

# **Seek and Ye Shall Find**

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What are people seeking in a church in 2005? How, in this age of postmodernism, have the desires of liberal men and women changed when it comes to seeking a religious home?

Some desires have not changed. Still, today liberal people want a church where they are not told what to believe, where they need not sign on to a “statement of faith.” People want to bring their minds with them into the sanctuary on Sunday. This fierce desire was borne of the Enlightenment, and still runs strong.

What has changed, according to scholars, is the number of people who have opted out of religion altogether. In this country many of these were raised without religion, and are, to use the academic language *unchurched*. They have no experience with belonging to a church. They grew up without it, and most of them got along just fine. Add to this the vast numbers of people who have left the church of their youth, who, as adults, have opted out of religious life altogether, and the decrease in church membership in the Western world begins to make sense.

What makes this time in history unique – at least in much of this country – is the rampant materialism that has taken over our culture. For many would-be church-goers, living amid this pervasive and out of control consumerism and finding that it does *not* fulfill them as the advertisements

claim, has compelled them to seek something deeper, something more real, something that enriches and expands the human experience. They call this something they seek *spirituality* – an oft maligned word that is at risk of losing its meaning from over-use and mis-use.

I learned most about this word during the months I worked with veterans, from the Vietnam War and the wars in Iraq, when my role was to serve as their Chaplain – their link to spiritual growth and learning. Most of these men and women were living lives of desperation, born of the horror of combat, the downward cycle of poverty and addiction, and the throes of pervasive mental illness.

As I saw firsthand these casualties of war – people who were alive, but so badly damaged that many of them would never again live outside the confines of a Veteran’s Hospital– one of the first things I did was to help them understand the difference between religion and spirituality. Many of them had run from religion, run in anger or loss, run from a place where they were called names, *sinner*s, *the Devil’s blood* – a place where they were regularly told that they were going to hell.

And so I told them that spirituality is different from religion. Religion has to do with beliefs, and how people act together in any given church based on what they believe.

Spirituality, I told them, was something different. These men were working the AA program, either for alcohol or street drugs, and they knew about the AA concept of a “higher power”, and they knew they didn’t have to call this “god.” This was a big help. Because what it meant was that they could tap into the power of the group of men who they were in the hospital with, and call that “god”. Or they could substitute for that angry, damning god, something real: the memory of a happier time, a better life. Or that higher power could be a dream, a distant, flickering dream of a life free of nightmares, free of the need for mind-altering drugs, a life with enough money, and health, and sanity to live among regular people again, even perhaps to raise or be part of a family, and to feel the light and warmth of human love again.

So spirituality, we came to agree, was about seeking something that was beneath the surface, beyond the ordinary. Spirituality was about a connection to another kind of truth, a deeper way of knowing. Spirituality was personal. It was a one-on-one relationship with that higher power, by whatever name one gave it. Spirituality was about growing, and learning, and changing. Most of all it was about hope. Spirituality was about an unexpected and perhaps undeserved new start; it was about being given, despite the odds, a second (or twenty-second) chance.

Spirituality was something they could experience on their own terms, in their own way. It was important to those men and women to learn that spirituality and religion were not the same, that sometimes you could be spiritual without belonging to any religion, and that sometimes church could be a big part of your life and give you nothing spiritual in return, or worse, damage or destroy your spirit.

Certainly, good religions, good churches can be spiritual places. And I suggest this morning that this is something we as UU's have been doing for a long time. For we have always had among us, and encouraged among us, those of differing beliefs. We do not depend on any one set of beliefs to guide us or shape our faith. We have moved from a quiet tolerance in the 1700's to a profound acceptance of diversity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our common agreements now are mostly about the right of the individual to seek spirituality in his or her own way, and to be supported along the way.

Today, spirituality is the Holy Grail. It is what people seek, especially those under the age of 60, the baby boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y's. It's an annoying word for some; but it need not be, not, I think, if we take it to mean simply our own personal relationship to and experience with the ineffable, to that core power or energy in life which goes by many names, but which, I imagine and hope, we all have touched .

