

# “Taking Responsibility”

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## Reflection: What Do You Mean You're Not Spiritual?

By Stan Yack

My name is Stan Yack, and I'm a member of this congregation.

A word that comes up around here more often than it used to is spirituality. It's not something that I like to talk about. That's in part because I've never really felt spiritual, but also because whenever I hear the word **spirituality**, I think **spiritualism**. You know: talking with the “departed”, recalling past lives, levitating table — stuff that a scientific humanist like me rejects almost instinctively. But levitating tables is of course not what spirituality is about.

Spirituality is defined as “the concept of an ultimate or an alleged immaterial reality” or “an inner path enabling a person to discover the essence of his or her being” or just “the deepest values and meanings by which people live.” The quest to discover the essence of our being, and our deepest values and meanings — that's hardly inconsistent with our Unitarian principles.

One way that I express my religious self here at First, is by celebrating our 4th Principle, “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” So why do I avoid or dismiss a word like spirituality that echoes that principle? Some of you may have encountered my occasional, illiberal reaction to the word. Sorry about that.

In my later life academic excursions, I've learned that meaning doesn't originate in some Platonic idea; what a word means is determined over time by how people use it. And there's not much evidence that spirituality is becoming a synonym for spiritualism.

Have you ever tested yourself on a “What is your religion?” website? (One of them is listed on the Toronto First website's [“Cool Links” page](#).) My own beliefs show a 100% commonality with Secular Humanism, and 88% with Unitarian Universalism; not too surprising — but also 55% with Theravada

Buddhism. I apparently have 55% in common with what most of us would consider a very spiritual believe system!

I have meditated off on for over thirty years, until recently mostly to calm myself. But I now sometimes meditate here Sunday mornings during a quiet time or musical interlude, apparently seeking some inner peace.

Most spiritual practices, including meditation, prayer and contemplation, are intended to develop an individual's inner life, but it isn't essential that spirituality encompasses a belief in immaterial realities.

I'm most comfortable calling myself an Agnostic. I understand that there are questions that we can't answer, and I believe that all knowledge is provisional, or as a longstanding UU aphorism puts it: "Revelation is not sealed." But if I don't believe in immaterial realities, why every Sunday do I "affirm life, to the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the divine"? What's the divine thing that I want us to grow into harmony with? Is it some theistic entity, God help me! In fact, because I've seen no evidence of the universe's "life-force", or "cosmic consciousness", I treat our Sunday affirmation as a metaphor.

My roots are in the Jewish tradition, a religion and culture where teachers, and the most learned, have always been the most respected. As long as I can remember I've held learning in high esteem. In later life, it's become my hobby, and my vocation. One of the things I've learned about is Unitarian-Universalism, a religion where reason is used to filter truth from make-believe, where there's no privileged priesthood revealing truths about mythical divinities.

I very much value what I've learned from all the free-thinkers that I've met here ... and I plan to continue to learn from you and, I hope, you from me.

## Sermon: “Taking Responsibility”

The year was 1563.<sup>1</sup>

Three cannibals from Brazil had just arrived in northern France, at the invitation of King Charles the Ninth, who happened to be all of thirteen years old.

The young king interrogated his guests at length.

When they were later introduced to Michel de Montaigne, the famed essayist, he asked these three visitors, who had never before traveled beyond their tribal lands, what they thought of France.

With fresh eyes, they shared what to them seemed absolutely absurd.

They spoke of their surprise that “‘so many tall, bearded men, all strong and well armed’ (i.e., the king’s guard) were willing to take orders from a small child: something that would have been unthinkable in their own society.”

And they were struck by the shocking inequality of the French people.

According to his account in an essay titled “The Cannibals,” Montaigne said the men commented on how some people “‘were gorged to the full with things of every sort’ while others ‘were beggars at their doors, emaciated with hunger and poverty.’”

Because Brazilians saw all human beings “‘as halves of one another... they found it strange,” Montaigne wrote, “‘that these poverty-stricken halves should suffer such injustice, and that they did not take the others by the throat or set fire to their houses.’”

Montaigne’s brief encounter with these men stirred him to question the moral superiority he and his peers so easily felt toward these visitors.

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<sup>1</sup> Account from Adam Etison, “Of Cannibals, Kings and Culture: The Problem of Ethnocentricity,” *The New York Times*, 17 February 2013.

While he wasn't trying to make a moral case for cannibalism, he was quick to point out to his contemporaries the barbaric customs that were so much a part of their own 16<sup>th</sup> century European lives.

