

# Spirituality Without God

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*A Sermon Preached at the First Unitarian Church Of Albuquerque, New Mexico  
By Christine Robinson February 19, 2017*

There are some people that define spirituality as a felt relationship with God. That's not a bad definition, but it is a limited one, even if you believe in God, which a lot of people here don't, or don't believe in the sort of God a person can have a relationship with.

Which is why we, who honor the importance of the individual search for truth and meaning, define spirituality as the depth dimension of life. It is the part of life where meaning comes from, where the "why" questions come from, where Love lives. If we are looking for God, we go in that direction, but we also go there looking for peace, for acceptance, for our place in the universe, for a sense that our lives have meaning and our actions have worth. We look deep for a sense of connections, for compassion, for the strength to live up to our moral values. There's depth of life available for every human being and spirituality and spiritual practices to fit every kind of belief about the meaning of life.

In this age when lots of people are saying that they are "spiritual but not religious..." meaning that they do feel some relationship to God or do experience a sense of awe, or do feel deeply connected to their moral values, but that they don't go for the trappings of religiousness, like worship services, or church programs, we, who do like and support our version of those things have to say something else. You can't really claim to be spiritual but not religious if you regularly attend, belong to, and contribute to a church, after all! I like to think of us as Spiritual and Religious but not Dogmatic. And when I say "dogmatic" I get this wonderful picture of a snarling bulldog in my mind's eye...surrounded by a "not" sign.

Every once in a while we survey the congregation about their beliefs, spirituality and practices. In the past this congregation, like most UU congregations, has found itself to have three main theological groupings. Roughly 1/3 of the congregation has no use for God, goddess, the divine. They are focused on this life, this world, on justice, a good life for all people. Some of these folks call themselves atheists: they don't believe in God. Some call themselves agnostics, meaning they don't know for sure, but in their day to day life, they are not particularly interested, not seeking, not inclined to pray even in hard times. Some of our "no use for God" group thinks of themselves as Humanists...as focused positively on the creative potential of humanity and the need to work for a world in which that creativity and potential can thrive, learn, solve problems, and advance.

Another third of the congregation, more or less, does believe in a traditional sort of divinity; one you can relate to, who loves us, and who might help us if we ask. A few of these think of themselves actively as liberal Christians; as followers of the teachings of Jesus, especially those embodying his radical love of neighbor, self, and God. Another group...larger, have found the Goddess in their lives. They think of themselves as pagans and are often focused on the natural world rather than the human world. A larger group yet in this subset of UU's are people who believe in some kind of God or Loving presence in the universe but who are not specifically drawn to Jesus or Christianity.

In the middle, another more or less third of the congregation, are folks who Think of themselves as agnostic...as not knowing...but they lean towards believing in some kind of a divine force in the world,

and those who do believe in God but define that God in abstract, rather than personal terms. God as the creative force in the universe, for instance, or as the originating spark of consciousness in the universe, as their higher power, as the 12-step people say, the source of morality or the ground of our being.

The search committee you elected a couple of weeks ago is about to do it again. We have to know who we are, after all, before we can say what kind of a senior minister we want after I retire, and anyone applying for the job, starting with Angela, who is our inside candidate at the moment, will want to know the same thing. You'll hear more about all that in a few minutes.

It matters what we believe, and the intellectual and heart felt search for beliefs that work for us in our lives is an important spiritual practice which we support in this church...we have to because we don't have the dogma that tells you what is true that you must accept or else. We put our faith in you and offer you tools and conversations to help you figure out what you believe.

And while it matters what we believe, it matters more what we do with what we believe. Whether you believe that every person is a child of God and deserves to be treated decently or that every person has worth and dignity because they are human beings and deserves to be treated decently, the important thing is that you train yourself to treat other people decently, after all. Whether or not you quiet yourself to pray to a God who will give you peace or quiet yourself to experience the peacefulness of deep breathing and soft eyes, you will be profoundly helped by your practice. Whether your spiritual practice is to love your neighbor as yourself because that is what Jesus recommends or your spiritual practice is service to humanity because that is what your Humanism suggests to you, the result will be the same.

And that gets us into the realm of spirituality and spiritual practice.

