

In Search of the Spiritual
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The first woman whose ordination as a minister of a religious denomination was recognized was the Rev. Olympia Brown. The Universalist Church ordained Rev. Brown in 1863. After her ordination, the members of the Universalist Church in Weymouth, Massachusetts called her to serve as their minister.

In her autobiography Rev. Brown wrote that the previous minister of the church remained in the community and held séances, a practice called spiritualism. Church members invited her to attend séances, and Rev. Brown went, trying to keep an open mind. She wrote,

Although I gave faithful attention and kept my mind as receptive as possible, I never at any time experienced anything that seemed to indicate even remotely that a means of communication with the spirit world had been secured.

Because of the popularity of spiritualism in the 19th and the early 20th century, both Unitarians and Universalists tended to avoid the words “spiritual” and “spirit.” For example, in the titles of sermons by the Rev. A. Powell Davies, who served as minister of All Souls, in Washington, D.C., from 1944 until his death in 1957, I cannot find the words “spirit” or “spiritual,” while the word “God” appeared in the title of many of his sermons.

This changed around 1980. In the 1950s, the 1960s and the 1970s, when asked what was the most important quality in a minister, most Unitarian Universalist congregations said, “Intellectually stimulating sermons.” However, over the past 30 years this has changed. In recent times some members of Unitarian Universalist congregations when asked what qualities are most desirable in a minister, congregations often list “spiritual guidance” as a crucial quality. These same congregations often also list “Humanism” as their dominant theology. In other words, humanist Unitarian Universalist congregations want spiritual guidance from their ministers.

In 1989, Rev. John Wolf, then senior minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Tulsa, Okla., wrote:

There is a lot of talk about spirituality these days. We talk about people becoming more or less spiritual. There is a great deal of interest in people learning how to become more spiritual in their lives.

I do not understand what people are talking about when they talk about spirituality. Spiritualism, I understand, is the belief in extra-sensory perception, reincarnation, people getting in touch with the spirit world, mediums, witches,

potions and prophecies. But I don't understand "spirituality" per se. Do they mean being more sensitive to things around you? Is it a greater awareness of the deep things of life? Is it a patience with things, a willingness to wait for the tough times to pass in the belief that a better day will dawn? Is it charitableness, kindness, sacrifice? If that is what they mean, all right. Those things I know about; those things I can understand. But is that what people mean when they talk about being more spiritual? . . . I don't know. (Sermon by John Wolf, March 19, 1989)

In recent years the use of the word "spiritual" has continued. In 1999, Rev. Scott Alexander, my friend and colleague at the River Road Unitarian Universalist Congregation, gathered a collection of thoughtful writings into a book called *Everyday Spiritual Practice*. Three years ago Rev. Barbara Hamilton-Holway, minister of our congregation in Berkeley, California wrote an adult education program called *Spirit of Life: Exploring Spirituality for Unitarian Universalists*.

During this period, the Unitarian Universalist Association published our current hymnal, with the hymn "Spirit of Life." This quickly became the most popular hymn. Previously our most popular hymn had been "Morning Has Broken," made popular by a 1971 recording by Cat Stevens.

Over the last few years, the phrase "Spirit of Life" has become a euphemism for the word "God." So in the 1950s A. Powell Davies wrote this prayer: "Oh God, who has given us the earth in its beauty to be our home, help us to rejoice and be glad in it." Today Unitarian Universalist clergy are more likely to say "Spirit of life that has given us the earth in its beauty to be our home, help us to rejoice and be glad in it."

As you can see, there has been a transition in our religious language. In the 19th and early 20th century, when people frequently used the word "spiritualism" to refer to communication with the dead, Unitarians and Universalists, skeptical about séances, avoided the word.

However, in the late 20th century, religious liberals have tired of hearing Christian and Islamic fundamentalists claim that God caused an earthquake to punish people. We are weary of being told that God will send you to an eternal reward in heaven if you die in a holy war. As a result, some Unitarian Universalists moved away from using of the word God, replacing it with the phrase "spirit of life." So for example, Rev. Barbara Hamilton-Holway asks "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?"

A Unitarian Universalist historian, David Robinson, said that Unitarian Universalists could find the answer to that question in the transcendentalist movement of the 19th century. Mr. Robinson said:

Like a pauper who searches for the next meal, never knowing of the relatives whose will would make him rich, American Unitarians lament their vague religious identity, standing upon the richest theological legacy of any American

denomination. Possessed of a deep and sustaining history of spiritual achievement and philosophical speculation, religious liberals have been, ironically, dispossessed of that heritage.

