

**March 16 2008 Sermon**

**Understanding Spirituality  
By Anne Treadwell**

Back in January, when we were confirming arrangements for me to be here today, I asked Susan Stephen if she had any suggestions for an appropriate topic, and she told me there had been some requests for sermons on “*dealing with life's challenges through spiritual understanding*”. Well, I’m not totally confident in my ability to deal with life’s challenges. But I do think that our sense of meaning and connectedness in our lives, which is the closest I can come to describing spirituality, is well worth exploring and does indeed affect how we face whatever life throws us.

When I first spoke on a topic similar to this, it was almost 15 years ago, in the small rural congregation of Olinda in south west Ontario, and I started out by saying,

*Today I want to explore with you a way of thinking which is fast becoming a major influence among UUs as well as among more traditionally religious people. It's sometimes called "New Age Thinking" or "Creation Spirituality" or "Paganism" or "the religion of the Great Goddess", according to which aspect of it is being emphasized. I'm calling it collectively "the new spirituality" because I think there's a single theme running through the various emphases -- through feminist theology and wicca (the religion of the witches) and even through such far-out ideas as crystal gazing and past-life regressions, or polytheism, a belief in many gods. The new spirituality is full of the idea of connectedness -- between body and spirit, between earth and humans, this life and previous lives, animals and people, words and actions, dreams and reality. The fundamental concept underlying it all is that a transcendent spirit is inherent in all things.*

Fifteen years on – half a generation later -- “New Age” seems rather old, but there’s no doubt that some of its elements, such as Creation Spirituality, paganism, goddess worship, and feminist theology, have had a huge effect on Unitarian Universalism as well as on mainstream religion, and continue to be important in the life of many UU congregations and individuals. I suggest that this is because such ways of

being religious represent the recovery of a vital element of being human that has become somewhat obscured in our increasingly technological world.

In our everyday thinking, we tend to split reality into the material and the spiritual - we tend to be dualistic. This reflects a fairly modern, and mostly western, convention. Our long-ago ancestors believed that one or more spirits pervaded everything – every **thing** in nature. In many parts of the world, and among the native peoples of our own continent, such beliefs are taken for granted as reflecting reality, and the experience and wisdom of many millions of people seem to confirm rather than contradict these ways of looking at things. Those of us who've made a distinction between body and spirit, material and spiritual, are probably still in a minority, although our ideas have become dominant in the technological world of today. It's ironic that traditional Christianity and rational humanism have made essentially the same split in reality, but while Christianity has valued the spiritual and downgraded the so-called natural world of bodies and things, rationalists have downgraded or denied the existence of the spiritual.

The time we live in is not the first period of questioning the dualistic, split view of the world. Let me recall for us a little bit of the spirituality which is older than Christianity, but which has been revived by Christians and others at various times, especially in what was called the Romantic movement which began about two hundred years ago. It can be found in a multitude of places, including the old stories which tells us that when the world began, everything that was made, including human beings -- the whole of creation -- was very good. It was imbued with the divine spirit and purpose, and it was all inter-related. It's this faith in the goodness and connectedness of nature which many thinkers are trying to recover for present-day religion. There's a strong movement within mainstream faith traditions, as well as our own, which wants to return to the pre-Christian belief that there is divine spirit not just over and above nature but actually **within it**.

You may have heard of Starhawk, the name adopted by a Jewish woman who joined and has greatly influenced the contemporary form of the ancient religion of Wicca, or witchcraft. In her book [The Spiral Dance](#), Starhawk reminds us that,

*The Old Religion, as we call it, is ..... not based on dogma or a set of beliefs, nor on scriptures or a sacred book revealed by a great man.*

*Witchcraft takes its teachings from nature, and reads inspiration in the movements of the sun, moon, and stars, the flight of birds, the slow growth of trees, and the cycles of the seasons.*

Many UUs find Wicca surprisingly compatible with our Unitarian Universalist outlook, as it describes the first source of our faith (in the statement which accompanies our UU Principles), **that is, *direct experience of the world around us***, as a more reliable teacher than books or institutions or doctrines or leaders. We associate witchcraft with magic and mystery, and indeed belief in the mysterious and magical powers of nature are basic to Wicca and Paganism. But Starhawk points out that **magic** is the word we use for whatever goes beyond our understanding, and that in some ways we all believe in magic. She writes,