What was worse, he asked:  
feeding people, as punishment, to dogs and pigs while still alive,  
as was the practice in parts of Europe,  
or eating one's enemies after they were already dead?

As a vegan-leaning vegetarian..., and, frankly,  
as a 21<sup>st</sup> century human being, both options are, of course, appalling.

But, the point of the essay was that we humans  
are so easily convinced of our own rightness.

Montaigne said:

We all call barbarous anything that is contrary to our own habits.  
Indeed we seem to have no other criterion of truth and reason  
than the type and kind of opinions and customs  
current in the land where we live.

If you're anything like me, you likely found yourself,  
as I was reading those words—now four and a half centuries old—  
agreeing about how often people  
are irritatingly and inflexibly convinced of their own rectitude,  
all the while seeing yourself as an obvious exception to the rule.

Or was I the only one doing that...?

Am I the only person who is so certain  
about how impressively open-minded I can be—  
how capable I am at hearing opinions other than my own,  
how eager I am to let go of falsehoods and embrace new insights?

How hard it can be to confront inconvenient truths.

And how easy it can be

to simply accept received wisdom as truth, without question.

I love how the poet Ronald Wallace gets at this,  
all while having a bit of fun, in his poem called “Blessings”:

Some days I find myself  
putting my foot in  
the same stream twice;  
leading a horse to water  
and making him drink.  
I have a clue.  
I can see the forest  
for the trees.

All around me people  
are making silk purses  
out of sows’ ears,  
getting blood from turnips,  
building Rome in a day.  
There’s a business  
like show business.  
There’s something new  
under the sun.

Some days misery  
no longer loves company;  
it puts itself out of its.  
There’s rest for the weary.  
There’s turning back.  
There are guarantees.  
I can be serious.  
I can mean that.  
You can quite  
put your finger on it.

Received wisdom isn’t always wise.

What we know to be true needs to be routinely tested.

There can be great danger in staying within the echo chamber  
where we fail to interrogate what is put to us as truth.

The Republican Party of late is a stunning example of this.

Heading into the American election in November,  
Fox News and rabid talk radio  
had convinced not only their audiences,  
but apparently even themselves,  
that Republicans had a lock on the election.

Things obviously went in a different direction,  
and by more than a mere hair.

In the aftermath, conservative pundits were gobsmacked,  
because they didn't see defeat coming.  
They were unwilling to accept as true  
anything that contradicted the narrative that had them winning.

It won't surprise any of you to hear me say  
that I was delighted with the outcome of the election.

And I wish I could say that I was above feeling a bit of *schadenfreude*  
at the Republican losses, but, well...,  
I'm not yet that evolved as a human being.

I do, however, see in that recent election a cautionary tale—  
one that causes me to wonder how often I—how often we—  
fall under the spell of falsehoods because they feel good,  
because they validate a convenient world view,  
because they confirm the biases that are so hard to acknowledge,  
yet so very near and dear to our hearts.

Hubris is the enemy of truth, and doubt is its servant.

Though there's much to be said for having the courage of our convictions,  
there's also something to be said  
for exercising a bit of humility on the path toward truth.

It takes courage to question our assumptions,  
to turn the steady gaze of doubt back on ourselves  
and take a hard look at what we've enshrined as truth.

Sometimes a visit from a cannibal might be a helpful thing.  
Something to force us to open our eyes to what we can no longer see.

One of the places where I wrestle with this the most  
on a personal level is in our larger political discourse.

With snarky sound bites and biting twitter feeds flying,  
I fear that what might well approximate truth  
is increasingly lost in the cross-fire.

In the liberal bubble in which I live—along with a good many of you—  
there are times when I spy cracks in the veneer.

Moments when I see slivers of truth from outside the bubble  
that don't actually or easily accord with my own views.

Slivers of insight that cause me to question  
whether I'm really getting the whole story,  
the truth and nothing but the truth.

On occasion the talking points of the liberal-minded media—  
which share values and beliefs so similar to my own—  
can be so extreme in the heat of battle  
that their credibility is at risk of crumbling.

I'm not saying there's no place for heat in the political process,  
but that we must beware the perils of overheated rhetoric,  
no matter how enthralling or seductive it may be.

It's easy for me to disregard the banter of Fox News  
and the Sun News Network as being overblown.

It's much more uncomfortable for me to question  
the part of the media that tells me things I generally like to hear.

The problem is that I'm not alone.  
Research is showing how we increasingly  
are drawn to news outlets that reinforce what we already think.

