

When
‘Spiritual But Not Religious’
is Not Enough...
(Version 2a)

A Sunday service led by the
Reverend Michael Walker, Interim Minister

Presented on February 19, 2017, at the
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

WELCOME

Dear friends, some who are new, some who are not, you are welcome here – one and all. We are a welcoming community which honors the inherent worth of all people, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, orientation, socio-economic class, or other attributes that only serve to divide our society. Here, we welcome you as you are, and are glad you came to be with us today. You may have been coming here for years, even decades; or you may have been coming here for just a few weeks; or, this might even be your first time here, ever. Regardless of how long you have been here, we have one thing to say to you all: **Welcome Home!** Please take a few moments now to greet your neighbors.

CALL TO WORSHIP (SLT # 434)

*May we be reminded here of our
highest aspirations,
and inspired to bring our gifts of
love and service to the altar of
humanity.*

*May we know once again that we
are not isolated beings
but connected, in mystery and
miracle, to the universe,
to this community and to each other.*

For all of this and more, we light our Chalice today.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

JOYS AND SORROWS (Market Street)

During our time of Silent Joys and Sorrows, we acknowledge those things we hold in hearts, whether they be joyful or sad. If you wish to mark some joy or sorrow in your personal life, you're invited to come and choose a disc from the heart-basket; hold it, admire it, imagine your joy or sorrow coming to reside in this symbol.

Of course, these can mean whatever you want them to, but we picked out the colors based on the sky. Joys might be blue for clear skies or yellow for sunny skies, while the dark stones can symbolize your sorrows, as an overcast or stormy sky. If you have a joy or sorrow you wish to acknowledge, please come forward.

MEDITATION

Being a caring community, we *celebrate* the joys and *share* the sorrows, whether we have told others about them or hold onto them in silence. We do so, so that our friends do not carry these alone. You are now invited into a moment of silence and meditation, as we hold these joys and these sorrows in our hearts and minds. We will bring our meditation to a conclusion by joining in singing a Musical Meditation, Hymn # _____, _____ (name) in the (grey/teal) hymnal.

[Silence]

Thank you. Blessed be.

OFFERING

This congregation offers a liberal spiritual home to seekers from all walks of life. We are proud of the work we do in the community, the classes we offer for children and adults, for the care and concern provided by this community and its staff, and for these two beautiful campuses that have each become a spiritual home for so many.

If you are here for the first time, we invite you to let the offering basket pass you by, because you are our honored guest. And if you have made this your spiritual home, we thank you for your continuing generosity.

Every month, we also collect donations during the Offering to support a worthy cause. This month, our Share-the-Plate Recipient is _____.

If you are writing a check, please specify on the Memo line whether this is for your Pledge, an offering to UCH, or for the Share-the-Plate recipient.

Thank you, all, for your generosity. This morning's offering will now be received.

READING

Today, we are using a book by the Rev. Lillian Daniel, When "Spiritual But Not Religious" Is Not Enough, as the starting point of our discussion. The author is a Congregationalist minister, who like me and many of my colleagues, has heard this phrase one too many times: "I'm spiritual, but not religious!" She tells the story of a man, who I think is likely a composite of many people, and describes his spiritual journey. He was hurt by the Catholic Church and left it when he was a young man. In college, he joined a conservative Baptist Church, and was really caught up in the strong community, but was later disillusioned by some of the strictures of that faith. When he got married, he joined his wife's liberal Protestant church, in which thought he

had found a home. In later years, they divorced and she got the church and he went on with life... About which, Lillian Daniel writes:¹

... So he found himself spending his Sunday mornings sleeping in, reading the New York Times, or putting on his running shoes and taking off through the woods. This was his religion today, he explained. "I worship nature. I see myself in the trees and in the butterflies. I am one with the great outdoors. I find God there. And I realized that I'm deeply spiritual but no longer religious."