*Witchcraft has always been a religion of poetry, not theology. The myths, legends, and teachings are recognized as metaphors for "That-Which-Cannot-Be-Told," the absolute reality our limited minds can never completely know. The mysteries of the absolute can never be explained -- only felt or intuited. Symbols and ritual acts are used to trigger altered states of awareness, in which insights that go beyond words are revealed. When we speak of "the secrets that cannot be told," we do not mean merely that rules prevent us from speaking freely. We mean that the inner knowledge **literally** cannot be expressed in words. It can only **be conveyed by experience**, and no one can legislate what insight another person may draw from any given experience.*

This kind of spirituality is one of feeling and intuition rather than of rationalism, and it's no coincidence that Starhawk likens it to poetry. The English poets of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries rebelled against the rationalism which they'd been living with since the Reformation and the beginnings of modern science, and they wrote passionately about the need to discover again the mysterious and divine within the natural world. Here's something a few of you may recognize:

*..... I have learned  
To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes  
The still, sad music of humanity,  
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:*

*A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.*

That's William Wordsworth, writing in 1798. And not only did he have this sense of oneness with the life-force as he saw it in nature, but also a sense of oneness with the past and the future. I don't know how Wordsworth would have reacted to the idea of specific past lives, but he certainly believed in **one** past life, one spiritual origin that we all have and that we bring with us into this world. Plato and other Greek philosophers, much earlier, were among those who believed it, but this faith in our spiritual connections transcending space and time had been largely forgotten by the time Wordsworth and his fellow Romantics came on the scene.

Coleridge, another of the Romantic poets, was for a while a devoted Unitarian, but he later rejected the Unitarian movement as not spiritual enough. He compared Unitarianism to "*moonlight*"; that is, it provided light but no warmth. And he wasn't the only one. Perhaps the most famous Unitarian of all time, Ralph Waldo Emerson, left the Unitarian ministry partly because the Unitarian outlook, he said, "*... is cold & cheerless, the mere creature of the [intellect], until controversy makes it warm with fire got from below.*" Listen to this passage, from his essay on "**Nature**", written about 1835:

*As a plant upon the earth, so we rest upon the bosom of God; we are nourished by unfailing fountains, and draw at our need inexhaustible power. Who can set bounds to the possibilities of human beings? ..... I have access to the entire mind of the Creator, myself the creator in the finite. This view, which admonishes me where the sources of wisdom and power lie, ..... animates me to create my own world through the purification of my soul.*

This kind of spirituality is not simply a view of the world, but a way of being in the world, always aware of wisdom and power beyond ourselves and the possibility of creating ourselves afresh. It's certainly not a cold and cheerless intellectual view!

But what does this mean in practice, you're probably asking, just like the person who asked for this talk. And like the true UU that I am, I answer that it means as many different things as there are individuals. Not for everyone the ritual dance naked in the moonlight, or the crystal gazing, or the past life regression. But for everyone, Starhawk would say, **some** form of magic is appropriate. She explains,

*Magic -- and among its branches I include psychology as it purports to describe and change consciousness -- is an art. .... The concepts of Freud, Jung, Melanie Klein, and Siberian shamanism can all aid healing or perpetuate sickness, depending on how they are applied.*

*Magical systems are highly elaborated metaphors, not [facts]. When we say "There are twelve signs in the Zodiac," what we really mean is "we will view the infinite variety of human characteristics through this mental screen, because with it we can gain insights"; just as when we say "there are eight notes in the musical scale," we mean that out of all the possible range and variations of sounds, we will focus on those that fall into these particular relationships, because by doing so we can make music. .... The value of magical metaphors is that through them we ..... **connect with larger forces; we partake of the elements, the cosmic process, the movements of the stars.***

This is the kind of magic which the spirituality I'm describing is about: the magic of connecting with larger forces and partaking of the cosmic process. It teaches us that we're deeply involved with nature, one with it, not apart from it -- and here it encounters eastern philosophy and religion. As Starhawk again reminds us,

