

Internal Responses and Reactions Reflected in External Behaviors: Some Observations and Questions Regarding Spirituality

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Reading Ronn Smith's presentation, "Becoming Whole: Working and Feeding the Spirit", I was spurred to preparation for my presentation today. As I did so, I began to be more aware of a pattern of definitions of spirituality in which "spiritual" appeared to be more internal in origin unless prescribed by an external dogma. Even in the latter case, one's interpretation and practice of external dogma was generally individual no matter the particular dogma's prescription. In both cases, whether of internal or external origin, assuming one believes in some form of spirituality, external behaviors are a reflection, for good or ill, of those spiritual beliefs or interpretations.

Along this line of thinking, it occurred to me that internal, thoughtful responses more often result in external behaviors that reflect positive purpose and intention, and are descriptive and respectful while addressing a given circumstance. In addition, they tend to reflect one's true spiritual beliefs or understandings more accurately. On the other hand, internal reactions appear to result in behaviors of dubious or negative purpose, uncertain intention and are more judgmental and disrespectful while addressing a given circumstance. At the same time, they tend to reflect one's true spiritual beliefs and understandings less accurately.

In our fellowship's statement of purpose we say, "We seek congruence between our beliefs and our actions". In our principles we state, "As Unitarians we affirm and promote: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations." and "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning." These appear to support the idea that spirituality in daily life is a dynamic process rather than a goal to be reached. Also Ronn Smith noted, "The capacity to suffer is no less a measure of spirituality than are goodness and wisdom." I'd like to suggest that the capacity to make mistakes is also no less a measure of spirituality than living with goodness and wisdom. I am thinking of "mistakes" here as behaving in ways that do not reflect one's true beliefs, but one sometimes behaves those ways anyhow.

I am going to tell you three stories to illustrate these thoughts. First, I grew up in a home that was a mini-United Nations. My Dad was always bringing home someone from a different country for dinner. This included people from Afghanistan, Somalia, Ireland, and many others. I learned at a young age that one used respectful terms and behaviors in regard to these guests. On the other hand, I was in junior high when I finally realized that the Republican Party was just that instead of the “damned Republicans”. I was confused about why respectfulness was required for one group of people and not the other. The intensity with which my Dad expressed himself in both cases probably led me delay my questions about the difference until I was older. It seemed like my Dad lived the Golden Rule for one group of people and not the other.

This second story bothers me to this day even though it happened over 40 years ago in Vietnam. For the most part, I lived my days within my principles as best I knew them at the time. I was and I am a conscientious objector, I worked with 82nd airborne medics, and I worked with Vietnamese women who served as kitchen help. As mess officer, I developed respectful working relationships with these delightful people. I called them by their given names and tried to respect their cultural and religious beliefs as I interacted with them. That’s the good part.

Now for an incident revealing a not so good part. During each soldier’s tour in Vietnam, he or she was granted a five-day R&R. That stands for rest and recuperation. As you might expect, one looked forward to those five days with great anticipation. We would pack and be permitted to wear civilian clothes. We could sleep in a real bed and eat something besides mess hall food or C rations. Yes. We looked forward to being around women every day. On the day of departure, we’d go to a particular terminal in the Tan San Nhut airport to obtain our tickets and board our flights. Then, this being a military operation, we’d hurry up and wait. During this waiting time, I struck up a conversation with two young privates who appeared to be of Japanese descent. We talked about our excitement and our hopes and plans for R&R. During that conversation, I said words that I regret to this day. I didn't realize until later what I had said and the negative impact it must have had.

Somewhere in the conversation I said, "It will sure be nice to see some round eyes." or words to that effect. Since I was a lieutenant and they were privates or because they were too kind to call me to account, they said nothing. When I realized what I said, we had departed on separate flights and it was too late to apologize or to ask for their forgiveness. I am truly sorry, but they will never know it.

Of course, I have tried never to do something of that nature again. Yes. Those words may have been part of the vernacular at the time. I am sure I said them without malicious intent. They just happened. They were not part of me as I saw myself. They did not reflect what I believed, what I felt, or even what I meant. I have been able, for the most part, to forgive myself. There is a part of me that still wants to look those two men in the eye, apologize, and hope for their forgiveness.

Third, I was riding in a jeep on back roads between Saigon and Long Binh with one of my medics driving. As we were coming into a small village he clipped a boy riding a bike and knocked him to the side of the road. I looked back and the boy was already mounting his bike and moving on. I was outraged and yelled something like, "What the F.... are you doing? You could've seriously injured or killed that boy." My medic replied, "What's the problem, Lieutenant? He's only a gook." I was stunned and then probably chewed on him for a while. At the same time, I was torn between stopping to check on the boy and my fears about what might happen to us if we stopped long enough for someone to draw a bead on us. As I reflected on this incident, I was surprised at the intensity of my response as triggered not just by my medic's act, but seemingly more so by his "He's only a gook" comment. A disrespectful, angry, judgmental reaction was triggered in me. Yet, who was I to judge considering my words to the two privates noted above? This was not one of my proudest moments. I should have stopped. Instead, I made a "safe choice" rather than a "growth choice" as Abraham Maslow might have said it. Certainly, I made a choice that was not in accordance with my espoused beliefs.

