

Applying Spiritual Principles to Your Daily Life

Old Dog, New Tricks

October 21, 2012

Introduction

Aren't metaphors fun? I seem to especially gravitate to the simple, obvious ones. My sister used to direct the jab, "Simple Pleasures for Simple Minds" my way, and who knows, maybe she was on to something. Some of you might recall the "Garden as Metaphor for Life and the Seven UU Principles" presentation I gave a few years ago. There certainly wasn't anything subtle about that one as we plowed through all that fertile and bountiful ground. I recall Roger having some fun with it. Or more recently, the "Peeking Behind the Curtain" presentation with our friend "Bob". And here we are again, this time with the perennial favorite "You Can't Teach an Old Dog New Tricks". Which always seems to prompt the little inner voice to beg the question, "Or Can You?" (and for the record, my inner voice responds to the other inner voice doing the asking is, "well, yeah, of course you can").

Well, I suppose I'm getting close to what the ageists among us might consider old, but my ears are pretty short, I don't have a tail, and I don't bury bones in the back yard, though Michelle did call me a Dirty Dog once, whatever that means. Taken together, do all those things make me an Old Dog? Maybe, could be, probably, I dunno; sure, why not? I am an Old Dog.

But what about the New Tricks? To be sure I've got an accumulated lifetime of old tricks I cart around (think personal baggage and habits here), but when was the last time I learned a new one? Or updated the act by getting rid of an old trick or two? And would an Old Dog (or dogs in the neighborhood) be better for having learned some New Tricks?

When Georgia politely and gently pressed me for a title, Old Dog, New Tricks oh so cleverly popped out, but it really does capture what I'd been planning on presenting today. Not so much about why or when I became a Unitarian Universalist, but instead, how I think becoming a UU has affected or informed me "spiritually", and whether it has translated into a different or better life. So again, I hope this isn't a "why I'm a UU" talk, but feels more like "how has it mattered"?.

Body

- ❖ First a little history, or the making of the Old Dog.
- ❖ Has to be a Puppy before there can be an Old Dog
 - My puppyhood was quite a bit different than that of many of us here in the room in terms of religion and spiritual development. While many were attending various churches; I was not. My parents didn't attend church nor did they make me. Though we never discussed religion or spirituality I don't remember ever thinking I was missing out on something. My parents were decent people and they imparted that basic decency to me I believe. Certainly nothing formal though, and if I was applying spiritual principles to my childhood life, I never knew it. I remember a mostly very happy childhood...hmmm.
- ❖ Fast forward to late my late teens (18-19) when I recall my first (and among my most powerful) spiritual memories.
 - Spoke of this last spring, when I described an entheogenic-assisted experience. It was something I had read about, discussed with friends, was seeking, and was completely open to, so it's probably not too surprising that it was a transcendent experience for me. I was certainly predisposed. I described it as

having "sensed, not understood, something majestic, wonderful, and mysterious, and called it simply "incredible".

- At the time I'm not sure what exactly I did with that experience; but I've remembered it so vividly that I've at least convinced myself it has affected me in somehow important ways. Maybe instilling a sense of comfort or confidence as a result of having experienced such a profound sense of belonging. But honestly, so much time has passed, and so many possible tricks of the mind are possible, that I may have obscured the real spiritual value of the experience, or somehow changed it to fit with who I am now.
- ❖ I do know though, that from that time on, well into adulthood, I became pretty much the Old Dog with no New Tricks. I really didn't pay much attention to the idea of spiritual development at all. I did lots of stuff, but spiritual reflection was not amongst the activities.
 - Don't want this to sound like I was a cold, unfeeling, heartless automaton, I just didn't think much about spirituality or religion.
 - This is quite a contrast to many of you I know. It's actually embarrassing to say it here, knowing what Bruce was doing as a young man, or the spiritual mountain Ronn dealt with in his youth, or the decisions of conscience Victor faced and dealt with.
 - It's lame I know, but about the best I can do is that somewhere along the line I started saying prayers to animals I killed when hunting, giving thanks to peaks that let me climb them and return safely, and continuing a long standing practice of striking up conversations with complete strangers. Michelle noticed that habit when we started dating, and I think it might be genetic. My dad seemed to spend a lot of time talking with people I sure didn't know.
 - Pretty rudimentary, but in retrospect I like to think of these as homemade, intuitive spiritual practices reflecting the latent UU within me. Ever the optimist.
- ❖ That's really about where I was when I walked through the UU doors, I think it was at the Sheridan College Observatory.
- ❖ Then I became a UU (hopefully this is where the new tricks part starts)
 - Wish I could say I was immediately and spiritually transformed, bells, trumpets, light streaming through the clouds, but while some claim those sorts of conversions, I've never heard anyone in here talk like that, nor aspire to something like that. I know how seriously, hard and long people in this room have worked to develop spiritually.
- ❖ But there was an immediate transformation of sorts. I was going to church!
 - Maybe not a big deal to some, but it sure was for me. The act of **just going** day in and day out has turned out to be really important, maybe the most important of any new trick I could have learned. As I've continued to go, a process unfolded.
 - Remember being somewhat mystified, tentative, and unsure about the whole thing. Honestly, it might even have been a bit scary. The idea of church, even for me a lifelong non church goer, had connotations. I can read history books and newspapers; the idea of organized religion was never very appealing. I remember being quiet a lot.
 - But persistence and repetition can have their rewards, and as attending became more comfortable, I began to focus more and more on what people were saying. I too began to participate. And I began to like it. It began to feel right. In hindsight, I can see that becoming a UU helped fill needs I didn't know I had.
 - It became a place to comfortably explore ideas about the larger world, about human relations, about morals and ethics, and eventually it just became a habit. I came to realize that I could not only understand

