elsewhere disciplines have evolved like yoga, T'ai C'hi, Zen meditation, sweat lodge ceremonies and the spiritual exercises of Ignatius.

All of those have proven useful for individuals suited to that approach and the philosophy or theology behind it. But even that doesn't guarantee a spiritual connection. Many people follow those practices, and gain some benefit and calmness just from doing them, but never find that transcendent 'a-ha' moment in those practices. Why? Because the practice is not the experience, it is only preparation. The experience is ultimately outside the discipline.

Now, please, this is not a criticism. These are wonderful activities, good for body and/or mind, and beneficial simply because they encourage us to focus in lives otherwise governed by distraction. Still, none of these practices promise a peak moment. The transcendent experience is beyond all practice, religion and philosophy. It is a thing unto itself.

However, these preparations tend to lead us to a place where we can realize the spiritual moment when the time is right, probably more often than those who ignore spiritual practice. The births of my children were transformative moments –they usually are. But Teilya and I made sure we noticed the spiritual aspect of the event by having our family chalice burning throughout labour in a place where we could clearly see it and draw strength from the light.

But many of us block those experiences, turn away from those opportunities. Perhaps we are afraid of them for they are dizzying, disorienting and leave us out of control for a time.

There is someone close to me, living in a far away city, who is so afraid of losing control for a single second that she routinely turns away from anything that could lead to an ecstatic moment. She lives in a splendid isolation defined by the mundane and the controllable. I suppose it works for her, but I have my doubts. I try to not be judgmental, yet I find it a bit sad.

Still, culture is on her side in her choice. I believe that we live in a culture that discourages the spiritual. Ours is a practical world with jobs and schedules and bills and expectations. The disciplines most of us learn are task focused, designed to help us be productive and responsible citizens, and, of course, active consumers.

That's not bad, per se. I believe in responsibility and I embrace the joy of accomplishment. But I don't think this makes a full or complete life. How many books and films and plays are built on the theme of some woman or man coming to the end of dutiful lives and realizing that they have not yet lived? The message is that we need other experiences to round us out, to complete us.

Spirituality rounds us out exactly because it is outside the practical or the functional. It is highly individualized, even when the 'a-ha' moment comes in a crowd. I remember standing with a friend one day in nature. The details are irrelevant, but suffice it to say that the few moments we spent left me with tears streaming down my

cheeks. My friend's response was a non-committal, "That was nice." In fact, that friend is quite a spiritual person, but the things in her life did not all converge to make that moment transformative as they did in mine.

We have seen an aspect of that in our spirituality course. Each week we try a different practice. The list has included, journaling, guided meditation, extended silent meditation, yoga, T'ai C'hi and walking the labyrinth. Each of these different forms has reached someone in the class, and each week someone has left with a "That was nice" noncommittal experience.

This past week, I found some new to me ideas that helped make sense of it all. I found them in a labyrinth book Bonnie Kyle brought called "Walking a Sacred Path", by Dr. Lauren Artress.

She named two paths towards spirituality. The first is Apopathic – a word you need not remember. This is the path of silence and contemplation. It refers to the approach most of us will imagine when I say the word 'meditation': sitting silently, letting the mind go blank and letting wisdom come in.

It is sooo 'Not Me', so much so that I have often thought myself unspiritual because I am so bad at following this silent path.

My liberations came when I read about the second way, the Kathopathic path, the path of images where one uses imagination as a way inside. For a long time this path was downplayed, it did not have the same status as the path of silence. New approaches and therapies have changed that. It includes things like guided visualization, art therapy, journaling, dream work and aspects of some physical disciplines like t'ai c'hi and yoga. Unlike the path of silence, one does not abandon the mental process. Says Artress, "(The mental process)...becomes like a paddle that guides the canoe of the heart through the waters flowing to the soul."

She sees these two paths as "rivers that converge". Now I can work with THAT as I write, or draw, or sing, or drink in nature, or cook a good meal.

The last little teaching bit I wish to do before I sum up is to note the cycle of spirituality. Our human side begins and ends in this so-called 'real world' of the practical. None of us, even someone as adept as the Dalai Lama, lives completely in the world of the spiritual. It is a sacred place we enter for a brief time and must leave. In most cultures, the spiritual journey has either three or four stages. The four stage cycle is usually seen as circular in nature like the seasons. I begin with the Autumn. As we step out of normal time, we must let go of the things of daily life. The journey begins with emptying, shedding the thoughts of what we must do next like falling leaves.

The second stage is the fallow or wintry time. It is the time of ashes, the via negativa. It is the time we too often try to rush through, for we are taught that the darkness is bad and that we should always be seeking the light and warmth. But there are lessons in the cold and darkness. It is a time of rest and preparation. Major religious stories contain accounts of the time of death and journeys to the underworld before rebirth occurs. The learning happens here.

When the time is right we begin to cycle upwards towards spring and rebirth. This is the moment of enlightenment and spiritual renewal and refreshment. We burst back into the time of light with new energy, new ideas, transformed by the journey. Finally there is the summer, our time in so-called normal time when we go about our daily tasks buoyed by the lessons we have learned from the rest of the journey.

Other traditions describe a threefold path. This is a helpful notion for disciplines such as Labyrinth walking. The first stage, walking into the labyrinth is 'purgation' the letting go of all that burdens and distracts us. The winding path takes us unerringly to the center where 'illumination' occurs. That is where we find the answer to the question we carried in with us. The center of the labyrinth is the place of the gift, the teacher. Finally there is 'union' as we leave the center and begin the return journey using the time to integrate whatever we have found into the life we lead. Three stage or four, you can see the similarities of emptying, discovery and returning.

But here is my final point: none of these paths are answers or promises. Rather they are only tools designed to train us to welcome the spirit – however we end up defining that elusive term.

Thich Nhat Hahn's reading told us about mindfulness, and that really is the key...not being mindful of everything we do every second of the day, but rather understanding that the spiritual moment will not come our way until we are mindful that it is possible, and attentive enough to give it our full attention when it does come.

The life of the spirit is about possibility. All of those practices, theories and ideas simply serve to remind us to keep an eye open for that door that looks out of the daily world and into the sacred universe. All of this asks us to find ways to pause at that doorway and to remember to step through now and then and welcome the refreshing, nourishing and transforming gifts that are waiting for us to claim as our own. It can happen walking the dog, washing the dishes, doing art, listening to music, being in love, sitting in silence reflecting on our life...it doesn't really matter.

The spiritual experience comes to us when we are open enough to let it in and mindful enough to recognize it for what it is.