

## **“On Being Religious”**

**A sermon by the Rev. Libby Smith**

(note: sermons are living entities and change in the preaching of them. This captures the gist of what I presented but is not word-for-word!)

**Reading:** “Impassioned Clay” by Ralph N. Helverson

Deep in ourselves resides the religious impulse.

Out of the passions of our clay it rises.

We have religion when we stop deluding ourselves  
that we are self-sufficient, self-sustaining or self-derived.

We have religion when we hold some hope beyond the present,  
some self-respect beyond our failures.

We have religion when our hearts are capable of leaping up at beauty,  
when our nerves are edged by some dream in our heart.

We have religion when we have an abiding gratitude  
for all that we have received.

We have religion when we look upon people  
with all their failings and still find in them good;  
when we look beyond people to the grandeur in nature  
and to the purpose in our own heart.

We have religion when we have done all that we can,  
and then in confidence entrust ourselves  
to the life that is  
larger than ourselves.

**Sermon:** I work with a lot of couples who are planning weddings or commitment ceremonies, and one of things I often hear from them – to explain why they don't belong to a church, but still want a minister to do their ceremony – is “Well, we're spiritual, but not religious.”

You've probably heard this phrase – maybe you've used it to describe yourself. I learned this

summer that it's an official category with a box you can check on match.com. (No, I wasn't on there looking, this came up in a conversation with a friend.)

Now, we could argue all morning about the definitions of the words “spiritual” and “religious.” But I'd really rather not. I'm reminded of the bit in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, when poor Alice winds up in a bewildering conversation with Humpty Dumpty. One of my favorite lines: 'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.' This morning I ask you to just go with me as I define these terms, and understand that's how I'm using them. You don't have to agree with my definition, but at least you'll know what I'm talking about and we'll have a common framework, if only for the next twenty minutes.

My experience has been that most people tend to use “spiritual” to describe an individual, personal journey. “Religion,” on the other hand, tends to connote a more structured, organized, and communal experience. That's how I'm choosing to use them this morning. For many people, their religion provides the framework within which they develop, explore and experience their spiritual life.

Often the word “religion” gets equated with rigidity, dogma, and religious conservatism – all the things of which Unitarian Universalists tend to be skeptical.

But there is no reason why the conservative, rigid and dogmatic voices of religion should be allowed to corner the market on what it means to be religious people. While “spiritual but not religious” can be perfectly sufficient for an individual, personal journey, Unitarian Universalism is – dare I say it? – a religion. We come together in religious communities. We are a liberal religious movement. And if a religious movement can't claim its identity as religious, it's lost a lot of its power.

I want to share with you some words from A. Powell Davies, the great Unitarian preacher of the 40's and 50's:

The religion that says freedom! – freedom from ignorance and false belief; freedom

from spurious claims and bitter prejudices; freedom to seek the truth, both old and new, and freedom to follow it; freedom from the hates and greeds that divide human kind and spill the blood of every generation; freedom for honest thought, freedom for equal justice, freedom to seek the true, the good and the beautiful . . . the religion that says humankind is not divided – except by ignorance and prejudice and hate; the religion that sees humankind as naturally one and waiting to be spiritually united; the religion that proclaims an end to all exclusions – and declares a brother and sisterhood unbounded! The religion that knows that we shall never find the fullness of the wonder and glory of life until we are ready to share it, that we shall never have hearts big enough for the love of God until we have made them big enough for the world-wide love of one another.”

And then he goes on: “As you have listened to me, have you thought perchance that this is your religion? If you have, do not congratulate yourself. Stop long enough to recollect the miseries of the world you live in; the fearful cruelties, the enmities, the hate, the bitter prejudices, the need of such a world for such a faith. And if you still can say that this of which I have spoken is your religion, ask yourself this question: what are you doing with it?”

