

Spirit of Life, Come Unto Me
Sermon by Colleen McDonald, Minister of Religious Education
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“Many congregations sing it every Sunday, or at least enough to know the words by heart... No other song, no other prayer, no other piece of liturgy is so well known and loved in Unitarian Universalism. It finds the common ground held by humanists and theists, pagans and Christians, Buddhists and Jews, gay and straight among us. In six short lines,... it touches so much that is central to our faith—compassion, justice, community, freedom, reverence for nature, and the mystery of life.”

So begins an article called *Carolyn McDade’s Spirit of Life*, published in the fall edition of *UU World*.

Despite its popularity, this particular song or hymn is not without its detractors—one UU critic has called it “overly sincere, drippy, and maudlin.” In fact, it’s a piece of music that tends to elicit strong opinions, either way. Just like its subject, spirituality. Although she has been a member of at least two UU congregations and has never officially left our movement, Carolyn McDade--*Spirit of Life*’s composer—does not call herself a Unitarian Universalist. “And when someone asks where am I being spiritually formed,” she says, “and where am I participating in spiritual formation with others, it’s not ever been connected with churches.”

Within this faith community that is not always comfortable with calling itself a church, Unitarian Universalists have a love hate relationship with spirituality. It’s something we need more of—or it’s something we don’t want shoved down our throats--depending on whom you talk to.

“When the UUA began conducting needs assessments (gatherings of ministers, religious educators, parents, and laypeople) [beginning in the year 2000] deepening spirituality was the number one concern and hope identified for adult religious education. [Spirituality, then] became... [a]top priority in curriculum development.”

The inaugural curriculum published as part of the *Tapestry of Faith* is an adult religious education course called *Spirit of Life* and its focus is Unitarian Universalist spiritual development; its goals include: To become familiar with a broad and inclusive definition of spirituality; to learn methods for being attentive to [one’s own] spirituality; to consider the value of spiritual practice, in any variety of forms, as a means to deepen faith and enhance the quality of everyday living; and to explore possibilities for deepening experiences of spirituality.

With Eric Nyman assisting me, I facilitated this 9-session course last fall. I was excited when thirteen participants showed up for the first meeting and a few more joined us along the way. The format allowed for individual reflection, whole group discussion, and small group or paired conversations, undergirded by a respect for privacy and the freedom to pass on sharing: “What experiences or moments have you had of feeling “wow”—feelings

of oneness with the earth, feelings of connection with the mystery and wonder of the universe, or a sense of God or the Spirit of Life?” “During this past week, what have you been blessed by? What have you been challenged by?” “What is the essence of how you want to be? What obstacles do you want to overcome in order to get there? And what help do you need?” The trust level in our group was high, and even between participants who were strangers to each other at the outset of the course, there were animated exchanges that reflected a hunger to talk about these matters of substance.

When the series was over, the evaluations stressed the benefits of carving out time out of a busy life to stop and focus inward; receiving guidance and support for living more intentionally, out of one’s values and longings; and being in community with others similarly tuned in to questions of meaning and challenges toward growth. I asked the participants if they were interested in continuing, this winter, with the follow-up curriculum-- *Spirit in Practice*—or in taking part with me in today’s service; on both counts, group members answered *Yes*.

My purpose today is threefold: For those of you hungering for a sermon on spirituality, here you go! For those of you who did not participate in *Spirit of Life* but are energized by hearing more about it, I hope to inspire you to check-out *Spirit in Practice*. And, for those of you who find the topic of spirituality too elusive or baggage-laden or irrational to be relevant for you, I hope you, too, will find something of value in this sermon, through this window into the experience of others who are also part of the Unitarian Universalist faith community.

What is consciousness? What is truth?... knowledge...? and by what authority? What is death? What can we be sure about what we can’t know for sure? To explore the nature of the spiritual is to ask questions like these-- questions that are even more inscrutable than the proverbial elephant that was analyzed by a group of blind men; for here we have a mammoth that isn’t even visible to seekers who have their eyesight. There is more to spirituality than something we can hypothesize about and then verify.