If spirituality is about the depth of life, then Spiritual Practice is anything we do to cultivate our awareness of that dimension. It is becoming aware of and using the states of mind and heart that will help you find depth and meaning, love, purpose, and peace. The human race has come up with a myriad of spiritual practices because people are very different. Sometimes we imagine spirituality as praying on our knees (ouch) or meditating in lotus position (double ouch), but not only can you meditate or pray in a chair, you can do so standing, moving, or lying down. There are spiritual practices for that involve reading, writing, art, and serving others. If you think you don't have a spiritual practice, think again! You are here! For most of you here, you either have decided to or are thinking of making a spiritual practice of attending the worship service...because you hope that will deepen your life, teach you something new, be an experience of peace and renewal. Right?

Spirituality is NOT spiritualism: that is communication with the dead. Like marry with a A means to wed and merry with an E means to be happy, the words spirituality and spiritualism are sort of related but simply do not mean the same thing.

Spirituality is also not piety, a word which describes, usually with a tint of disapproval, a life which is completely focused on devotion and duty to god. Piety is one kind of spirituality. Religiosity is yet another spirituality with a negative cast; it describes a piety and religious zeal which is either faked or a product of mental illness. Here we try to avoid both.

Lots of misunderstandings around this word, no doubt about that. You might ask why we have to use it at all, and the answer is two-fold. First of all, there is no other word which encompasses the search for depth broadly enough to cover the expansive freedom we offer in Unitarian Universalism. The second reason is that that's the word the culture is using and our refusal to use it too would only isolate us...and frankly, that's a luxury we can't afford in these days of shrinking interest in congregations. Instead we are going to define it our way: expansively and inclusively. Unitarian Universalist spirituality has space in it for all manner of believers, all kinds of bodies and even all kinds of psychology. We serve diversity here: all kinds. That's the way we are.

Alain de Botton is an atheist. He has no use whatsoever for the supernatural as it is explained by the religions. However he has a certain appreciation for the unintended consequences of religion and worries that without religious institutions, the civitas will be poorer, and people less wise. He wrote a book called *Religion for atheists*, and in it he has an interesting comment about the fruits of spirituality.

“We invented religions to serve two central needs which continue to this day and which secular society has not been able to solve with any particular skill: first, the need to live together in communities in harmony, despite our deeply rooted selfish and violent impulses. And second, the need to cope with terrifying degrees of pain which arise from our vulnerability to professional failure, to troubled relationships, to the death of loved ones and to our decay and demise.”<sup>1</sup>

So, what kinds of spiritual practices and observances actually help us with pain, vulnerability, grief, and our knowledge that we will die? What kinds of practices enable us to live peacefully with others and keep a reign on our selfish and angry impulses? Perhaps de Botton didn't mention developing peace of mind because he knows that there are a variety of secular philosophies which encourage this...often using techniques which are strikingly like meditation and owe a lot to the careful study of humanity by centuries of Buddhist teachers. Anyway, if we want to live well and deeply, what should we do and how can a religion-without-dogma help?

With no dogma, we are free to honor the religions of the word in all their glorious diversity, as well as spiritual quest and spiritual practices which come to us from philosophy, humanism, and atheism. We are also free to honor the ways that people are different...and the fact that different spiritual practices appeal to different kinds of people is well known to most of the world's religions. Most of the world's larger faiths recognize that people are different, have different gifts and experience the Holy, or express their spirituality in different ways and need different practices. There are different kinds of Yoga in Hinduism, different gifts of the spirit in Christianity, Catholic religious orders for those whose call is to serve the people and for those whose call is to pray without ceasing. In the end, most of these schemes are variations on a scheme of four spiritual paths: the path of the mind, the path of the heart, the path of mysticism, and the path of service.

For most UU's, the most congenial task of Spiritual development is the formation of beliefs that we find comforting and challenging as we live our lives. Everybody does it. Even people who say that they believe “nothing” actually have lots of beliefs. They believe that there is no afterlife; that this life is all we have. They believe that we humans are on our own in the universe, that there is no divine force or love or morality. We have to work these things out for ourselves. We all have beliefs and live our lives by precepts which we cannot prove.