Davies wasn't one to mince words. He was passionately and powerfully committed to his religion – the religion called Unitarianism. (This was before the Unitarians and Universalists consolidated in 1961.) He knew that for us to have an impact in the world and to be a meaningful partner in any kind of religious or interfaith dialogue, we had to claim our power as a religious movement. And he was unapologetic about it. He didn't say “well, we're not really religious, we're sort of “religion-lite,” as I've heard some contemporary UUs say. He claimed religion as a powerful and positive force and defined what he understood it to be.

It's no wonder that many of us are uncomfortable with the label of religion. Many of us have experienced religion as restrictive, disrespectful or oppressive. Or, even if we haven't had bad experiences with religion, it's so commonly defined as a set of beliefs and doctrines that it may be hard to imagine religion meaning something bigger than that.

But religion is much bigger than a set of proscribed beliefs. I have been a Unitarian

Universalist all my life. My beliefs about God, human nature, the universe, the meaning of life – all those things have changed many times, have grown as I have grown. I have been fiercely atheistic during long segments of my journey. I now identify as a liberal Christian. But I have always considered myself a religious person.

You may choose not to claim the word “religious” as a positive word in your lexicon. It's not my goal to convince you of anything. But I'm a religious leader in a religious movement, and if I don't have a positive understanding of that word, I've got a real problem.

So this morning I want to lay out for you what I understand “religious” to be, within the context of our liberal religious tradition of Unitarian Universalism, and to invite you to think more deeply about your own understandings.

I said earlier that the word “spirituality” tends to imply a more individual journey, while “religion” tends to describe a more collective experience. Of course these two dimensions are in no way mutually exclusive! You can be spiritual and religious. Some of my own spiritual life takes place outside the realm of an organized religion. Moments of meditation, certain kinds of reading that I do, singing along with music that speaks to my heart, or sitting on a rock watching the endlessly changing ocean, can all be spiritual experiences.

But much of my spiritual life takes place within the realm of organized religion. Singing hymns, for example, is the best way I know how to pray. And for the prayer to feel really deep, I need to sing harmony. You can't do that alone! I'm fortunate now to be bi-denominational – I have joined a small Mennonite community near my home -- and for Mennonites, congregational singing is a deep and powerful tradition. So when I sing hymns with a community of fellow seekers, or when I go to the deep places within myself to write a sermon for a Unitarian Universalist community, or when I am taken to the deep places listening to someone else's sermon, I am practicing my spirituality within the framework of religion. The same is true when I participate in a community that encourages my transformation, that inspires me to greater service and then provides opportunities to serve. Much of what I need to seek the depths in my spiritual life comes to me through my involvement with religious community.

So for me, the fact that I have a religion – well, two religions, both Unitarian Universalism and the Mennonite Church – my religious identity gives me a home, a framework and a community within which to explore and deepen my spirituality. I certainly accept that not all people need a religion within which to do those things. But I do, and I believe many people do. The religious scholar Houston Smith once said that religion gives traction to spirituality. I love that image.

Religion, at its best, gives us the structure and support to do the things we want to do and know are right but may have trouble living out on our own. The example that comes to mind most vividly for me at this time of year are the Jewish High Holy Days, a time for self-examination and reflection, a time for mending relationships and getting right with others and with God. We all know this is a good thing to do all the time, but it's so easy to let it slide. Most of us do better with a deadline when we're facing a difficult task. The rhythm and structure of the religious year provides a framework to help us do what we know we should do. Religion both challenges and supports us in our effort to live as our best selves.

So I've begun by suggesting that spirituality and religion are two sides of the same coin, one more individual, and one more communal. But even if we go with that distinction, there are plenty of people who don't consider Unitarian Universalism a religion, primarily because we don't have a common set of beliefs or require a belief in God. And for many people, the idea of "religion" is so linked to doctrine and creed that the idea of a religion without those things seems a contradiction.

So what makes us a religion? What are the characteristics of religion?

On a website called Ancient Sites I found this description: "*Religare* is the latin word for "to reconnect, to bind together" which gave origin to the word *religion*. Attempts to define religion are manifold and various, but for the time being we will just say that religion is at the heart of an ancient human longing for meaning and oneness, inspiring both the civil and spiritual life."