Spirituality is better described by attitude, orientation, or perspective, than it is by belief. Young children offer us an example. My colleague, Ann Barker, Director of Religious Education at the UU congregation in Appleton, writes, “Children are not spiritual ‘blank slates’ upon whose souls we can write whatever we, as the adults in their lives, desire. We can sense that they have deep spirituality expressed in awe, wonder, joy, and reverence before the mysteries of life and death. They have rich inner lives... [which may include] significant dreams, a God concept, conversation with spirit beings (not imaginary playmates) and deep awareness of the sacredness of all that is in our universe. They seem to be natural born mystics.”

To say that all children have the same appreciation for the spiritual realm is an overgeneralization. From the sensory to the abstract, the practical to the theoretical, there are an infinite number of “things” in this world that compete for our attention and that carry the potential to engage our curiosity, spark our passion, and excite our imagination; and I think that some of us are more spiritually inclined, by disposition, than others.

My one-year-old grandson seems to have arrived in this world with an innate fascination for vacuum cleaners. I have never had much of an interest in machines or mechanics; but even though I wasn't raised in a church or taught religion at home, for as long as I can remember, I have seen myself as being in relationship with something larger than myself that I sometimes call God.

I can't argue whether most young children are spiritually attuned, but I do know that the process of socialization can discourage a spiritual outlook, particularly in a patriarchal culture and/or religious tradition that devalues both children and women, elevates reason and logic beyond feelings and intuition, and operates under strict rules and narrow boundaries. The analogy of a person who is naturally left-handed but is trained to develop and favor her right hand, instead, comes to mind; in a "right handed" world, this individual will gain some advantages, but at a cost.

Even as spirituality can be discouraged, it can also be nurtured, in an environment in which questions about meaning and purpose in life are invited and explored, discussion takes the form of an exchange rather than a debate, and individuals are affirmed as authoritative in their own sense of truth. This kind of "safe space" is the context out of which the *Spirit of Life* course (and other UU curricula) operates. This morning I will address three facets of spirituality that are addressed in the curriculum: Language, Ritual, and Practice.

In Women Who Run With the Wolves, Clarissa Pinkola Estes writes, "The profound energies that have formed galaxies and spread open the first pollen-hungry bud move within us. They have never once abandoned us, though we have abandoned ourselves and one another and have most tragically as humans succeeded in cutting certain ones of us off from self-determination of our vital capacities, which is the spawning of oppression. But always there is that which whispers through the chains, "There is more to life than this. It was never meant to stop here."

The *Spirit of Life* curriculum intentionally avoids any explicit definition of "spiritual" or "spirituality," instead offering a wide berth and encouraging participants to flesh out the concept for themselves. It does connect worship—one form of spiritual practice—as a response to an "itch in the human condition." Metaphors are one of the best ways to talk about spirituality, and there are an infinite number that are applicable; if a spiritual experience is one that reaches an existential itch that needs to be scratched, it can also be understood as something inward that has the feel of quenching a thirst, satisfying a hunger, opening a door, releasing a captive, building a bridge, plumbing a well, healing a wound, holding a child. It is something found "not only in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work... but also in the midst of things as they are, when there is... [serenity] in your heart."

The curriculum also relates spirituality to "wow" moments—that feeling of "oneness with the earth... connection with the mystery and wonder of the universe, or a sense of God or the Spirit of Life." One session includes a hand-out of nearly one hundred "wow words," taken from our grey hymnal and representing numerous perspectives on "Ultimate

Reality” or wider consciousness, including Blessed Radiance, Unfolding Grace, Father Spirit, Mother Earth, Web of Life, Still Small Voice, Wind of Change, Circle of Peace, and Truth that Makes us Free. Many of these labels can be understood as forms of “God Talk,” but within our Unitarian Universalist faith, spirituality is not confined to a theistic worldview: In holding a baby, watching a sunset, or seeing justice being done, one might experience a transcending “wow moment”—with its deep joy and serenity—without placing a deity anywhere in the picture.

As Unitarian Universalists, each of us is allowed the freedom and given the responsibility to choose the words that best capture our sense of Truth (with a capital T)—to use the language that best conveys our most profound experience about what it means to live as a human being on planet earth. And together, as a church, we are challenged to find language that honors the multiplicity of our theologies in setting a tone or framework for our common worship.

