

“Spiritual But Not Religious”

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It usually goes one of three ways.

Whenever I'm called upon—be it at a party or on an airplane—to explain to a stranger that I'm a minister, I find there are typically three predictable reactions.

The first is for a person to air to me every last grievance they have ever had against organized religion.

The second is for a person to want to debate at length whatever theological differences might exist between us.

Just these first two responses are, no doubt, the reason why, a few years ago, one of my colleagues confessed that when she flies or is otherwise confined with strangers who ask what she does for a living, she summons every ounce of bubbly enthusiasm she has and tells them that she's a regional sales rep for a company that makes leather dog chew toys.

And she then asks, pryingly, if they have a dog. Strangely enough, everyone tells her “no!”

Though I've not resorted to using this fib myself, she swears it's guaranteed to shut down any and all awkward conversation.

More often than not, these days, though, I find it is the stranger who is the one most likely to close down the conversation, if and when the topic turns to religion.

The third and most common response I get when telling a stranger that I'm a minister, is for that person in a defiant or a sheepish way to explain that they are “spiritual but not religious.”

In whatever way the trope is delivered,
it is clearly intended to move the conversation to some safer ground—
or to bring it to a close altogether.

“That’ll be enough of that, thank you very much.”
End of discussion.

I suspect at least a few of you have had this experience, too,
even without telling someone you’re a minister.

To bring up religion,
to mention that you attend Sunday services,
or that you belong to a Unitarian community
is a highly counter-cultural act in our very secular city,
arguably one of the most secularized places on this side of the planet.

Sometimes it’s just the path of least resistance to say,
“I’m spiritual but not religious.”

I know I’ve said it myself before—
at least before becoming a minister.

It’s pretty hard to deny being religious
when you’re an ordained clergy person.

But what does it mean when someone uses that phrase?
What is it, exactly, that people are really trying to get at?

For starters, it seems there’s always some pain
wrapped up in the reason somewhere.

There’s a story just waiting to be told.

Very often the people who describe themselves as decidedly non-religious
do so because their previous experience of religion
has involved emotional, physical, spiritual, or—appallingly—
even sexual harm.

These wounds can run deep,
whether they be the result of dogma, deceit, or outright abuse.

In our time, the term religion has become a very wounded word, and the real tragedy is that the wounds have been mostly self-inflicted, and too often by those entrusted with authority and responsibility to care for those in their charge.

So, it's no surprise that so many people describe themselves as non-religious.

(There are days when I am so angry or embarrassed by the horrors done in the name of religion that I want to join them.)

It's no surprise, that people turn to the term spiritual instead.

It's not nearly as loaded.
It's not so heavy-laden.

It sounds nice and nurturing. It sounds enlightened.

It sounds tidy, and more often than not, suggests a solo journey, free of institutions, and, most importantly, other people, and all of their problems.

Indeed, it seems that part of the appeal of the modern spiritual quest is that it's something an individual so often takes up alone.

Sure there can be teachers and gurus along the way and books to guide one on the journey, but so often when people speak of spirituality, they're speaking of something they're ultimately doing by themselves.

But, if spirituality is about anything, it is the quest for connection.

Spirituality speaks to that restless longing in the human heart—for an ever-deepening connection with the great force of life that is within us, between us, and beyond us.

And, so, therein lies the rub for me—
in anyone trying to be spiritual alone—
in anyone trying to be spiritual all by themselves.

I just don't believe it's possible.

The spiritual quest invariably involves other people.

This doesn't mean, of course, that we can't find powerful connection when we are alone with our thoughts or when we glimpse the grandeur of the earth and are left speechless by its beauty.

These things are important and essential to our spiritual development, but they are not enough.

The thing is that most of us don't live alone on mountaintops, and we were never really meant to.

As Richard Gilbert puts it, the spiritual path is not a solitary journey up the mountainside, but more like Chaucer's merry band of pilgrims making their way to Canterbury, telling the tales of their lives along the way.¹

We are social creatures, and we need one another—when we mourn and require comfort, when we are in trouble and afraid, when we are in despair and temptation and need to be recalled to our best selves again.²

We need one another when we know that we cannot accomplish some great purpose on our own.

When we wish to share our triumphs and when, in the face of defeat, we need encouragement to carry on.

And we need one another at the end, when we come to die and would have gentle hands prepare us for the journey.

1

I regret I no longer have a direct reference for this quote.

2

George Odell, "We Need One Another," *Singing the Living Tradition* #468.

4

Being awake to these needs and these turning points
in our lives and the lives of others
is the work of being human, and it is, at its best,
the real work of religion.

The word religion comes from the Latin term *religare*.

It shares the same root from which we get the word ligament.
Religare means to bind back,
to bind together.

And so when people tell me they are not religious,
I wonder and I worry whether they have found a way
to create a community to hold them in their times of trial,
to hold them accountable to their values and their dreams,
to call them to live with purpose
into the promise of their being.

It saddens me to say that it often seems they haven't.

It's not as easy as it would seem to replicate the role of religion in our lives.

