

“What’s spiritual?”
Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT

May 19, 2013

“What comes in a bottle?” It was a question on a scale of early childhood cognitive development. I was reviewing it as part of my graduate work in developmental psychology. Why not ask my four-year-old daughter what she thought would be a good answer. “Shana, what comes in a bottle?” She thought for a moment, then a pleased smile swept across her face as she announced, “Air!”

If Shana had been scored according to the answer sheet prepared by the creators of this assessment, she would have received a zero—a wrong answer! So much for the cognitive development of those who created this apparent measure of it.

Is air real? We can’t see it, but without it we would die. Is breath real? We can’t touch it, but if we stopped breathing, we would stop being. Is wind real? We can hear it, we can feel it, but can we grasp it? Is spirit real? Is the spiritual for real?

“I’m spiritual, not religious!” It’s all but a mantra of popular theology. Perhaps because I hear this so frequently, I tend to recoil at the very word spiritual, for it seems to be infused with the inclination toward other-worldly solitude, a glazed denial of the troubling realities of our times and an easy flight from anything smacking of communal accountability. Given these feelings, it’s amazing that I have a spiritual practice at all, but I do, a spiritual practice that *grounds* me in the here and now.

Spirit is anything but other-worldly. Spirit is of the essence of life. Spiritual peace is close to an oxymoron, for by its very nature spirit is restless. As earth spun out from the biggest bang imaginable, spirit churned and stirred. Hear the words of an ancient author, who could not possibly have been there,

“The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.”

It was a primal mess. No form, void, no light, but water and the spirit, moving in a tandem dance.

Spirit is a selective rendering of the Hebrew term, *ruach*, which may also be translated as “wind” or “breath,” so that we might read “the wind of God” or “the breath of God was moving over the face of the waters.” Spirit of Life was the primal source in this ancient story that seeks to penetrate the wonder of how it all began—with wind, with breath, moving and transforming the void into the not void, formlessness into form.

When I consider spirit, this is what I move towards: that primal essence of what wasn't even matter yet. It was the stuff of non-stuff. It was a nonmaterial force—breath, wind, spirit—that moved for a nanosecond or countless millennia into an unfolding of what we recognize as material: soil, flora, fauna, and at long last, flesh.

We wonder with our material minds, with the neural impulses of our brains, at that which is nonmaterial. As I navigate the manifestations of Spirit, I stumble across a core paradox. In the notion of spirit lie the attributes of that which is unseen alongside that which acts on what is seen but is ever changing. Like wind, like breath, like being in its essence, spirit is unseen but present with unequivocal force. It is intimately and ultimately natural, as natural as air in a bottle, as natural as a four-year-old who hasn't yet divorced imagination from reason.

“It is in the natural that the soul can grow,” observed A. Powell Davies, minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, DC during the years right after World War II.

“It is not the supernatural that is spiritual,” he observed. “The supernatural is a *flight* from the spiritual—a flight into something projected as material—a thing of childish [not child-like, but child-ish] imagery. The spiritual remains with the natural, learns to live with reality, tries to understand it and itself as part of it. . . .”

We come from nature. We return to nature; and in between we are of human nature. In between, the soul can grow. In between, our essence, our spirit, moves within us and defines us, and our spirit is as restless as the breath, wind, *ruach*, of God or the *Ineffable* moving over primal waters. We are born curious. We are born astonished, as we take in that first breath and the Spirit of Life moves through our utterly new being. We ingest our brand-new habitat. If we are nourished in all our modalities, we learn to balance “the pretend” and “the real.” We learn to inform our imagination with reason and our reason with imagination. Our spirit stretches; our soul grows.

Robert Coles, the Harvard psychiatrist who has spent so much of his life observing and advocating for children, takes quite seriously the spiritual life of children. In his book by that title, he recounts a day spent with a fifth-grade class in nearby Lawrence. Coles had long been attentive to how children define themselves—in words, in drawing, however. On this day, he posed to youngsters whose demographics were richly diverse the invitation: “Tell me, as best you can, who you are—what about you matters most, what makes you the person you are.” He added the qualifier, “Try to single out one [quality or trait or characteristic] for special mention. . . .”