Some of us have touched it when we've been in nature, in the wildness of the wind on the water. We've touched it in music, when the stirring notes of harp or piano stir us to know life in a way we've never known before. We've touched it in action – when we've stepped out of our own comfortable lives to help another human being – someone whose life is a struggle, whose world has grown dark and cold. And we've touched it with one another – when we fall in love, when we serve a greater cause together, or when we share a moment of such intensity with another human being that all we have been until then changes in that instant. That's what spirituality is – it's the connection to the depths; to the source and heart of life, to what can transform us as we cannot transform ourselves.

And here, in this old and glorious faith tradition of ours, we stand uniquely poised to welcome today's spiritual seekers. For here, in our pluralistic religion, we offer a community of searchers, each of us recognizing and rejoicing in the freedom and the authority of the individual to seek and to find for him or herself.

Here, among us, are atheists, agnostics, theists, and Deists. For some of us, the earth herself is the source of spirit, and ritual the means; for others god is the goal, found through prayer and contemplation; still others come seeking truth, and the path of intellect and dialogue is their way. For some, it

is the community itself that awakens spirit, through relationship and worship and love.

Here, we offer an antidote to the consumerism that threatens to consume us. Here, we offer an alternative to the rigid reign of doctrine. Here, we offer not damnation, but hope. Not conformism, but freedom. Not hate, but compassion. Not fear, but love. We hold out our hands, and we say out loud:

*Whoever you are,  
Whatever you are,  
Wherever you are on your journey,  
We bid you welcome.<sup>1</sup>*

The question for us right now is this: here, in Santa Paula, in California, in America, in the year 2005, what is a Unitarian Universalist seeking? What does he or she want?

And here, like with most good stories, we end by returning to the beginning.

That story I told to the children this morning did not stop where I did. Those children in that story grew up, and as I said, they never forgot the image of that flame in the circle, and what it meant for them and their lives. Now, four and five generations beyond those children, the story is still told,

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<sup>1</sup> Dick Gilbert, *We Bid You Welcome*, in *Singing the Living Tradition*, #442

how the light came for them in the darkness, came when they most needed it, came and gave them hope, came and gave them back their lives.

And we who follow in the path of those who drove that truck in Eastern Europe in the 1940's or who ran that safe house, we have gone on to create new stories, to find our own strength to carry forward the sacred flame of respect for all the world's people, in the never ending quest for peace on earth with freedom and justice for all.

So what do Unitarian Universalists want? Like the people in this morning's story, most of all we want to be safe. We want a place where we can come in from the cold, and be made warm. Where we can be who we are, tell our true names, and speak the truth of our lives. We want a place where we can rest and be restored, so that we can go back to the world and give ourselves once more to its work. And then, when the weight of the world grows too much for us, we want a place where we can return to be renewed, again and again.

What do Unitarian Universalists want? We want to know, like the children in the story came to know, that what we see in the dark, when we are lost or afraid, can save us, that it comes for us and for all people of good will, everywhere, in all times and places.

We want to know that when we dare step out of the shadows of the night, that the light we move toward is the light of love the light of truth, the light of God. We want to know that this light will be there to hold us, and to keep us – to guide us and help us grow. We want to see in that light something that helps us believe in a better tomorrow. We want to see in it the faces of all those who go with us, who will come after us, and who were there before we were born. We want to know we are not alone.

What do Unitarian Universalists want today? We want to know that when we leave or cannot be in that place of light and peace, that sanctuary of spirit, when we are away doing the needed and sometimes hard tasks of the world, like the children's father in the story, we want to trust that the place will go on. We want to believe that it will be there for those we love, to grant them refuge and rest, to be a place of memory and hope. We want to know that in this place and through the people who are part of it that the flame of our love will be carried to the people we leave, so that the love lives ever on in their light, lives, like a beacon, all through the night.

Will you please joining me in singing hymn # 409, *Sleep My Child*.