

## **Long Strange Trip**

### **The Rev. Meredith Garmon**

In 2003, I was a 44-year-old ministerial intern, preparing for a second career as a minister.

The first career, teaching philosophy, had been fun, but I was looking for something where I wouldn't have to grade your papers.

Now I'm 58.

A lot happens in 14 years.

This place is different.

I'm different.

A lot of you, I'm sure were not a part of this church 14 years ago.

How many of you were around when I was an intern here?

I had a lot to work on during my internship with you, and I've had a lot to work on since.

You all have obviously been doing a lot of work, too.

One of my projects was essentially assigned to me by an entity known as the Midwest Regional Subcommittee on Candidacy.

The path to professional ministry, you see, is gaily strewn with committees!

Shortly before beginning the internship, while I was a divinity student, I had been to see this Midwest Regional Subcommittee on Candidacy.

Their job was to determine whether my aspirations to be a minister should be encouraged or discouraged.

"Do you have a spiritual practice?" the committee asked me.

Before starting seminary, I had spent two years as the congregational facilitator and preacher for the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clarksville, Tennessee.

Before that, I'd served as a president of our Fellowship in Waco, Texas, as Vice President of our church in Charlottesville, Virginia and had worked as the church secretary for a year at our Nashville, Tennessee church.

But did I have a spiritual practice?

I was a born-and-raised Unitarian Universalist.

I had a Ph.D.

I'd been a university professor of philosophy for four years.

I could debate about metaphysics, metaethics, metatheology, poststructuralism, postindustrialism, and postmodernism.

If it was meta-, or post-, I was all over it.

But did I have a spiritual practice?

Well, no, I didn't.

“Get a spiritual practice,” the committee told me.

As the first-born child of rationalist humanist academic parents who had grown up and gone into the family business of being a rationalist humanist academic, the notion of spiritual practice was almost but not quite entirely novel.

I had declared myself an atheist in fourth-grade – which scandalized my classmates – and I wasn't even one of these modern “spiritual atheists” exemplified in today's reading.

No, as a child and teen-ager, and on through graduate school, I was the old-fashioned kind of atheist.

I didn't go for “spirituality” – did not use that word for my experiences.

Nor did I think in terms of sacred, divine, transcendent.

Wasn't so keen on awe, mystery, or wonder either.

But the inchoate sense that something I could not name was missing from my life had begun to grow, and by the time the Midwest Regional

Subcommittee on Candidacy spoke unto me, I was ready to take their instruction to heart.

I would try this thing called spiritual practice.

When I showed up here 14 years ago, I had that to work on.

I had a number of other things to also work on, but that's one I'm still working on.

And as a preacher, my mind has been recurrently engaged through the years with the question of how to explain spirituality to Unitarian Universalists.

I have noticed that a lot more of us need a lot less explaining about this than, say, my parents' generation did – or, for that matter, than I did 14 years ago – but just in case I'm not the only one still working on this, let me offer what I got.

So what I want to tell you this morning is how I learned to stop worrying and love spirituality.

You might remember Stanley Kubrick's 1964 movie, "Dr. Strangelove," with the subtitle "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb."

Spirituality is sometimes like a bomb – or rather life sometimes hits like a bomb, and spirituality is about being present to it – loving it.

The world as we have known it can blow up at any moment: the loss of a loved one, traumatic tragedy.

Life also explodes in beauty: the birth of a child, the arrival of spring, an act of kindness.

How can one stop worrying and learn to love the bombs we have feared?

How do we stop worrying and love: everything; even the hard parts?

It calls for development of such virtues as equanimity and compassion.

Those, I can now tell you, are spiritual virtues – and even if they are entirely a matter of neurons being wired a certain way, the circuitry of spirituality draws on but is different from purely cognitive intelligence – draws on but is different from the emotional circuitry.

Native disposition – genetics – accounts for some of a person’s spiritual virtue.

Can you cultivate the spiritual virtues beyond your native disposition?

Maybe. Sort of.

Spirituality encompasses transcendent love, inner peace, “all-right-ness,” acceptance, awe, beauty, wonder, humility, gratitude, a freshness of experience;

a feeling of plenitude, abundance, and deep simplicity of all things;

what Sigmund Freud called “the oceanic feeling, . . . a sense of indissoluble union with the great All, and of belonging to the universal.”

In moments of heightened spiritual experience, the gap between self and world vanishes.

The normal experience of time leaves us, and each moment has a quality of the eternal in it.