He dumped the news in my lap as if it were a controversial hot potato, something that would

¹ Daniel, Lillian. *When "Spiritual But Not Religious" Is Not Enough*. NY: Jericho, 2013. Ch. 1, passim.

shock a mild-mannered minister never before exposed to ideas so brave and different and daring. But of course, to me, none of this was different in the least. [...]

Like people who attend church wouldn't know that [the holy can be found in nature]. Like we are these monkish people who never heard all those ... psalms of praise [for] the beauty of natural creation, like we never leave the church building. God in nature? Really? ... [These] folks always seem to think they invented it.

But push a little harder on their self-developed religion, and you don't get much, at least much of depth. So you find God in the sunset? Great, so do I. But how about in the face

of cancer? Cancer is nature too. Do you worship that as well? [...]

Suffering is seldom accounted for in these self-made spiritualities, other than as something we might overcome, by hard work, exercise, and reading the op-ed page. But worldwide disaster, [or a health crisis], how do you wrestle with that? [...]

When you witness suffering and declare yourself to achieve salvation in the religion of gratitude, you've fallen way short of what ... you [could] do, no matter what religion ...

Here ends the reading.

*When
'Spiritual But Not Religious'
Is Not Enough...*
Reverend Michael Walker

A few years ago, me and many of my colleagues read When "Spiritual But Not Religious" Is Not Enough, by the Rev. Lillian Daniel, a UCC minister. This sermon is an examination and response to that book.

Like many people in modern American society, I come from a religious heritage that I chose to leave behind. Just two generations ago, it was unthinkable almost anywhere in this country, that people would do anything on Sunday morning except go to church. Everyone went to church. Or, at least this is the story that we often hear.

Of course, that story doesn't take into account Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or other Americans. It is simply the story of the dominant majority. The interesting thing about now is that the dominant majority has changed. The majority of Americans now fall into these two related groups, called the SBNRs and the Nones. By SBNR, we mean *Spiritual But Not Religious*. By Nones, we do not mean Catholic religious women living in convents, but rather the people who mark *No Religious Preference* or *None of the Above* when filling out forms. We call them *Nones*, N-O-N-E-S, for short.

My colleagues in other denominations have watched this trend with a great deal of concern. Over the last two generations, their flocks have fled. Some of my UU colleagues, on the other hand, have watched this

trend with some interest because they believe that these SBNR folks are ripe for the picking. These are just the sort of people we should be attracting to UU churches, some think. Unlike many ministers, I actually have a different experience with this group of people, because I've actually had the opportunity to interact with them on deep and personal levels. This is because many *spiritual but not religious* people, as they identify themselves, will at times engage in an intensive weekend of spiritual reflection at a retreat center, but would never sit in the pews for an hour every Sunday. During parts of my career, I lived and worked at retreat centers and this has allowed me to spend more time with those folks than, perhaps, some of my colleagues.

But, before that, I was a pilgrim on my own

spiritual journey. My story includes, in my early years, my family's Baptist Church and the anti-gay sentiment that I experienced there as a young person. One day, I walked out of that church and did not set foot in a church again for almost 20 years. My story is like the story of so many other people. What was perhaps unusual about my story, is that I spent the intervening years (between leaving the Baptists and finding the UUs) in the Pagan community, learning how the goddess religion of nature was more accepting of people who are different than the expected norm of conservative Christianity. Like that guy in the story Lillian Daniel shares in the reading, I too was finding the holy out in nature – what was different was that I did so with a community of others.

I realize that in UU congregations, especially those

fellowships that have a strong Humanist history, there may be those who will stop listening the first-time God is mentioned. Some may be turned off by readings such as we shared earlier, because it came from a book written by a Christian minister. I, myself, am *not* a Christian. However, even though my perspective differs from that of the author of the book, our conclusions are pretty similar. That is: The point of any *faith community*, regardless of religion, has more to do with the community than the faith. People forget that. Often. It doesn't matter what church you visit – if all they talk to you about are the doctrines of their religion than they have missed the point, not to mention an opportunity. And you are likely to leave and not return. If, however, they spend more time talking to you about their

community and what they do together, then you know you have found a really good bunch of people. You might even go back. We hope that is the experience of people who visit us in all of our UU churches.