On the other hand, there were times, hopefully, the majority of times, that I did function in accordance with my beliefs. One of the religious or cultural beliefs of the ladies who were kitchen help is an example. If one's eyes were above the person whom you were addressing, it was considered an expression of authority over them. I made it a point to try to squat like them which killed my football knees. So when we had meetings, I had them sit on the steps of the mess hall while I was on the ground. This may not seem like much, but it was really an ice breaker. They began to mess with me and feign confusion when they knew exactly what I was telling them. This left me looking foolish and they would laugh like crazy. They also invited me to their homes. We had fun together and respected each other. Our relationships felt right for all of us.

Another instance had to do with our Army issued "care packages" which were definitely not like the ones from home. The Army care packages were writing materials, cigarettes, matches, candy, and the like. Hershey bars were made with a heavy dose of paraffin because they would melt less quickly. For some reason, the cigarettes were mostly Viceroy's – not a popular brand. I used to save them for one of my medics who did like them. Then I'd take them to him when I rode the supply helicopter out to his firebase. It was nothing big, but he appreciated it.

Helping others has been a value of mine since growing up in a family where that was done every day. In regard to that, a long time ago I went canoeing with a friend. We capsized in a rapids and the canoe became stuck. We had to hike out of a deep canyon to find our vehicle and face his dad. Later we and some friends returned to retrieve the canoe. It involved four of us forming a human chain anchored to a tree on the bank. My friend secured a rope around a thwart and we tied the other end to that tree. Fortunately, our human chain held because those rapids were not friendly waters.

It had become dark by the time we started back out of the canyon to find our vehicle. We lost our way in the dark and were becoming cold in addition to being wet. We wandered for a while until we saw a light in the window of a cabin. We told the man there that we couldn't find our vehicle. He was familiar with the area and had a pretty good idea where it was. Then he loaded five of us along with himself into his brand new Oldsmobile F 85. For those of you who don't remember, that was one of the first compact cars which was small and built low to the ground. On the way out he dented his car, beat up the undercarriage, and drove on until locating our vehicle. When we offered to pay him, he said, "I won't take your money. However, if you ever find someone along the way who needs help, give it to them. That is all I need from you." I have tried to live up to that ever since. I have said those words many times in response to offers of payment. It's the right thing to do. It feels right. That feeling is a sort of contentment knowing that I helped someone and maybe one day that person will help someone else in need.

As I have written about thoughtful responses and negative reactions on my part that have both resulted in negative and positive behaviors on my part, it is clear that they are part of a whole. Once again that sentence in Ronn Smith's paper came to my attention. That sentence is, "The capacity to suffer is no less a measure of spirituality than our goodness and wisdom." My paraphrase of that sentence is, "The capacity to be triggered to reactive negative behaviors is no less a measure of spirituality than our capacity to respond with thoughtful respectful behaviors." It seems to me that the former leads more readily to a greater drain of emotional strength than does the latter. One may be physically and emotionally exhausted by one's efforts to do the right thing as best one can determine that. As noted above, one can walk away from those efforts with a feeling of contentment and the belief that they can gain the strength to do so again. On the other hand, when one submits to being triggered from within into reactive negative behaviors, there is a feeling of awfulness and disappointment in oneself that in fact drains one emotionally and physically. The hope here lies in learning more and more about oneself and how one can preclude, intervene, mitigate or in whatever way possible reduce or eliminate the damage that thoughtless negative behaviors can do.

I've learned that the primary feeling triggers for my negative behaviors tend to be anger, fear, and my perception of others or myself being hurt in fact or only in my perception or misperception. The misperceptions are often really embarrassing. Both my prophylaxes and my antidotes for these negative behaviors are calming, taking time, deep cleansing breaths, reflection, and introspection. I learned a shorthand formula for this calming process from 10 year old boy who was a client many years ago. He had been sent to the Wyoming Behavioral Institute for inpatient treatment for anger and impulse control. He brought back a list of stress coping skills. I have found that if you can do one of these, the others may be unnecessary. Here is a shorthand sign I made up for that skill and have handed out to literally hundreds of people. It is titled SBTA.

STOP what you are doing
BREATHE a deep cleansing breath
THINK what's best to do
ACT that way

The breathing sends more oxygen to your brain so you can calm and think more clearly. Just think how desperate you become when you can't breathe. The opposite is also true. A deep cleansing breath can lead you to calm.

Thus, there is something one can do even when the darker side of one's spirituality comes out. That side is spiritual in that it forces one to examine oneself and to, hopefully, improve or do better the next time. It has to do not just with what you do, but also with how you respond to the expression of that darker side. You can have a thoughtful, respectful response to a negative behavior on your part or on the part of others. That can feel right even if it's through making honest apologies and amends followed by real efforts to change for the better.

In closing, I will show you a paraphrase of a novelty highway caution sign I have in my office to share with clients. It says,

CAUTION: Be sure brain is engaged before putting mouth [or actions] in gear. I really do try to do this, but I'm not always successful.