

Not All Those Who Wander Are Lost: The Practice of Spiritual Searching

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In the past -- and not far back in time -- religion was mostly a fixed feature of people's lives. By and large, we tended to practice the same faith tradition as our parents and relatively few people questioned what they had been taught to believe. Today, in contrast, recent data from the Pew Research Center indicates that an astounding 44 percent of all Americans have either switched their religious affiliation from the one they were born into, gone from being unaffiliated with any religion to joining a particular faith, or given up any connection with religious traditions altogether.

Interestingly, the majority of the people in the Pew study who identify with faith traditions that are different from those into which they were born also describe themselves as being "spiritual not religious." In a clever bit of wordsmithing, the Pew study's authors describe this portion of the population as America's "faithful unfaithful." Among the many things Americans are notoriously choosy about, it seems religion has become yet another of the many options people pursue in search of a richer, more meaningful life.

All of which also says there's a lot of religious questioning and ferment going on in America today. Not that any of this should be surprising to those of us here today. How many of you were either born into another faith tradition or had families which practiced no religious tradition at all? It seems many of us had to travel some spiritual distance to get here today.

I certainly number myself among the spiritual travelers here this afternoon. As many of you know, I was born into the Jewish heritage, a religious tradition I left as a teenager. I made a brief, unsuccessful attempt to embrace existentialism in my late teens. Yet, while I knew I couldn't accept any of the conventional ideas I'd been taught about God, I found that I still yearned for some kind of deeper spiritual awareness. I became interested in comparative religion and began to embrace teachings and perspectives from a range of faith traditions. If someone asked me in those days to describe my religious orientation, I'd say I was a spiritual seeker, a designation I still use today. Partly I was seeking a religious tradition I could whole-heartedly embrace. Partly I was seeking a kind of perennial wisdom underlying all religious traditions.

Then, as is true for many people, in my late-twenties and early thirties I more or less abandoned active spiritual searching as I focused time and energy on careers, relationships, and other mundane matters. That state of affairs continued more or less unchanged until I was in my late-thirties, when a series of painful life experiences reignited a desire for some sort of spiritual grounding.

Having decided that there was no one organized religious tradition I could wholeheartedly embrace, I began to evolve a personal form of spirituality. Like the established religions I'd studied for years, my spiritual framework included beliefs, symbols, and practices. Unlike traditional religion, however, mine came from a variety of sources, none of which I assumed to be true in any sort of absolute or universal sense. I only knew they felt deeply meaningful and relevant for me.

Until recently, I thought of this kind of do-it-yourself spirituality as an invention of the Baby Boomer generation. Often derided by modern critics as "religion a la carte" and "deli style spirituality," this kind of spiritual searching did not begin with the Boomers. According to Leigh Eric Schmidt, a distinguished religious studies professor at Princeton University, our fascination with spiritual searching actually dates back to the Transcendentalist movement in the mid-nineteenth century.

In a book entitled *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, Schmidt says it was Transcendentalists -- and early Unitarians -- like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Theodore Parker, and Margaret Fuller who first popularized the concept of spirituality as opposed to religion. They were also the first group of Americans to emphasize the importance of seeking direct, personal experience of God or the Holy. Equally importantly, says Schmidt, these men and women were the first Americans to step outside of the confines of Christianity in the course of their spiritual searching. In doing so, they opened American spirituality to a new kind of religious diversity and pluralism. Finding spirituality in solitude, in communion with nature, and through the cultivation of a mystical awareness of oneness were all innovative ideas the Transcendentalists brought to American religious life.

So it would appear that we UUs come by our interest in spiritual searching honestly. Indeed, it's bred into our very roots as a religious tradition. We can see it reflected today in the fourth of our common principles, the one in which we affirm and promote "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning."

That said, what does it mean to be a "spiritual seeker" particularly in the context of Unitarian Universalism as a religious tradition? For starters, I think it implies an openness to a wide range of spiritual experience and a deeply-rooted embracing of the value of spiritual pluralism and diversity. It requires a willingness to trust our lived experience of the sacred as it manifests in daily life. It fiercely relies on individual conscience as a guide in our searching and a firm commitment to question all external authority in spiritual matters. It means accepting the inherent complexity and paradoxical nature of all spiritual understanding. It requires finding or developing practical ways of manifesting the spiritual wisdom we encounter. Perhaps most challenging, being a spiritual seeker in the context of the UU tradition requires embracing doubt about whatever we believe to be true and meaningful. Finally, it means foregoing the safety and comfort of ever arriving at ultimate spiritual truth, that the search is one that must continue as long as we live.

Of course, all of this can also be done outside the context of Unitarian Universalism or any other form of organized religion. I know, because that's what I did for the majority of my adult life. I think that's the essence of what people mean when they say they're "spiritual but not religious." Clearly the intention of this designation is to separate spirituality from religion. I think it also often implies the idea that spirituality possesses a kind of moral or ethical superiority to religion. While I once would have blithely -- and sanctimoniously -- agreed with that sentiment, I'm no longer so sure of its truth.