Perhaps an illustration from a different religion would help. Among those who follow the teachings of Buddha, they gather themselves in something called a *sangha*, which means – perhaps not surprisingly – *community*. In western culture, people *congregate* in common cause. In other words, people who are going to work on something together, and they gather together to do that work, it is said that they have *congregated*. This, of course, is where our own religious term of *congregation* comes from. We are a community, first, and of faith, second – especially in UU churches, faith is

often considered secondary to the community.

Let's take a look at faith now. In our reading by the Rev. Lillian Daniel, she wrote:

When you witness suffering and declare yourself to achieve salvation in the religion of gratitude, you've fallen way short of what ... you [could] do, no matter what religion ...

The author further described the conversation she had with the 'spiritual but not religious' gentleman, in which the man expounded upon the theological wisdom of his child, which boiled down to the belief that their religion is gratitude for what they have in life and the privileges that come with where they live, rather than some other, less fortunate part of the world. Lillian continued the

story, speaking in the language of her faith community:²

...[While] I think God does want us to feel gratitude, I do not think God particularly wants us to feel lucky. I think God wants us to witness pain and suffering and, rather than feeling lucky, God wants us to get angry and want to do something about it. [...]

When he told me about his son, it finally hit me what was bothering me about this self-styled religion he had invented — he hadn't invented it at all. It was as boring and predictable as the rest of our self-centered consumer culture, and this very conceit, that this outlook was somehow original, daring, or edgy, was evidence of that very self-centeredness.

If we made a church for all the spiritual but not

² Ibid.

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. Why? 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.

Lillian Daniel's indictment of folks who say they are *Spiritual But Not Religious* or have *No Religious Preference* (the *Nones*) can be forgiven for being slightly histrionic. As I mentioned before, some of my clergy colleagues from other faith communities have watched this trend with alarm, as their diminishing communities leave them feeling as if they are failing in their mission to save souls. We UUs look at things a bit differently, but

we do worry about our shrinking memberships, as well.

We have come to realize that the *SBNRs* and *Nones* are a growing segment of society that has really diminished church memberships. *But, why are more people seeking such a path? What is fulfilling their spiritual needs?* And, I believe that every person alive, even atheists, have spiritual needs of some sort. We may need to quibble over definitions a bit, but ultimately I believe we each need to feel as if we are part of something greater than ourselves. For some people, that *something greater* may simply be a faith community.

But for others who, as Rev. Daniel describes, take to watching sunsets, listening to NPR and reading the New York Times op-ed columns... For those who hear

profound spiritual wisdom from the mouths of babes, or during a walk of the beach... For some who claim to be *spiritual but not religious*, there seems to be a self-defined spiritual path that is a mile wide, but only an inch deep. That's how my colleague explained it in her book. For what it's worth, I've noticed the same thing, myself.

Let me take you off on a tangent for a moment.

One may be surprised to learn that some years ago, I wrote a book. I never sent it to any publishers, so it sits collecting dust. Very few people have ever read it – a theological primer for nature-based spirituality, for those UUs, Pagans and SBNRs that find the holy in nature. I sent it to my academic advisor from seminary, a well-respected professor, minister and author, himself. He

read it and told me, *"It's not quite ready for prime-time. It doesn't answer the big questions."* Feeling somewhat dejected, I put it on a shelf and haven't done much with it, since. Of course, I've been busy working for churches and retreat centers, and haven't had much time to re-write my book. But, I've stewed on his words all these years and come to some realizations.

The first is that there are pre-conceived notions that come with whatever context in which one is a part. Like the story of the Aztecs, who could not see the ships on the ocean, because ships were outside of their experiences. I don't know if that is really a true story or not, but my point is that some live with a basic set of assumptions that feel like Truth to them. Here is a true story... When I was in a Hospital Chaplain internship

for a summer during my seminary years, I attended a retreat with my fellow students. We had to perform a skit, and one of my fellow students, wanting to be inclusive, suggested the Genesis story. The other UU and the Science of Mind practitioner and I all looked at each other, then back at her, somewhat stunned. I said, ever so gently, "*But, you see, that is a Judeo-Christian story, so it isn't very inclusive.*" She replied, "*It's about Creation and that includes everybody!*" Well, there you go! What can you say to a person wearing blinders?