Symptoms of developing spirituality include:

increased tendency to let things happen rather than make them happen;

more frequent attacks of smiling from the heart;

more frequent feelings of being connected with others and nature;

more frequent episodes of overwhelming appreciation;

decisions flow more from intention or spontaneity and less from fears based on past experience;

greater ability to enjoy each moment;

decreased worrying;

decreased interest in conflict, in interpreting the actions of others, in judging others, and in judging self;  
increased nonjudgmental curiosity;  
increased capacity to love without expecting anything in return;  
increased receptivity to kindness offered and increased interest in extending kindness to others;  
a capacity, sometimes, to transcend the ego defense mechanisms by which most of us spend our lives governed.

As I pursued this work, my scholarly bent did not disappear, so I was intrigued to learn about the work of Psychologist Robert Cloninger, who sought a way to define spirituality more definitely, empirically, and measurably.

He developed a 240-item questionnaire called the "Temperament and Character Inventory," includes spirituality (he calls it self-transcendence), as one of the dimensions of character.

As Cloninger measures it, spirituality is the sum of three subscales: self-forgetfulness; transpersonal identification; and acceptance.

First, self-forgetfulness.

This is the proclivity for becoming so immersed in an activity that the boundary between self and other seems to fall away.

Whether the activity is sports, painting, playing a musical instrument, we might sometimes lose ourselves in it, and the sense of being a separate independent self takes a vacation.

Second, transpersonal identification.

This is recognizing oneself in others -- and others in oneself. If you have ever found yourself looking at another person -- or another being -- with a feeling that you are that other, their body embodies you -- or if you have

looked at yourself with a sense that your being embodies others -- then you have experienced transpersonal identification.

Spirituality involves connecting with the world's suffering and apprehending that suffering as our very own.

Transpersonal identification goes beyond "there but for the grace of God go I."

It's not that grace saves you from the unfortunate circumstances others endure.

Nothing saves you because, in fact, you are not saved from those circumstances.

If anyone is hungry or hurting, then you are hungry and hurting, for the suffering are you.

That's transpersonal identification.

Third, acceptance.

This is the ability to accept and affirm reality just as it is, even the hard parts, even the painful and tragic parts.

Spiritually mature people are in touch with the suffering of the world, yet also and simultaneously feel joy in that connection.

"Acceptance" does not mean complacency about oppression, injustice and harm.

Indeed, the spiritually mature are also often the most active and the most effective in working for peace and social justice.

They are energized to sustain that work because they can accept reality just as it is, even as they also work to change it.

Because they find joy in each present moment, they avoid recrimination and blame, seeing that blame merely recapitulates the very reactivity that is at the root of oppression.

So.

Add together your scores for self-forgetfulness, transpersonal identification, and acceptance. The sum is your spirituality score, neatly quantified for you by Dr. Robert Cloninger.

Here's the thing, though.

It's not a matter of will.

It's not a matter of volition.

It's not a matter of weighing the pros and cons and making a decision.

You can't decide to be more spiritual or more spiritually mature.

If you are low in spirituality -- that is, as Cloninger finds, you are practical, self-conscious, materialistic, controlling, characterized by rational objectivity and material success -- you can't wake up one morning and decide you are no longer going to be that way.

It's who you are, and your own rational objectivity will very sensibly point out to you that you don't even know what it would mean to not be that way.

What you can decide, what is a matter of will and volition, is whether to take up a certain kind of discipline called a spiritual practice -- and just see where it takes you.

I know that these days all kinds of things get called a spiritual practice.

Since the days when this spiritual practice thing started getting enough attention that Unitarian subcommittees would ask ministerial aspirants about it, I have heard all kinds of things called a spiritual practice.

I heard one UU say that the way she got dressed in the morning was her spiritual practice.

When I was your intern, Christine once gave me a small gift: a button that said, "Book buying is a spiritual practice" -- which was gratifying because I do like to buy books.

I'm not saying that those things can't be spiritual practices, but I do believe we're missing something crucial if we fail to distinguish between a spiritual practice and just something you do.

Quilting, piano-playing, or hiking might or might not qualify as spiritual practice – that is, might or might not tend to produce the symptoms of developing spirituality.

An activity is more likely to work as spiritual practice if you seriously treat it as one.

First, engage the activity with mindfulness -- focusing on the activity as you do it, with sharp awareness of each present moment.

Second, engage the activity with intention of thereby cultivating spiritual development – reflecting as you do the activity (or just before and just after) on your intention to manifest those symptoms of spiritual development in your life.

Third, sometimes engage the activity with a group that gathers expressly to do the activity in a way that cultivates spirituality – sharing each other's spiritual reflections before, during, or after doing the activity together.

Last -- and most of all -- it requires establishing a foundation of spiritual openness.

There are three basic daily practices for everyone that over time develop a foundation upon which some other practice can grow into a real spiritual practice.

Silence. 15 minutes a day being still and quiet, just bringing attention to your own amazing breathing.