Needless to say, one can become spiritually mature on one's own. And it is undoubtedly true that without a deep and ongoing commitment on the part of the individual seeker to grow and evolve, spiritual development ceases. That said, it can become very lonely on the spiritual journey without fellow-travelers. Moreover, without honest, loving interaction and feedback from fellow-seekers, the process of spiritual evolution can become an entirely internal process having no practical effect. And then there's the perpetual challenge of staying faithful to the process of spiritual searching. Seeking in the context of a community of seekers can provide encouragement when our commitment flags, as well as a kind of accountability for the outcome of our searching.

If we go back for a moment to the sort of demographic data I began with today, we can see some evidence of why spiritual seeking might benefit from being done in the context of a spiritual community. One of the more interesting findings of a major Gallop survey is that Americans' perceptions of their spirituality can differ significantly from the actual practice of their spirituality. According to that poll, 47 percent of Americans said they strongly agreed with the statement, "I am a person who is spiritually committed." When pressed for more information, however, only 13% of these people strongly agreed with a short list of indicators of what it actually might mean to be spiritually committed, including statements like:

- My faith is involved in every aspect of my life.
- I spend time in worship, prayer, or meditation every day.
- Because of my faith, I have forgiven people who have hurt me deeply.
- My faith has called me to develop my given strengths.

It seems to me that if the process of spiritual seeking doesn't lead to a greater commitment to spiritual practice, it truly *is* nothing more than a kind of spiritual naval-gazing. That said, if the process of genuine, lifelong spiritual seeking is more difficult when done entirely on one's own, it is even more challenging to convert that searching into life-altering ways of being by oneself. All of which means that we spiritual seekers are truly blessed to participate in a faith tradition that not only endorses spiritual seeking, but provides a context for sharing the fruits of our searching with each other and a world that desperately needs that wisdom.

The title of this homily is drawn from J.R.R. Tolkien's epic *The Lord of the Rings*. Like many famous quotations that find their way onto bumper stickers, Tolkien's pithy observation is both deceptively simple and deeply insightful. While some of us seem to know from an early age exactly what we want to be and what we believe, there are

others who spend much of their lives wandering on journeys of self-discovery. Indeed, even those who think they know who they are and what they believe often find themselves on quests to rediscover themselves, to uncover aspects of themselves of which they were unaware. And so, it's likely that at some point in our lives, we all will wander.

Perhaps this is why we often use words like "journey" and "quest" as metaphors for life. Another word that I find deeply symbolic of the process of spiritual seeking refers to an inherently religious activity, namely the idea of "pilgrimage." Unlike other kinds of journeys, pilgrimages are *always* undertaken for spiritual reasons, with the goal of the journey being the arrival at some place imbued with the presence of the Holy. Of course, as with most kinds of travel, we humans tend to focus on the destination rather than the often circuitous road that takes us there. Yet, as many pilgrims will attest, the wisdom one hoped to attain at the end of the journey is more likely to be discovered on the road than at the shrine. Perhaps this is because pilgrimages are as much about a journey within to our deepest selves as it is to some external holy place.

I recently saw a lovely film that deepened my appreciation for the idea of pilgrimage as a symbol for the spiritual quest. It's a movie called *The Way* and it concerns a pilgrimage from southern France to the famous shrine of Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain. The central character of the film, played by Martin Sheen, is a aging father whose son had accidentally perished in a freak snowstorm walking across the Pyrenees while making the pilgrimage. The father, who had been estranged for many years from his son, goes to France to collect his son's ashes. There, for reasons he cannot explain, this man who had been equally estranged from his own spiritual longing, spontaneously decides to undertake the arduous 500 mile pilgrimage himself. Initially he tells himself that he is doing it for his son, perhaps as kind of penance for the ways he had judged and withheld approval of his son's unconventional way of life. He also decides to spread his son's ashes along the way as a kind of homage to his son's spiritual quest.

Deeply grieving, Sheen's character seeks to walk the "camino" -- or "The Way," as the path to shrine of Santiago is called by pilgrims -- alone. It soon becomes clear, however, that this is not to be, as the father unwittingly begins to attract an unlikely assortment of fellow travelers. They include a pot-smoking Dutchman walking the camino to lose weight so his wife will desire him again, an angry Canadian woman escaping from the pain of an abusive relationship, and an Irishman who'd once dreamed of writing a great novel but who now writes trite articles for a travel magazine.

Much as the father tries to drive them away, this quartet of wounded souls find their paths inexplicably and inextricably intertwined. By the end of the film, each of them has found a kind of healing and wisdom they didn't know about at the start of the journey. Most importantly, much of what they discover on along the way they learn from and through each other. If that's not a metaphor for the process of spiritual seeking within the context of a spiritual community, I don't know what is.

So on this journey toward deeper and higher spiritual meaning, I'm grateful to have this band of fellow pilgrims we call the Live Oak Fellowship. And may we always remember that, while we may travel down different roads to that holy place that resides within each of us, there's no reason to assume any of us are lost.

Blessed be. Amen.