

Opening words #518
Closing words #682 , 466?

The Spirituality of Living

I have been asked to tone down the big words. I have probably misused many words, but doubt there are any in this talk that anyone will have trouble with. Please help me by pointing out improper usage or ask for a definition when I stray.

BEGINNING

I started thinking about this presentation as soon as I agreed to do it. The topic of personal spirituality seemed straight forward enough, but I don't feel very spiritual most of the time. The few times I do feel truly "spiritual" usually come when I am close to nature and some vision or realization of how amazing life is hits me over the head. Since I like to fish, typically away from a lot of man made stuff, many times fishing gets mixed up with spirituality for me. A talk about fishing seemed reasonable at first, but after a short time, I realized it is not the fishing that is spiritual, but the change in perception that comes from being in nature that is the spiritual part for me. The talk languished in my head.

On October 8th I was listening to NPR Talk of the Nation with Neal Conan. They happened to be airing a repeat broadcast called "Christians Divided over Science of Human Origins". When I mentioned after Bill's talk during the potluck that part of the piece was talking about original sin, Sam acted interested. I felt sure I had my topic, and I went on line and printed out the program. I want to talk a little about original sin, (I couldn't resist) but I'm sorry Sam, this talk is not all about original sin.

The basic premise of the npr piece is that many conservative Christians are still trying to reconcile the bible with science. In particular, some of them are just now figuring out that gene sequencing has pretty much ruled out the possibility that Adam and Eve could have provided enough genetic material 10,000 years ago to give rise to the human diversity we have today. For some, this is a crisis.

I am not sure why this particular evidence is more convincing to some than all the other evidence that the Adam and Eve story is not historical. But apparently, this latest evidence is provoking more thought than dinosaur bones, geological evidence, carbon dating, astronomy, evolution, common sense, or any of the other scientific evidence that challenges the historical Adam & Eve. What is particularly challenging to many is that if the story is not factual, then the snake may not have tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God. The original sin is in jeopardy for these folks. Maybe, there was no fall from god's grace! And if we didn't fall from grace then what is the point of Jesus?

This is the point that caught my attention. Original sin is so central to Christianity in a way I have never fathomed. For me, the story of Adam and Eve and the apple was always allegorical. Adam and Eve were perfectly happy to be nude, and live like

animals. In fact for me, they were animals in the sense that they were innocent. They were not self aware. The tree of knowledge provided the fruit that brought awareness, (knowledge is sin!) including shame of nudity as the first concern. This always made some sense to me. Once humans started becoming self aware, we became slightly different than other animals. I always have been thankful that the apple got et, because otherwise we would not be human. We would simply be non self-aware animals. Why Christians have always taught this was a fall, or a bad thing has always mystified me. And why would anyone give up the knowledge that makes us human to go back to a state of being an animal? I for one don't want to go back to the garden of Eden.

What I failed to comprehend is how important this original sin guilt is for many Christians. Without this guilt, their entire belief system starts to implode. How strange. To me, this guilt seems like hitting yourself with a hammer so that you can feel good when Jesus interrupts the hitting for brief spells. Then you remember, oh yeah I'm guilty, and start hitting yourself again!

I guess the universal blame can be comforting. At least we are all to blame, not just one of us. And, if you buy in, it makes the Jesus solution pretty darn compelling.

This idea that we are fallen, or flawed is a powerful one. Consider the opening words are from the Ojibwa Indians. It's not just Christians! The evidence is all around us. Yes we are "bad to the bone".

Oh yeah, this original sin stuff is a minefield of juicy religious nuggets. (Why did god tempt us? If god knew no evil, where did the snake come from? One caller pointed out that god put all this false evidence here to test our faith.). I guess the story of Adam and Eve and personal guilt resonates strongly enough for some to feel spiritual. But it really doesn't relate to my personal spirituality, except in a very indirect way. My talk had hit another snag.

MIDDLE

Back to the drawing board. So what is spiritual for me again? Change in perception when I am in nature?

I really didn't think the word spiritual or spirituality was a difficult concept. I know it when I feel it. A heightened reality, an intuitive feeling, a deep appreciation, a sense of accomplishment, a sense of awe or wonder, the feeling of being in love, deep gratitude, a sudden realization that a story resonates for me. All these and more seem spiritual to me.

In a recent UU world article Doug Muder defined spirituality as "an awareness of the gap between what you can experience and what you can describe,". Huhh? So if you can't describe something you are aware of, it is spiritual? Those of us who have a hard time expressing ourselves must be a lot more spiritual than the rest of you. This seems only peripherally to define spirituality to me.

In “Working on God” by Winifred Gallagher the author attended a Zen Buddhist retreat in California. She described sitting for hours meditating, to bring about a change of consciousness. And the spiritual awareness, the change of perception she describes sounds amazing. They seem to become one with the universe, losing their individuality. In short they experience a major change in perception.