The youngsters took to their challenge with gusto. The responses were wide ranging, but one girl took longer than any of the others to complete her assignment. When she did, she paused for a moment, then took the paper on which she had written and crumpled it. Coles became concerned, walked over to her desk, and asked to read it. These were her words:

“I’m the one who’s writing this! I’m the one at home who can make our Gramps laugh. He’s old, and he doesn’t laugh much. I don’t tickle him. I just tell him jokes. My mom said without me Gramps would be sad.”

Coles was moved and said so. The child replied, downcast, “I don’t know what else to say about myself.” Coles asked her permission to keep her paper, and she agreed, but reluctantly: “OK, but maybe I should do another one, too, because in this one I’m boasting, and you shouldn’t do that, the nuns tell you.” Coles acknowledged her feelings, affirmed the value of what she had written, and the child, with a few reticent smiles, moved on to her second statement. Again she took her time, disregarding the impatience of her classmates. Then she walked up to where Dr. Coles was sitting and handed him her thoughts:

“I’m like I am now, but I could change when I grow up. You never know who you’ll be until you get to that age when you’re all grown. But God must know all the time.”

This fifth-grader had risked sharing her internal truths, an act of spiritual daring. Coles was the thoughtful facilitator of this process that freed her to write what mattered. But before she wrote a word, she reflected long and hard. She was a seeker and a questioner. Coles chose an apt title for the chapter that holds this account: “The Child as Pilgrim.”

As spiritual beings, we are on a pilgrimage—mindful or not—from birth to death. We seek and we question. We hope and we doubt and we wonder. To become spiritually free, we are called also to do justice and practice compassion. This is the uphill stuff of the spiritual, the stuff kept well under cover by popular conveyors of a spirituality that is solitary and pseudo-secure, like a gated community with a halo over it.

The spiritual is grounded in body and soul, flesh and blood, fire and water, earth and air. But to define it, to really define what is spiritual? I posed the question a few years ago to my dear friend and mentor, Unitarian Universalist minister Victor Carpenter. “Defining the spiritual is like bottling fog,” he replied.

“I’m spiritual, not religious.” Tell me about spiritual. Tell me about religious. Tell me your story. Tell me what comes in a bottle and why it is possible. Tell me what moves within us and through us and beyond us—not how it looks or sounds or tastes, but what comes of it.

The words of Davies ring out:

“Faith is not a thing of contemplation only, but of our experience on the earth. There is no way of knowing how much of meaning there is in life unless we trust the meaning that we find.”

Trust that meaning that you find. Trust the meaning that we find together. Within you too is a pilgrim child, reflective, joy giving, searching, and sometimes finding. We are in this world and of it. Beyond life as we know it is a mystery. The very next moment is uncertain. It is, I believe, through sharing our stories and listening deeply to the stories of one another that we transcend the popular divide between spirituality as escape and religion as imprisonment. It is, I believe, through doing justice, loving our neighbor as we love ourselves, and walking in wonder at that which we understand as sacred, that we escape the confines of a small soul. May we grow our spirits in the here and now and be faithful stewards of a religion grounded in a covenant sustained by love.

Amen

Sources:

The Bible (Revised Standard Version)

Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1990.

A. Powell Davies, "Spiritual Nurture," from "Personal Religion in a Time of Tension," (November 30, 1952), in *without apology: Collected Meditations on Liberal Religion*, Edited by Forrest Church, Skinner House Books, Boston, 1998.

A. Powell Davies, "There Is No God in the Sky," from "There Is No God in the Sky," (February 25, 1951), in *without apology: Collected Meditations on Liberal Religion*, Edited by Forrest Church, Skinner House Books, Boston, 1998.