At my home congregation in Richmond, Virginia, the place where we held our Sunday services was called the “Meeting Room,” an expression common within the Universalist strand of our heritage. In Madison, Wisconsin, I served not a “church” nor a “congregation” but a “Society,” which had spun off a “Fellowship.” The story goes that when First Society of Madison sponsored the start-up of a third UU community in the city, there was quite a discussion about what its name would be. It didn’t take the leaders long to decide that they would call themselves the James Reeb Unitarian Universalist... but then what? Finally, they realized that in order to give the larger community some idea about what their organization was all about—most people being equally unfamiliar with Reeb and UUism—that they’d better call themselves the James Reeb UU Church!

To err on the side of caution and include everyone, some UU’s argue, Unitarian Universalist worship should exclude all traditional religious language—such as “God,” “prayer,” “Mystery,” and even “worship”—because it is irrelevant or meaningless to some people in the church-- or has too many meanings to be useful (What do *you* mean by “God?”)—or because it has been so narrowly defined by more traditional churches that it feels out of place, even contradictory, within a liberal faith community. The opposing viewpoint, however, recognizes what educators call a “null” curriculum—meaning that that there is a message conveyed in what you don’t say. Just as an African American couple might walk into the “average” UU church, look around at the congregation, and decide they didn’t belong there, so too a visitor hearing no mention of God in our worship might conclude that this was a church where belief in God has no place. The same traditional words could make one UU very uncomfortable, and another, extremely comforted.

At UU Rockford, a traditionally (at least in recent decades) humanist religious community, I think this congregation has become more relaxed about hearing theologically loaded words in worship. Even so, when Howell arrived as interim minister and told me he wanted to add a “Pastoral Prayer” to the Sunday service, I suggested he call it a “Meditation” instead. As an experiment, I’ve called it a “Prayer” in today’s order of worship!

There's a lot more God talk in worship services held at the district and denominational level than there was when I became a UU over twenty years ago; despite my theistic bent, at General Assembly I find my defenses rising at the words, "Let us pray," because not all of us pray, and because I am skeptical that someone else's prayer is going to speak for me. I could use another sermon to explore these issues further, but before moving on, I want to point out that there can be barriers not only between those of us who are spiritually inclined and those who are not, but among those of us who are spiritually inclined in very different ways.

A second facet of spirituality that is lifted up by the *Spirit of Life* curriculum is ritual. Corporate worship—and particular kinds of religious rites, such as weddings and memorial services—employ many rituals, but these are experiences that are limited to particular times and places. Judaism and Islam emphasize ritual as an integral part of daily life; many Jews light Sabbath candles every Friday night, for example, and Muslims, of course, stop to pray in exactly the same way several times a day. Ritual can be performed in a very mechanical manner, particularly when it becomes an established habit; paradoxically, performing the same ritual over and over again can deepen its meaning and impact.

And many routine activities of daily life can be done either mindlessly or mindfully in a way that touches us more deeply than what we would feel checking off another item on our to do list.

A *Spirit of Life* participant who is employed as a school bus driver told us that each morning when she gets in her vehicle, she takes a moment to center herself with a prayer that helps her feel confident in her responsibility for the lives that will be entrusted to her care. Another group member told us of her morning stretching ritual in which she celebrates the miracle of her body and gives thanks.

"Before enlightenment," says the Buddhist monk, "chopping wood, fetching water... After enlightenment, chopping wood, fetching water."

Some of the most profound moments in our class resulted from the experience of creating blessings for each other. We did this one on one at one session—after sharing with one another something of our hopes and longings for our spiritual growth—and also for the whole group. (These will be shared with and for all of you, as our closing words). Many of us also felt the sense of being blessed vicariously when we experienced the reading about the ritual laying on of hands that Margaret White shared with you earlier. That particular story reinforced my awareness that there are more "vocations" than the limited list we tend to recognize, which elevates clergy, doctors, and sometimes others.

Indeed, just as any drab routine can be shaped into a transformative ritual, every job—whether it be waitress, mechanic, or parent--can also be performed as a ministry; this is the case when we do our work with an attitude of caring and respect for those we are serving, an awareness that whatever we do has meaning within a larger whole, and a commitment to using our life as a vehicle for love, peace, justice, healing, and transformation.