While family and friends can pick up some of the slack,
while yoga classes and the spiritual book aisle
at Indigo can certainly help,
it doesn't seem that an ad hoc, do-it-yourself spirituality
is all that sustaining—or ultimately sustainable—without a community.

We need others to bear witness to our lives, and we to theirs.

We need others to challenge us, to help us grow,
to call us back to our highest purpose.

To question our assumptions and lovingly cover our ignorance.

To call us beyond a self-centred existence
that would have us regularly attending
what some have called the “Church of Me”—
that seductive place where we only hear and do what we want,
and are free from anything that might offend or irritate
or cause us to question ourselves and our most cherished beliefs.

While such a place might be free from friction,
it is also without much life.

And it leads, I believe, to spirituality
being just another form of narcissism.

The truth is we need others to help rub down our roughest edges.
And that's not something we can do so well on our own.

We can affirm all day long an abstract belief
in the inherent worth of dignity of every person.

But where the spiritual rubber hits the religious road
is when we have to deal with someone who puts that belief to the test.

We are, after all, each other's spiritual practice on this planet.

And that's what makes religious community so vitally important.
We are a community of practice.

A group of imperfect people coming together
to build up our character, to grow ourselves a soul.

I often think of congregations as rock tumblers,
where with persistence, we who belong to them
eventually come out as polished stones.

“Where by turning, turning, we come round right.”

We need one another if we are to shine.

It's not easy, though.

To be a part of a religion, to be part of a congregation,
even of the most kindred of souls,
is not for the faint-of-heart.

There's a story told of Rabbi Bloom, who was conducting
his very first service at one of London's oldest synagogues.

All was going well until he got to the 'Shema' prayer

and half of the congregation suddenly stood up.

Those still seated started yelling ‘sit down’ to those standing and those standing started yelling ‘stand up’ to those still seated.

Although the rabbi was knowledgeable about much of the law, he didn’t know what to do in the moment.

He thought to himself that this behaviour must have something to do with this particular synagogue’s tradition.

After the service, Rabbi Bloom consulted Hannah, the synagogue’s oldest member.

“I need to know, Hannah, what the synagogue’s tradition is with regard to the Shema. Is the tradition to stand during this prayer?”

Hannah replied, “No, that’s not the tradition.”

“So the tradition is to sit during Shema?” asked the rabbi.

“No,” Hannah said, “that’s not the tradition either.”

“But,” the rabbi said, “the congregation argues all the time. They yell at each other about whether they should sit or stand and. . .”

And, then, Hannah interrupted him,
“Ah, now you understand,
THAT’s the tradition!”

Alongside all their wonderful qualities, congregations— the places where religion is practiced in proximity to others, even when it’s done online via Zoom in these strange times— also come with a good deal of conflict, upset, and anger.

We disappoint one another, feelings are hurt, toes are stepped on.

Again, it’s no wonder people would rather be spiritual than religious.

It’s a lot easier.
But it’s not nearly as transformative.

Because in religious community,
we practise together what it means to be human.

And we are called to practise at it until we get it right.

This means learning more than we maybe ever wanted to know
about patience and compassion,
forgiveness and humility,
about not always getting our way,
but growing through pain and frustration rather than running from it.

Now, I suppose one could sit on a mountain peak
and think deeply on these things and hope for some illumination,
but wading into these difficult waters with others
is the only sure path I know to genuine spiritual growth.

And, the best part is that there's no need
to run off to the far corners of the world seeking such enlightenment,
when there's already so much to work with
through the people who are already in our lives,
be it those we live or work with,
our neighbours or complete strangers.

I love how theologian Ronald Rolheiser gets at it:

[There is this] idea that spirituality is, somehow,
exotic, esoteric, and not something that issues forth
from the bread and butter of ordinary life.

Thus, for many people, the term spirituality conjures up images
of something paranormal, mystical, churchy, holy, pious, otherworldly, New
Age, something on the fringes,
and something optional.

Rarely is spirituality understood as referring to something vital and
nonnegotiable lying at the heart of our lives.³

3

Ronald Rolheiser, *Holy Longing*, p. 6.

And, rarely, I would add, is religion understood
as the place in our lives where we are guided and goaded
by the wisdom and inspiration of others
to put that spirituality to the test
by putting it into practice.

So, it is right and good that we gather often, and even virtually,
into this little loving laboratory of the human spirit,
to look at our lives-as-we-live-them.

To be reminded once again that the spiritual path leads not to isolation,
but into the very heart of recognizing our shared humanity.

To see that the spiritual quest for connection
must be tried and tested in the crucible of human community.

The notion of being spiritual but not religious represents a false choice.

It's not a matter of choosing one over the other.
It's about seeing them both as absolutely essential to each other—
and to us and our well-being.

If spirituality is our yearning for deep connection,
religion is the best way I know to make those connections real.

So, may we, as a community,
be ever-dedicated to this quest, to this practice.

May we be gentle with ourselves and each other,
as we learn the hard lessons that life together has to teach.

And, may we undertake this work, both spiritual and religious,
with open and happy hearts,
because if cannot learn to dwell together in peace, what hope is there for our world?