

*Spiritual and Religious*

Readings & sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno  
November 13, 2011

*Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey (excerpt) by William Wordsworth*

And I have felt a presence that  
    disturbs me with the joy of  
    elevated thoughts;  
A sense of sublime of something far  
    more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of  
    setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the  
    living air,  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of  
    all thought,  
And rolls through all things.

*Prayer for Those Gathered In Worship*

By, Rev. Barbara Pescan

In this familiar place, listen:  
to the sounds of breathing, creaking chairs,  
shuffling feet, clearing throats, and sighing all around  
know that each breath, movement, the glance  
meant for you or intercepted  
holds a life within it.

These are signs  
that we choose to be in this company  
have things to say to each other  
things not yet said but in each other's presence still  
    trembling behind our hearts' doors  
these doors closed but unlocked  
each silent thing waiting  
on the threshold between unknowing and knowing,  
between being hidden and being known.

Find the silence among these people  
and listen to it all - breathing, sighs,  
movement, holding back -  
hear the tears that have not yet reached their eyes  
perhaps they are your own  
hear also the laughter building deep where joy abides  
despite everything.  
Listen: rejoice. And say Amen.



*You Can't Make This Up* was the title of the article. Innocuous, right? Wrong. The article was a snarky, albeit very funny rant written by a UCC minister who is a frequent columnist for the *Christian Century*.

The subject matter: "I'm spiritual but not religious."

The man had been seated next to the minister on the plane. When he learned that she was a minister, that's what he said to her. Every clergy person has heard it hundreds of times. Mostly, we stay on the beam. She did too – but only long enough to get to her keyboard. And then she got down:

*I was not shocked or upset by the man's story. I had heard it many times before – so many times I could have supplied the details. Let me guess, you read the "New York Times" every Sunday, cover to cover, and you get more out of that than the sermon? Let me guess, you find God in nature? And especially in sunsets?*

She even went where no clergy person dares: she made fun of "spiritual but not religious" parenting. Oh, yes she did. I imagine this woman of the cloth pounding the keyboard as she poured out every ounce of restraint that she had for so long held so carefully in her cup.

On and on she went. Sure it was snarky funny, but it was insightful and soulful, too. I bet you can guess why this next paragraph jumped out at me. Wrote the flabbergasted Reverend:

*If we made a church for all these spiritual-but-not-religious people, if we got them all together to talk about their beliefs and their incredibly unique personal religions, they might find out that*

*most of America agrees with them. But they'll never find that out, because getting them all together would be way too much like church. And they are far too busy being original to discover that they are not.*

What do you think would happen if we got all these spiritual-but-not-religious people together to talk about their beliefs? Are you thinking that you'd have a Unitarian Universalist congregation? I bet you are.

As the detective the preacher must be, I fervently scanned the online comments confident that I would find the indignant reader who staked this very claim. And lo! There she was. Chava began:

*I consider myself spiritual but not religious. Observant, yes. But not 'religious' the way many believers, of many faiths would define it. .... The author is dismissive of the people she's writing about. .... For example, when she wrote "If we made a church for all these spiritual-but-not-religious people ..." etc. etc. etc. ... I wanted desperately to be able to show her the Unitarian Universalists, who are EXACTLY what she describes and who contradict every assumption she made.*

Bless her heart.

Chava's desperation is unwarranted. We can safely assume that the author, again, a UCC minister, knows all about the Unitarian Universalists who are, indeed, "EXACTLY what she describes". But it's the latter part of Daniels' point that resonates. Let's break it down:

*... if we got them all together to talk about their beliefs and their incredibly unique personal religions ...*

Sarcasm noted.

As for a UU's "incredibly unique personal religion"? We're not particularly "incredibly unique". Not in the ways that we think we are, that is.

*they might find out that most of America agrees with them.*

Actually, many progressive religionists representing mainline faith traditions embody both similar and the same values as does Unitarian Universalism. As well, we have long known that far more Americans identify as Unitarian Universalists than actually make their way to our

churches. And why do you think that is? Perhaps one reason is because they identify as spiritual but not religious.

*But they'll never find that out, because getting them all together would be way too much like church.*

Or, if you'd rather, Society or Fellowship or Congregation or just plain "Unitarian Universalists" – hold the definer.

*And they are far too busy being original to discover that they are not.*

This is perhaps our greatest obstacle to welcoming more seekers to our faith. We're too busy being original – trying to think up new ways to say old and straightforward things until no one, including ourselves, knows what in the Sam Hill we're talking about when we talk about Unitarian Universalism.

SO.

Spiritual not religious. Many a Unitarian Universalist would make this very claim. Some of them sitting right here in Unity Hall this morning.

You know, when I first read this article I laughed. And then I tossed the magazine into the recycling bin. I didn't give it another thought. But my some of my colleagues who are Facebook friends of mine were in a twist. Back and forth they went until one posted, rather wearily, "Tired of the spiritual not religious discussion." Truth be told, I'm never bothered when a stranger on a plane makes this claim to me or a stranger anywhere, for that matter. Here's when I get a little twist-y: when one of *you* makes the claim.