We are often living in echo chambers without even realizing it.  
I know I certainly do, at least some of the time.

My facebook newsfeed, my email inbox, the newspapers I read,  
the books that line my shelves, and almost all of the company that I keep  
mostly tell the story you'd expect to hear of a lefty religious liberal.

But I'm finding these days that I have to work harder and harder  
to live beyond the bubble that I'm in.

Don't get me wrong. It's a bubble that I love. Dearly.  
But, as they say, there are dangers in only reading your own press.

As Unitarians, we have long regarded skepticism as a spiritual practice.  
(Sorry to use the 'spiritual' word there, Stan...  
I was trying to get through the sermon without it in your honour today,  
but couldn't find a way around it in this case!)

I'm guessing that there's been more "Question Authority" bumper stickers sold  
to Unitarians through the years than probably to all other religious groups,  
combined!

In fact, I am imagining that someone here later this week  
will be telling a friend about this morning's service and say, in all seriousness:  
"my minister preached on Sunday  
that we should all be more skeptical, but, well, I'm just not so sure...!"

In this and in every Unitarian congregation,  
we uphold a tradition called Freedom of the Pulpit.

My covenant with you calls on me, as your minister,  
to preach the truth as I see it, "without fear or favour."

With that privilege you extend to me comes the equally important tradition  
of Freedom of the Pew.

You are not required to accept anything and everything I say.  
How boring this place would quickly become if you did!

My hope when you disagree with me, though,



is that you give yourself over to really asking *why*.

Nothing would please me more than knowing  
that a disagreement between us helped you to deepen your own thinking.

The fourth principle of our faith calls us as Unitarians  
to undertake a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

We are rightly proud of the freedom this faith offers us—freedom to formulate  
our beliefs according to the dictates of our own conscience.

Freedom to reject or discard  
whatever we find objectionable or unjust or untrue.  
Or silly, ludicrous, and insane.

I cherish that freedom.

And, yet with that freedom comes a burden  
we much less frequently discuss.

In that free and responsible search,  
we often emphasize the “free” part,  
but sometimes ignore the “responsible” bit  
because of the inconvenience it often involves.

The inconvenience of having to question our own convictions,  
to let our minds be challenged, and maybe even be changed.  
The inconvenience of being responsible to and for the beliefs that we hold.

It turns out that a free religion isn’t free, and it doesn’t come cheap.  
It comes with a responsibility, a burden, if you will,  
to engage, to wrestle, and refine our beliefs.

I think we often feel vulnerable  
about putting what we believe to be true  
up to the light of scrutiny.

As hard as it is to remember, we must not forget, though,  
that truth can take care of itself.

Truth—if it is true—can and will withstand scrutiny.  
If anything, it's all the better for it.

And, so are we.

I'll take a true truth over a false one any day.

We live in a time of many competing truth claims.  
Not all such claims are equal, and not all such claims are true.

There are profit-driven and ideologically-motivated clouds  
of misinformation swirling all about us.

Which is all the more reason why getting at the truth matters.

The world needs people willing and able to see clearly.  
People willing to weigh different arguments,  
to engage other perspectives,  
and refine their views within a diversity of opinions.

People who know what they believe and why,  
and, yet, who are still willing to entertain and incorporate new understandings.

As Stan said of our tradition—and as he models in his own search—  
revelation is not sealed.

Which brings me back to responsibility.

A free search for truth and meaning can be undertaken alone, in isolation.  
But a responsible search requires other people—  
and that sacred knowledge that we are, indeed,  
all swimming to the other side.

For me, this has been found, most consistently,  
in the small groups in which I actively participate.

Like the heart-to-heart and soul-to-soul and living-in-spirit groups here,  
my two small groups, comprised of friends and colleagues,  
are the places where I've been most deeply challenged to grow—  
to grow beyond the bubble of my assumptions,

to see things I couldn't see myself,  
to understand that truth and meaning are very complicated,  
and that a little humility goes a long way on this journey.

Over time, in the practise of my faith as a Unitarian,  
I have come more profoundly to understand that this free faith  
doesn't allow me to believe whatever I want—  
about theology, or politics,  
or any aspect of what it means to be human.

It asks more of me than that.  
And it asks more of you.

May we, then, of all people,  
undertake this free and responsible search for truth and meaning  
with a uniquely Unitarian blend of unflinching courage  
and the humility of being fully, blessedly human.

May we strive on toward the truths that serve life  
and toward the meaning that makes life worth living.

Amen.