David Robinson argues that we are “troubled by a sense of the vagueness of our religious identity and hold an uneasy conception of ourselves as perhaps marginal among the established American denominations.” On the other hand, he observes that Unitarian Universalists, like many other Americans, are looking for a greater sense of spirituality in their lives (and churches). In Robinson's words,

[This spirituality is a] feeling or hunger for a deeper inner life and a more profound experience of the world that we share. We're haunted by the specter of our own superficiality, the uneasy feeling that life is sliding by and leaving no deep mark on us, that we're being cheated of some version of real experience that would add marrow to the dry bones of our daily routine. We've found ways of dealing with this hunger, of masking it, but we've found it has a curious persistence.

David Robinson published a book called: *The Spiritual Emerson: Essential Writings*, and Rev. Barry M. Andrews published *Emerson as Spiritual Guide* and *Thoreau as Spiritual Guide*.

The word “transcendentalism” comes from the book *The Critique of Pure Reason* by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Published in German in 1781, and translated into English by the 1830s, Kant divided his *Critique of Pure Reason* into two parts. The first part he called “Transcendental Doctrine of the Elements,” which deals with the sources of human knowledge. Kant wrote that space and time are “nothing more than formal conditions of our sensory faculty,” that space and time are “not real properties that adhere to the things in themselves” but “mere forms of our sensory perception.” We can only know things as they appear to us through the forms of space and time. We can never know things as they exist in themselves. Therefore, Kant concluded, we cannot know of the existence of God. We can only make a leap of faith that God exists. For Immanuel Kant transcendental elements are another name for things as they exist in themselves.

In March of 1833 the Unitarian minister Frederic Hedge published an article on Coleridge and Kant in the Unitarian magazine, *The Christian Examiner*. Emerson must have read the essay and this was likely his first encounter with Kant. Emerson also heard about Kant from the English poet Samuel Coleridge and the English historian Thomas Carlyle. An English translation of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was published in 1838. Emerson bought a copy and examined it enough to mark a few passages.

Kant believed that we humans could never know transcendental elements, never have direct knowledge of God. We can only accept the existence of God by a leap of faith. Emerson had more trust in the ability of human beings. He believed that we could have direct knowledge of

God through our intuition. Emerson's American Transcendentalism is the belief that we humans can intuit the existence of God. An 1828 dictionary defines intuition as “the act by which the mind perceives . . . the truth of things, immediately, or the moment they are presented, without the intervention of other ideas, or without reasoning and deduction.”

This is American Transcendentalism: the belief that we do not need the miracles of the Bible to know that God exists. All we need is to trust our own intuition. Nature will tell us that God is real. Transcendentalism is the belief that each of us can experience the existence of God through the beauty of nature. Margaret Fuller describes it this way:

[Pausing beside a stream at the end of a long walk,] I saw there was no self; that selfishness was all folly, and the result of circumstance; that it was only because I thought the self real that I suffered; that I had only to live in the idea of the all, and all was mine. This truth came to me, and I received it unhesitatingly; so that I was for that hour taken up into God. In that true ray most of the relations of earth seemed mere films, phenomena.

Today people often use the word “spirituality” to describe a state of calmness and self-acceptance. I am suggesting this morning that we have a special emphasis on nature as a way to arrive at this feeling of calmness and self-acceptance. The worship spaces Unitarian Universalists have often built during the past 60 years reflect this. This building, with its lack of a steeple, and its position among the trees, suggests that our community finds God in nature. I look out on the trees and I feel a sense of the sacredness of nature. Here we celebrate: The smell and feel of soil in our hands. The freshness of the wind against our skin. The warmth of the sun on our faces. The color of the leaves in the fall. The beauty of the snow in winter, and the sight of green buds announcing the coming of spring. It is our Transcendentalist heritage.

My friend and colleague Jane Rzepka, who has just retired, reminded me of a passage by Wendell Berry about the pleasure of nature, and I want to end with it today. Wendell wrote in 1988:

Last December, when my granddaughter, Kate, had just turned five, she stayed with me one day while the rest of the family was away from home. In the afternoon, we hitched a team of horses to the wagon and hauled a load of dirt for the barn floor. It was a cold day, but the sun was shining; we hauled our load of dirt over the tree-lined gravel lane beside the creek – a way well known to her mother and to my mother when they were children. As we went along, Kate drove the team for the first time in her life. She did very well, and she was proud of herself. She said that her mother would be proud of her, and I said that I was proud of her.

We completed our trip to the barn, unloaded our load of dirt, smoothed it over the barn floor and weighted it down. By the time we started back up the Creek Road

the sun had gone over the hill and the air had turned bitter. Kate sat close to me in the wagon and we did not say anything for a long time. I did not say anything because I was afraid that Kate was not saying anything because she was cold and tired and miserable and perhaps homesick; it was impossible to hurry much, and I was unsure how I would comfort her.

But then, after a while, she said, "Wendell, isn't it fun?"