*..... Eastern religions offer a radically different approach to spirituality than Judeo-Christian traditions..... The image of God is not the anthropomorphic, bearded God-Father in the sky -- but the ....., unknowable ground of consciousness itself, the void, the Tao, the flow. Their goal is not to know God, but to **be** God.*

Most **Christians** who're attracted to spirituality wouldn't go quite as far as this, although some do and get into trouble with the authorities for daring to suggest that not only are we one with nature but **one with God** -- a concept which is anathema to most Muslims and Jews, among others. The Jesuit scientist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, writing in the 1950s, was not too popular with his superiors when he described the evolution of the universe from a geosphere of rocks and inanimate matter to a biosphere of living organisms to a "noosphere" of conscious and self-conscious beings to the final "*Omega point*" of the whole world's oneness with Christ. This might be the ultimate **Universalist** faith -- not only universal salvation but universal divinity! It's a faith in the interdependent web of existence; it's the conviction that we are called not only to love one another but all creatures, the earth and the universe itself, **as ourselves**, because we

are part and parcel of one another. As the Opening Words Margaret read earlier reminded us, we come here to affirm

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

“Only connect” said E.M. Forster, and I believe that’s what spirituality is about and how it can help us. Just this week, a friend sent me an article from the Guardian newspaper in England, written a couple of years ago by a self-described non-spiritual atheist, Roy Hattersley. I’ve adapted it very slightly, but here is the gist, and I think it speaks to the question of how spirituality can help us meet the world’s challenges, **which may not be separate from our own:**

*The Salvation Army has been given a special status as provider-in-chief of American ... relief [work of various kinds]. But its work is being augmented by all sorts of other groups. Almost all of them have a [religious] origin and character. Notable by their absence are teams from rationalist societies, free thinkers' clubs and atheists' associations - the sort of people who not only scoff at religion's intellectual absurdity but also regard it as a positive force for evil.*

*The arguments against religion are well known and persuasive. .... Yet [spiritually believing] men and women ..... are the people most likely to take the risks and make the sacrifices involved in helping others. Last week a middle-ranking officer of the Salvation Army, who gave up a well-paid job to devote his life to the poor, attempted to convince me that homosexuality is a [grievous] sin. Late at night, on the streets....., that man offers friendship as well as help to the ..... human beings who exist just outside the boundaries of our society. And he does what he believes to be his [spiritual] duty without the slightest suggestion of disapproval. Yet, for much of his time, he is meeting needs that result from conduct he regards as intrinsically wicked.*

*[Spiritual believers] are the men and women most willing to change the fetid bandages, replace the sodden sleeping bags ..... Good works, John Wesley insisted, are no guarantee of a place in heaven. But they are most likely to be performed by people who believe that [a spiritual world] exists.*

*The correlation is so clear that it is impossible to doubt that faith and charity go hand in hand. The close relationship may have something to do with the belief that we are all God's children, or it may be the result of a primitive conviction that ... it is prudent to be recorded ... as "one who loves his fellow [beings]". Whatever the reason, [spiritual] believers answer the call .....*

*..... [Religious teaching] is so full of contradictions that we can accept or reject its moral advice according to taste. Yet men and women who, like me, cannot accept **the mysteries and the miracles** do not [generally] go out with the Salvation Army at night. .... The*

*truth may make us free. But it has not made us as [altruistic] as the average captain in the Salvation Army.*

As Unitarian Universalist educator Sophia Lyon Fahs said: ***“It matters what we believe. ... Some beliefs..... lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies.”***

***“How can spirituality help us with life’s challenges?”*** Spirituality can give us the courage and the motivation which we so urgently need in times of turbulence and fear and disaster – the courage and motivation which come from connection rather than isolation. It can help us live up to that old verse which says: *“Life is full of froth and bubble;/ Two things stand alone: / Kindness in another’s trouble, / And courage in your own.* In Wayne Arnason’s words with which I’ll end this reflection:

*Take courage, friends:*

*The way is often hard, the path is never clear, and the stakes are very high.*

*Take courage.*

*For, deep down, there is another truth:*

***You are not alone.***

**You are not alone.**

.....