Well, back to what I've learned since having my book so soundly disregarded by my Christian colleague and former professor. I've come to learn that the Religions of the Book, the Abrahamic traditions, have a

focus on **theodicy** (a word that is often explained with the phrase, *why bad things happen to good people*), as well as **soteriology** (which is about sin and salvation), and a morbid preoccupation with **eschatology** (regarding death, the afterlife and something called *The End Times*.) The UU, Pagan and Buddhist paths that I've explored were never preoccupied with those issues. We do not give much thought to evil, sin, or the trials and tribulations visited upon the likes of *Job*. In this way, Pagans, Buddhists and UUs are very much alike. So are the SBNRs and Nones, for that matter.

Since many or most of us do not believe in Armageddon, or that there is a divine entity expressing His wrath in our personal lives, or that every person born is inherently sinful, then it was no surprise that my

Christian professor could not relate to my book. The theologies that I explored and explained do not rest on those Abrahamic assumptions, the preoccupation of which overpowers anything that a Christian, Jew or Muslim has to say about theology, or even life. Yes, if you assume every person is sinful, then you must necessarily spend much thought as to why that is, and how to address the problem. With the professor's assumptions and preconceived notions, it is no wonder that he thought my book was a mile wide and an inch deep, not ready to answer the big questions. Because the Religions of the Book are completely focused on these questions, whereas non-Christians are prone to believe that what thing they so fear is not really a question to be answered, at all.

Many have been aware for some time now that the root of the SBNR movement to discard institutionalized religion is really a rebellion against dogma that paints humanity in a very bad light. Our Universalist forebears set out to address that very issue in early American history, claiming that God was a loving entity that would never damn His children to hell. Which was quite a departure from the Calvinism that was so prevalent at that point in American history! And, I believe that those Universalists were really reacting to the same problem that our modern *spiritual but not religious* folks are responding to... That is, finding a rosier outlook on life and discarding overly negative dogma.

My colleague whose book I've been responding to

today still speaks from her Biblically-based perspective. What she has to say is a good, solid message for her liberal Christian readers. I imagine that her works resonate deeply for many of them. But what about us? What about liberal spiritual people who do not believe that there is only one Source of All Truth? How do we answer the person who says, *you know... it's just that I'm really spiritual, just not religious?* Like that dichotomy is real. Everyone here understands the words *spiritual* and *religious* are synonyms, right? Therefore, the phrase, *spiritual but not religious*, is actually a false dichotomy.

But, let's set that aside and look at the underlying issue. People are seeking a spiritual path that lets them see life as it is, and lets them address the issues in their lives in some fashion that does not require what

psychologists call "magical thinking." We offer that in our UU churches; and, we offer something more. In addition to offering sacred space in which one is allowed to search for one's own truth, we also offer *community*. And that is the piece that is missing among the SBNR *individuals*. It is something that many such individuals notice over time, so they've been creating various non-church spiritual groups. Creating their own little communities, perhaps because no one told them about us!

So, this is our task, in this era of non-church-going people. We need not hide our light under a bushel. We have a saving message, *love*, and it is something that we share freely to those who come to our community seeking it. But, it's okay to reach out to those who are lost, who are seeking, and mention that this community

offers a place for seekers. It may not be the right place for every single person out there, but it will be the right place for some. We have something good in Unitarian Universalism, so I counsel that we not keep it to ourselves.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

BENEDICTION (SLT # 692)

*If, here, you have found freedom,
take it with you into the world.*

*If you have found comfort,
go and share it with others.*

*If you have dreamed dreams,
help one another,
that they may come true!*

*If you have known love,
give some back*

to a bruised and hurting world. - Lauralyn Bellamy

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!