And then, I beg to differ. In fact, I have begged and differed in conversations had with a good many Souls over the years most recently in the *Spirit of Life* adult religious education class that I led last spring. This curriculum is part of the UUA's Tapestry of Faith lifespan faith formation program and asks the question: what is a Unitarian Universalist spirituality? 45 Souls explored the question together. And when during one session I was begging and differing about the spiritual not religious question, Lee Boltz went home a little agitated – in a good way.

As a self-described "notorious post-processor" Lee let the question sit and simmer. And like a good Unitarian Universalist, he consulted his dictionary. And then he wrote to his minister.

*After our first Spirit of Life session I ran home and looked up "religious" and "spiritual". "Spiritual" refers to the body-versus-soul-or-spirit context: spiritual as opposed to corporeal. "Religious" refers to one who adheres to religion in general or a specific religion; it can also mean pious or devout.*

My note: I would add to the definition of spirituality, the quest for meaning. I would add to the definition of religious the root meaning which is to bind ourselves to others.

Lee continued:

*Put that together with that wonderful, insightful conversation we experienced yesterday ... and one could conclude that Unitarian Universalism will make the leap from "faith community" to "legitimate religion" (the church equivalent of "moving up to the majors") when Unitarian Universalists are willing to say, "I am religious", meaning "I adhere to Unitarian Universalism". Perhaps it's time for UUs to put to bed the "I am deeply spiritual but not religious" line of reasoning.*

Increasingly, there are Unitarian Universalists who take this leap. Here's one who responded to Chava. The writer chose to remain anonymous and wrote:

*I wonder if you fully understand Unitarian Universalism. I am a very religious UU and I know many religious UUs. ... If you are asserting that there are many UUs who brand themselves "spiritual but not religious", yes, there are those who are on that part of the journey. But Unitarian Universalism is a journey – we encourage one another toward spiritual growth. In our religion.*

At our 10 year anniversary service last week, Reverend Sue Phillips said a lot of nice things about us. They were all true. But the work continues and this area is where we as a congregation and our entire movement need to work harder. We are, I do believe, the religion for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But to communicate that to others is going to take our getting our act together on a very deep level.

In my recent newsletter column, I wrote that my sense of call has only deepened these 10 years since ordination. As the old story encourages: Why not be totally changed into fire? In a couple of weeks, we will welcome new members to All Souls. I have had the great honor to sit with these seekers as they discern their religious and spiritual journeys. The common thread that moves through their stories is that yearning – a spiritual yearning – to make meaning of their lives. And there is also the religious yearning – to do so in community.

And in both senses, to be changed to fire.

On our own, we nurture our spiritualities. We each do so in our own ways. Thus, the individual search for meaning. Indeed, we are mindful of

the “felt presence that disturbs [us] with the joy of elevated thoughts. We feel the [sense of sublime] of something far  
more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of  
setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the  
living air,  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of  
all thought,  
And rolls through all things.

And on Sunday morning, each of you puts down your individual endeavor, and with your aching, joyful, terrified heart wrapped in your spirituality, you bring yourself here and join yourself with others to worship as a congregation.

In this familiar place, [you] listen:  
to the sounds of breathing, creaking chairs,  
shuffling feet, clearing throats, and sighing all around  
know that each breath, movement, the glance  
meant for you or intercepted  
holds a life within it.

These are signs  
that [you] choose to be in this company  
[that] you have things to say to each other

[You] find the silence among these people  
and listen to it all - breathing, sighs,  
movement, holding back -  
[You] hear the tears that have not yet reached their eyes  
perhaps they are your own  
hear also the laughter building deep where joy abides  
despite everything.

[You] Listen: rejoice. And say Amen.

And *that* is what makes us a religious people. Not the “‘religious’ the way many believers, of many faiths would define it.’ as noted by Chava. “Religious” as described by the poet and as defined by Lee Boltz.

Does it stick in your throat, this thought of your being religious?

Does it conjure an image of a person who you never thought you would be?

I am what a religious person looks like. Lee Boltz is what a religious person looks like. (several others at each service were called out as what a religious person looks like) Your loving faces look to each other and to the stranger in a way that says, “Welcome.” Your stance says, “We stand on the side of love.” This is a *religious* proclamation.

No matter where you place yourself on the spiritual continuum – or whether your roots and / or leanings are Christian, Jewish, Pagan, Buddhist, Muslim, Humanist - we are all religious *Unitarian Universalists*.

Take your time getting there. After all, Lee Boltz is not the only post-processor here at All Souls.

I am ready to propel myself into the world on fire. I hope that you will join me. Clear of who we are and why we respond to the world in the way that we do.

Because we are spiritual.

Because we are religious.

Because we are spiritual and religious.

Because we are Unitarian Universalists.

Because we are All Souls.

Amen.