Some of my colleagues have come up with beautiful, succinct definitions. The late Forrest

Church, for many years the minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York, said that religion is the human response to being alive and having to die. Galen Guengerich, who is now the senior minister at All Souls, said “In my view, religion is constituted by two distinct but related impulses: a sense of awe and a sense of obligation.” I'll come back to that one.

I haven't pinned it down quite as neatly as those two – who are widely recognized to be among the best and most articulate contemporary theologians in our movement. But I have my own set of themes that I consider fundamental to what it means to be religious. Of course, any one of these themes could be a sermon of its own. And there is overlap among these different themes, although each has its own characteristics. As I played with them, I found that one seemed to lead naturally into the next.

One element of religious life is the choice to come together in an intentional, covenantal community. Of course there are many examples of communities that are not religious in nature. But our religious communities are bound together by our promises, our way of being with each other, in a way that secular communities often are not. So that understanding of covenantal community is one thing that I believe makes us religious.

Religion involves living with reverence and gratitude. Reverence for life was the cornerstone of Albert Schweitzer's life and work. It's that experience of standing in awe before the beauty and complexity and sometimes even the pain and sorrow of our experience. It requires awareness and it evokes gratitude.

Reverence doesn't hinge on a belief in God, so it's equally accessible to theists, humanists, people of all religious affiliations. It's a universal human religious response, one that can unite rather than divide people of different faiths.

And through that response of reverence we begin to experience another piece of what I believe it means to be religious – a connection to something larger than ourselves. Some of us use language of god or spirit to express that larger reality. For others it has to do with experiencing our place in the cosmos, the vast and complex natural world in which we live. For still others the emphasis may be on the deep connection among human beings and the

community we for together. But however we feel and name it, an important dimension of religion is this realization that it's not all about us, but that we are part of something astonishing that is much bigger than we are. And religion at its best helps us to experience and appreciate that connection and try to understand our place in it.

Religion also calls us to cultivate compassion. Religious historian Karen Armstrong has argued that compassion is the common ground among all religious traditions. Like reverence, it's a universal human religious response, born out of our experience of connectedness to that larger reality and our experience of common humanity within that larger reality.

And then, if we have really experienced reverence, connection and compassion, we are led naturally to a desire for service. Religion can't only be about looking inward, but also about looking outward, seeking to transform the world. I come back here to Galen Guengerich's words: "In my view, religion is constituted by two distinct but related impulses: a sense of awe and a sense of obligation." The awe is, I think, what I have called reverence, and if we experience that and all that it brings to us fully, then we begin to understand our obligation to contribute, to serve others, to preserve and improve this astonishing world we find ourselves in.

I also believe that religion is about breaking down barriers. In his book [A Passion for the Possible](#), William Sloan Coffin says that religious people must be notorious boundary crossers. It's easy to see the way that religion can put up the barriers between people, drawing lines in the sand to define who belongs and who does not. But religion at its best is about reaching across those boundaries, seeking to know and understand those who are different from us. Jesus crossed boundaries all the time, and it's a major theme of his preaching and teaching, although it sometimes gets left out of the Christian message. Because this element is sometimes neglected in other religious traditions, we have a particular obligation to lift it up, to celebrate and promote the ideals of inclusion and acceptance, of reaching out and seeking to understand and appreciate those we experience as different from ourselves.

I believe that all religions should seek to do or experience these things – to be in community,

to live with reverence, to cultivate compassion, to feel our connection with a larger reality, to serve others, and break down barriers between people. I believe that religion at its best is about these things.

And yet I also acknowledge that religion is often not at its best. Including our own. So I want to close by repeating the challenge that A. Powell Davies expressed so eloquently in his sermon: “As you have listened to me, have you thought perchance that this is your religion? If you have, do not congratulate yourself. Stop long enough to recollect the miseries of the world you live in; the fearful cruelties, the enmities, the hate, the bitter prejudices, the need of such a world for such a faith. And if you still can say that this of which I have spoken is your religion, ask yourself this question: what are you doing with it?”