The last dimension of spirituality I want to address today is that of Spiritual Practice, or Spiritual Discipline, which is the focus of *Spirit in Practice*, *Spirit of Life's* follow-up curriculum. A spiritual practice or discipline is a self-chosen activity in which one engages regularly, even every day, for the express purpose of deepening one's consciousness and cultivating one's wholeness as an individual in relationship with all there is. In the words of the *Spirit in Practice* curriculum introduction, "The idea of spiritual practices encourages individuals to take responsibility for their own spiritual development by spending time working on it, deliberating on its meaning and how best to pursue it, seeking to understand the sacred... to connect with the sacred ground of their being, however they understand it. Traditional, even stereotypical, spiritual practices include meditation, prayer, fasting, voluntary poverty, and the reading of sacred texts. A broader menu of choices includes gardening, dream work, journaling, walking, artistic expression, Tai Chi, social justice work. As the curriculum guide indicates, "There is nothing in our lives that cannot serve as a tool for this work." Like ritual, one form of spiritual practice, what matters is not the activity itself but the manner in which we approach it.

A good example is just one of the many activities we engage in everyday without having to make room for it in our schedule-- something that requires no supplies or expert instructor and has no cost: Listening. We all know the difference between talking to, or maybe at, someone who simply hears or half hears us, or doesn't listen to us at all, and talking to someone who really tunes into both the content and the nuances of what we are saying, who pays attention both to our words and to our body language. Making a concerted effort to turn off our own, internal chatter and offer that attentive kind of listening can be a spiritual practice.

In our class we practiced the roles of both listener and what I would call "deep listener," or "holder of the space." "When you are holding the space," said our instructions, "you hold the good intentions for the group and provide sacred witness to the sharing between speaker and listener. As you hold the space, you want the best for the time. You want safety and compassion. You want truth to be spoken, and heard. When you are holding the space, you give your attention and support to the speaker, to the listener, to the process, and to the relationships it creates." As for the other kind of listening as spiritual practice, no one describes it better than Parker Palmer, whose understanding is shaped by a Quaker structure known as a "Clearness Committee": "The focus person," writes Palmer (meaning the person who is receiving the listening attention) becomes the great thing at this small version of the community of truth, the sacred subject, worthy of respect. Undivided attention means letting the focus person, and his or her issue, be at the center of the... [conversation], without trying... to put yourself there. This means that... [you] do not call attention to... [yourself] by laughing uproariously when something funny happens or by rushing to comfort the focus person when he or she is feeling pain or by falsely uniting with his or her concern ("I know just how you feel"). Undivided attention means forgetting about yourself, and... acting as if you had no other purpose on earth than to care for this human being." (The Courage to Teach)

Last week I suddenly found myself on the receiving end of this kind of listening when I told my peers at an inter-faith dialog group that I was leaving my position here at church at the

end of June. Instead of quizzing me about the particulars involved in the decision or reacting with their own feelings or experiences, they steered me toward my own, deeper process, asking me, “What is grounding you as you face the change this has brought and the changes still to come?” “What do you need for closure?” “What is calling to you as you anticipate the future?” Being “held” in this way was a holy moment that will remain with me for some time, even as it is also a model for how we can meet one another heart to heart, soul to soul, within a caring community.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes retells the following story from the Talmud called “Four Who Entered Paradise”:

One night four rabbis were visited by an angel who awakened them and carried them to the Seventh Vault of the Seventh Heaven. There they beheld the... [Holiest of Holies]. Somewhere in the descent from Paradise, to Earth, one Rabbi, having seen such splendor, lost his mind and wandered frothing and foaming until the end of his days. The second Rabbi... told himself, “Oh I just dreamed Heaven, that was all. Nothing *really* happened.” The third Rabbi carried on and on about what he had seen... and was totally obsessed. He lectured and would not stop with how it was all constructed and what it all meant... and in this way he went astray... The fourth Rabbi, who was a poet, took a paper in hand and a reed and sat near the window writing song after song praising the evening dove, his daughter in her cradle, and the stars in the sky. And he lived his life better than before.” That is what nurturing my spirit comes down to for me—paying attention to the deepest, most compassionate and conscientious, most perceptive and profound part of me, that I may live my life better than before.

“The profound energies that have formed galaxies and spread open the first pollen-hungry bud move within us. They have never once abandoned us. Always there is that which whispers through the chains, ‘There is more to life than this. It was never meant to stop here.’