Journaling. 15 minutes a day writing about your gratitudes, your highest hopes and your experiences of awe.

Study. 15 minutes a day reading “wisdom literature” – the essays of Pema Chodron or Thomas Merton, the poems of Rumi or Mary Oliver, the Dao de Jing, the Bible’s book of Psalms – just to mention a very few examples of wisdom literature.

With these three daily practices building your foundation of spiritual awareness, then gardening, yoga, or throwing pottery are much better positioned to truly be spiritual practices for you.

Suppose you got serious about maintaining a spiritual discipline.

You engage your practice daily; you do it mindfully, you do it with intention to cultivate compassion, connection, nonjudgmental curiosity -- self-forgetfulness, transpersonal identification, and acceptance; you get together regularly with a group that helps you maintain and explore the spiritual focus of your practice, and you develop your base with daily silence, journaling, and study.

What then?

What will happen?

If you do everything to ensure that your practice is a true, bona fide spiritual practice, and you do that spiritual practice long enough – every day for a year, or 10 years, or 30 years – will you then exude equanimity and compassion while unperturbable calm inner peace and beauty continuously manifests as you gracefully, lovingly flow through your life? Maybe.

It could happen.

No guarantees, though.

Spirituality, as I mentioned, is not a matter of will.

Strong muscles aren’t either.

That is, you can’t just decide to bench press 500 pounds, and then go do it.

But at least with muscles, there's a fairly predictable timeline by which exercise increases strength.

If you have a normal physiology, and you adopt a regimen of exercise, and stick to it, then you will get stronger.

There's a smooth curve by which you'll progress toward the limit to which that regimen can take you.

Spiritual strengthening doesn't go like that.

It's not a reliable product of putting in the time doing the exercise.

The spirit has its own schedule.

Committed serious spiritual practitioners can go for years when their practice just seems void and useless.

Then they can hit a patch where they actually seem to be regressing.

They're acting as cranky, unkind, disconnected -- as withdrawn, on the one hand, or as controlling, on the other -- as they ever had before they started any spiritual practice.

There is no smooth curve of progress.

I started my primary spiritual practice for the worst reason: because an authority told me to.

The Midwest Regional Subcommittee on Candidacy decreed, and I set out to comply.

It is contradictory to take up a path of self-acceptance and trusting in my own inner wisdom because an outside authority told me to.

Yet that's what I did.

It is contradictory to judge myself for judging myself too much.

Yet that's what I did, and still do, albeit somewhat more gently.

Usually.

I've now had a chance to talk with a number of people on a path of serious spiritual practice.

All of us, or so it seems, began, as I did, in some form of contradiction.

We felt broken, wrong, inadequate, and we thought spiritual practice would fix us.

But spiritual practice isn't about fixing anything – which is why there's no smooth curve toward becoming fixed.

Spiritual awakening is about realizing that we aren't broke and don't need fixing.

We aren't broken and from the beginning never have been.

It's hard to really believe that we are not broken and don't need fixing.

Our culture constantly tells us we aren't good enough, get better, buy this product, this treatment, this school, this exercise, this method.

Spirituality is about remembering the fact of abundance in the midst of the daily barrage of messages of scarcity.

Will recognition of abundance happen if you do the practice?

I can tell you there are more ups and downs than the most volatile stock market.

But over the long haul? Probably, yes.

If you love just doing the practice, and you do it just because it is who you are, and not with any idea that you're gaining something from it – if judgment about gain and loss, progress and regress, falls away and there's just you, loving who you are and loving the way you, and the whole universe, manifest in and through your practice, then, yes.

The fact of abundance is thuswise clearer to you.

Speaking of "Dr. Strangelove."

At the end of that movie, the bomber plane is set to release its nuclear payload, which will set off a nuclear conflagration to end civilization, but the release mechanism jams.

Slim Pickens climbs down into the bomb-bay to fix the jam.

He succeeds, and the bomb is released -- while he's still sitting on it.

In the film's most memorable shot, Slim Pickens is waving his cowboy hat and whooping as he rides the bomb down to his -- and what will ultimately be the planet's -- destruction.

“Woooo-hoooo!”

Maybe that's what learning to stop worrying and love the bomb looks like.

He does seem to be living in the moment.

I first saw the movie as a teenager, and that was such a striking scene for me because I knew if I were falling out of the sky riding on a nuclear bomb, I'd be freaked out in fear and despair:

“My god, my god, my god, I've only got maybe one minute to live.”

But look at what Slim Pickens is doing with his minute!

Woooo-hooooo!

All of us are riding that bomb.

Our time is so short before life blows up on us.

Really being there for it is what I've been working on.

How about you?