The development of a belief system is a practice of the intellect. We read, we discuss, we hear what others have to say and puzzle out what we believe. In a “Spritual but not Dogmatic” church, we honor this spiritual path and we don’t fence it around with things that you have to believe.

Secondly, there are spiritual practices which help us develop compassion. The Buddhists have a wonderful guided meditation we do sometimes to this end. Every week in this service we bring to mind those who are hurting in some way and name them aloud or in our hearts. Some sermons and forums aim to teach us about the plight of other beings, including animal beings, including the planet, so that our hearts can be softened to others. Covenant Groups are our main program for helping us explore the path of the heart, and they offer a unique kind of open-hearted listening which helps us to be compassionate to others and to ourselves. If you are interested in this, make time in your life for these bi-weekly groups which begin in October each year.

Thirdly the path of mysticism, often the Road Not Taken by UU’s, but we have our mystics. if you can fall into a sense of awe and unity stroking your dog or hiking in beautiful landscapes or gazing at a baby, then you have at least a little mystical bone in your body. These times of insight and unity are usually quite brief, but they shimmer in the story of our lives. These experiences sometimes change what we believe, which sends us back to the path of intellect, and they sometimes open our hearts to new realities or different people, which circles us back to paths of love and service. Mystics are the suspect class in most dogmatic traditions, because the truths which come to us in such experiences are so powerful, and when they go against dogma, this causes trouble. But not here! Some people are motivated to do what it takes to have these experiences more often. Learning the skills of meditation that help us quiet our minds helps, but these experiences seem to mostly be gifts rather than achievements; they come in their own sweet way and mostly our task is to remember them, which is surprisingly hard, and cherish them.

Finally the time-honored spiritual path of service, which is another way of developing and expressing compassion and connection with the world. Whether you have developed the spiritual discipline of emptying your coin purse into the offering plate every week....no matter how many quarters there are, or teaching RE tutoring neighborhood children or bring canned goods for the food pantry or even volunteer in the political realm, service to others is a spirituality which stretches us, teaches us, and sometimes even offers us that wonderful experience of oneness. We have an abundance of ways you can get involved in these kinds of projects; this kind of spirituality is the kind that Unitarian Universalism has most fully developed. But, we are not the only ones! Hafiz, the medieval Islamic Poet wrote this classic encounter between the path of mysticism and the path of service:

Once a man came to me and spoke for hours about  
“His great visions of God” he felt he was having.

He asked me for confirmation, saying,  
“Are these wondrous dreams true?”

I replied, “How many goats do you have?”

He looked surprised and said,  
“I am speaking of sublime visions  
And you ask  
About goats!”

And I spoke again saying,  
“Yes, brother—how many do you have?”

“Well, Hafiz, I have sixty-two.”

“And how many wives?”  
Again he looked surprised, then said,  
“Four.”

“How many rose bushes in your garden,  
How many children,  
Are your parents still alive,  
Do you feed the birds in winter?”

And to all he answered,

Then I said,  
“You asked me if I thought your visions were true  
I would say that they were if they made you become  
More human  
More kind to every creature and plant  
that you know.

People are different, and our lives take different turns. The intellectual quest for belief morphs into a passion for a better world, a surprise and perhaps even unwelcome mystical experience forces us to re-visit what we believe and turns us to meditation and prayer. The path of service wears our hearts and hands to nubs and we need to seek inwardness for a while before we can serve again.

We UU's, usually rational by bent of mind, often not believing in a traditional sort of god, still have spiritual life; are still in touch with the depths and meanings of life, still contemplate the mysteries of death, beauty and goodness. We do sometimes tend to neglect the solo work, and so I urge you to walk in the desert, sit every morning with your coffee and practice your soft eyes, or empty your thoughts or just watch the birds, do you yoga not just because it is good for your body but because it can quiet your mind, and if Yoga seems too strenuous our you feel too inflexible, Tai Chi is the practice of choice of millions of Chinese people for good reason. Just church is probably not enough for the well-developed spiritual life, so keep experimenting until you find a balance that works for you.

And rest assured that whatever you find that works for you is ok with us. No dogma. Just a variety of paths to peace, self-acceptance, compassion, and oneness. Blessed Be.

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<sup>i</sup> Religion for Atheists: A Non-believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion (Alain De Botton)