

The Art of Spirituality

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I have this habit of bursting into song at unexpected moments. Sometimes it's disconcerting to people around me. Usually I'm able to contain it as humming when I'm out in public or in polite company. When I'm around people with whom I've become comfortable, though, they'll ask me how I am and I'll, "My life goes on in endless song, above earth's lamentation." I don't think I have a great singing voice or accurate pitch. It's just that the world makes more sense to me when it's framed musically.

Some of us enjoy exploring the world by making our own kind of music. Some of us connect with something larger than ourselves by creating in media such as bronze or paint or gardens or fabric. Some of us find generativity in words, some of us make the most of silence. In order to open the doors to the life-saving spiritual path of Unitarian Universalism, we need to ensure that we're drawing from a variety of ways of understanding and experiencing the world.

Spirituality is an adventure for our whole selves. We go through our day-to-day lives solving problems and creating things with words, with actions, with space, with sounds, with emotions. We wrestle with moral and religious questions in every one of these arenas. Art and spirituality depend on each other so that we can engage with moral and religious questions anywhere and any time we meet them.

The arts have helped me engage with religious questions, even when they weren't arts I was particularly good at. It seems to me that spirituality connects us with the Source of Life; and spirituality is deeper than words.

Spirituality is connected with the Source of Life

Something I've learned about spirituality through the arts is that it's possible to have a connection with the Source of Life. I'm not sure what the Source of Life is. Even so, I have felt the presence of the Source of Life. For me, creativity lets me be in relationship with the Source of Life without having to define it. Stories about God in sacred text or folk tales or fiction can sometimes be illuminating about the Source of Life, even if God isn't always the right word for me.

Unitarian Universalism names Jewish and Christian teachings about love as one of the six main sources of our living tradition. The first thing we learn in Genesis about the Holy is that the Divine is a creator and names creation as "good." For me, this implies

that being creative connects humans with the Infinite. The text also gives a message about acceptance, that all things were created in love, holy from the first moment of existence without having to earn it.

Looking around the two campuses of this congregation, I see examples everywhere I turn of creation in the spirit of love. I see the quilts on the walls. I see posters for the Poor Peoples Campaign and for our various community partners. I see drawings from the children in Religious Education. What about you? What are your creative practices? When have you felt in partnership with the creative Divine? Remember that message of love. And it was good.

Faith can be concrete. It can be real. We don't have to have a logical definition of that Source of Life in order to feel connected to it. Feeling of the presence of the Source of Life can be another avenue of comfort and challenge, part of a sustaining faith. The art of spirituality invites us into relationship with the Source of Life.

Spirituality is deeper than words

When we face the most difficult transitions in our lives, sometimes there is nothing we can say, no way to explain or to bargain. These are the times when we need a spirituality beyond words. In her book, *Glory Hallelujah! Now Please Pick Up Your Socks*, UU writer Jane Ellen Mauldin talks about such an experience. She writes:

A number of years ago, my brother lay dying in the hospital. He spent days in the intensive care unit while members of my family, including my mother, sat for many long hours on chairs in the hallway outside his room. Among visitors who came to share the vigil was a member of our church.

"How are you doing?" the friend asked.

My mother was too exhausted to tell anything but the truth. "I'm tired," she said. "I'm very, very tired. I'm too tired to even pray any more."

"But don't you see," her friend replied, "your very presence here is a prayer."

There are times when all words fail us, all forms seem hollow, and no one out there or inside seems to be listening. At those times, our presence, just our presence, is prayer. Our bodies, our actions, become our prayer, our connection to God, whatever God may be.

So ends the reading. Mauldin alludes to the reason why it's useful to have worship that uses arts not limited to words, and this is why it's helpful to have an embodied spiritual practice. When we come to a place when the only prayer left is our actions, it's good to have practiced.

Like most UU ministers, part of my training involved 400 hours of ministry in a specialized setting such as a prison or a nursing home. I spent a summer being a student chaplain at a children's hospital. I met children of all ages and their families going through difficult circumstances.

One thing I learned over and over was that words are not always the right tool in a crisis. This was hard to get used to. I'm comfortable with talking. I had to practice being in spiritual community with people through means other than speech. Silence can be companionship, or nonverbal prayer, or it can be focused attention on a project with beads or paper or instrumental music. Perhaps because I was in a children's hospital, I had more permission to experiment. Those experiments did not always turn out well. I was not always graceful or wise or skillful. Part of the spirituality of creativity is forgiving and trying again. The families could lead me where they needed to go.

I learned that summer that wordy theology isn't the only way to be religious. My Unitarian Universalist congregations prepared me for those moments by asking me to stretch, to try things like sculpture or prayer beads that weren't familiar or comfortable. When words failed, I was glad that my UU congregations had challenged me to practice spirituality deeper than words.

Conclusion

Spirituality connects us with the Source of Life. Spirituality is deeper than words. These are some of the things that I have learned from art and creativity. As Unitarian Universalists, we each have a responsibility to search for truth and meaning. Nobody gives us the answers, but we can give each other the space to ask questions. We strengthen the beloved community when we open up new ways of searching for truth and meaning.

Go forth and create. Let your creation be a prayer. Bring back your many ways of creating, finding new ways to be spiritual together in this community. Know, at the end of the day, the Spirit of Love will join us in saying, "It was good."

So be it. Blessed be. Amen.