our 7 Principles, but could comfortably embrace them, not only as powerful statements about UU, but because they capture much of what I believed or aspired to.

- Church became a place where the habit of not thinking about spiritual matters at all, was replaced by the opposite. It's where I've learned to talk about and reflect on a whole host of things. It's where I can focus on making my life more fulfilling, and connecting with others in better ways.
- Attending church has helped me clarify, articulate and identify what I believe.
- not playing music, and not at work, but here. Attending church has simply made my world a little bigger and is where I go for the really good stuff.

- Side Trip here to what are a couple of especially important Principles to me
- I mentioned talking to strangers, wanting to know something about them, but in the context of our first principle (inherent worth), I've come to realize it's about more than just exchanging pleasantries; about dignity and worth. Can you really approach a street person, or initiate a conversation with someone who for all intents and purposes looks like a gang banger, if you've not allowed them the dignity of defining themselves; if you've already judged them from across the street. If anything, this principle has probably affected my daily life the most and is the one I work at the most.
- I also mentioned little prayers to dead animals and inanimate mountains. Not knowing about the 7th Principle at the time, I'd say I lucked out on that one. "This is God in my garden. It is everybody and everything; good, bad, evil, and indifferent. It's the Isness of life, the cosmic currents, or the metaphor for everything that can't be intellectualized as Joseph Campbell put it. This is what I pray about ". It's also what I think "BOB" experienced.

- ❖ You probably got it; going to church was a big new trick for me. So what, did it matter? Does any of it bear on my daily life or interactions with others?

- One answer is "how could it not", church so many times, with so many conversations, exercises, books, about compassion, love, life, god, evil, acceptance, guilt, tolerance, you name it; how could it not. Even simple osmosis should have an effect over time; let alone with a little active encouragement.

- Another answer is simply "yes" I believe so. But I don't really know, I'm not impartial, and most of you didn't know me before I learned my new trick, so maybe you'll just have to take my word for it. I'm not the same person I was before I started attending church. Other things have happened at the same time; ageing, outside influences, so autocorrelation is a possibility; But regardless, I'm sure attending church has nudged me along in a good direction.

- I guess both answers were yes.

- ❖ Let me illustrate with what I'm thinking when I say it has mattered.

- comforting when my really cool Aunt Peg and Cousin Ralph died. I really think it helped to know we are all part of the same thing, I could celebrate their lives, missed (and still do) them, but took joy knowing we got to spend our time on earth together as part of something incomprehensibly amazing.

- Meeting last week: Bruce discussion last week. We got on topic of difficult people and how we react (spiritual high road or low). People offered great suggestions, I was open to them (old default = anger). It turned out ok. Thinking of #1 and 7 (so many people, what's a mother to do; they are just part of the mix; acceptance).

- Jug's presentation
 - A wonderful celebration of a life well lived, and one that I knew so little about.
 - Raised a family, took risks, had adventures, and contributed to bettering so many lives through his substance abuse counseling, serving as a minister, and sharing his building skills right here in Sheridan and Johnson Counties.
 - Maybe it reminds me of the Studs Terkel saying that, "every man has a story"
 - If not Terkelesque, than it was certainly 1st Principlesque- an hour of my life spent listening to him was an easy and pleasant way to honor the worth and dignity of a good person.

Conclusion

- ❖ We all know that what happens here is what's important, but let's not discount the importance and value of showing up day in and day out. Unfortunately it took 40+ years for me to get here. I'm glad I did. I'm convinced I'm better for it.
- ❖ And as always, I'm thrilled to see all of you here.

Thank You

Opening Words

"We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience."

— [Pierre Teilhard de Chardin](#)

Closing Words

Whatever you do will not be enough, but it matters enormously that you do it - Mohandas Gandhi