While I believe Buddhism could be an amazing spiritual trip, I find it hard to imagine “wasting” the time to achieve the goal. Perhaps I am afraid I would become addicted to the spiritual awakening. After all, the adepts seem to meditate for decades. From the outside looking in at least this seems like a withdrawal from life. Kwong Roshi explained to Ms Gallagher when she asked what happens when we die? *“That’s being taken care of. Zen adepts don’t fear death, because they’ve practiced for it. Sitting kills the self. You see what that’s like so you’re not afraid of it.”* Instead of practicing for death I would rather live for life. I am sure I will have enough of death.

I have heard that there are some Israeli rabbis that spend all of their time studying their sacred texts. If I understand it correctly, they are supported by the taxes of their fellow citizens. Perhaps the knowledge and wisdom they garner is adequate, but again I find myself wondering if we all decided we want to be wise in this way, who would do the living? Who would pay the taxes? Is this deep living, or shallow narrowness in service to spirituality?

ENDING

So what does that leave.

In “Working on God” the author points out many aspect of Zen that align well with American ideas. A reading from that book.

“Despite its Asian trappings, in important respects Zen is as American as apple pie. Like the nation’s secular religion of sports, it teaches that peak performance looks simple but requires as Buddha said, pushing forward like an “ox that marches through the deep mire.” If I had to describe zazen in one word it would be exercise. On my hard cushion, I appreciate for the first time a systematic how-to approach to spiritual development that one does. Rather than ignoring the body or regarding it as a source of trouble, as in many forms of Western spirituality, Zen uses it. Like sports, this religion has clear rules, coaches, and equipment – a whole technology that helps people to become addicted to the activity and benefit from its unexpected side effects. Like working out, this spiritual practice unites body and mind, brings order to life, whispers that this too shall pass, and makes one feel good when it’s over.

Zen suits America in other ways, too. It shares her anarchic, playful sensibility, articulated by artists from Walt Whitman to Kurt Vonnegut: “I tell you, we are here on Earth to fart around, and don’t let anybody tell you any different.” Like Jefferson

democracy, it values independence and interdependence. Like Emersonian spirituality, it sees “big mind” embodied in each person, and life’s beauty and joy contained in everyday moments.

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This do it yourself, privatized faith is rooted not only in Emerson’s “God within” and John Muir’s idea of nature as cathedral but also in the political principles of religious freedom and the separation of church and state.

I have quoted this because it helps me clarify my own approach to spirituality and religion. My perspective is so American, these passages almost shocked me. My individualistic streak almost rebels that these are not my original ideas!

Peak performance looks easy when done right but requires lots of practice.
Irreverence and humor are a requirement of my life.
Independence of thought and individuality.
Life’s beauty and joy in everyday moments.
Muir’s Nature is a cathedral.
Emerson’s God within.

I find it hard to feel spiritual in most churches I have attended. The rituals seem arbitrary, the rules restrictive, and many of the teachings laughably archaic. There are exceptions. I have heard a few sermons that sent a shiver down my spine. But more often than not it is a shiver of “I can’t believe these people are taking this seriously”, than a shiver of “that is so true”. I feel much more spiritual going about my daily business, especially if I happen to be in the cathedral of the outdoors.

But what is “spiritual” about simply living. After all, I have lived for years at a time without feeling especially spiritual. The spiritual flashes I do feel seem fleeting and haphazard at first. But upon reflection, I realize they are perhaps more subtle, but infinitely more varied and frequent than first imagined. The “flashes” are really only the highlights. They are simply the most memorable recognitions of spirituality.

We live in an amazing time and place, right here and right now. Looking into a baby’s eyes, loving those around us, recognizing a beautiful sunset or warm fall day, enjoying the sense of accomplishment and pride in a job well done, enjoying the burn of strenuous exercise, giving someone a helping hand, telling a funny story, the taste of chocolate, the smell of wood smoke, solving a mystery, falling in love, and yes the thrill of a fish strike telegraphed down the line to the hand. When I stop to consider, these things are surrounding us and are unavoidable. I would argue that they are all spiritual, when examined closely.

Not all spiritual experiences are positive either. Breaking up with someone, losing a friend, experiencing depression or pain, realizing we have been insensitive, recognizing our mortality, feeling inadequate, feeling angry or jealous, and being unable to help someone when they need it are all part of spirituality. Indeed without the bad, we could

not understand or recognize the good. Recognizing that all experiences have a spiritual aspect helps us to grow and improve. My father's death is intensely spiritual for me.

Taking the time to recognize all of life, and enjoying it as best we can is my idea of spiritual. In this sense all of us can't help but be spiritual. But we can and do fail to recognize and appreciate our life. Living life and appreciating it is my idea of the best kind of spiritual. Coming here to this church to share your insights is my attempt to see the flashes, and try to more fully appreciate this amazing existence. This then is the spirituality of living.

Thank you