

Please join me in a moment of meditation and prayer. Spirit of Life that flows through and between us, we open our hearts, minds, and souls to all that is good and holy so that we may be renewed and refreshed. May the words of my mouth, the meditations of all our hearts, and the ways we live our lives bring more love, justice, and compassion into this world. May it be so and amen.

There's a river flowin' in my soul.  
There's a river flowin' in my soul.  
And it's tellin' me, that I'm somebody.  
There's a river flowin' in my soul.

I had the privilege of being in Eugene, Oregon, the last nine days for work. The PeaceHealth hospital system that I work for has upgraded to a new electronic medical record and it is a software that I have extensive training in, so I partnered with my colleagues in Oregon as they navigated their upgrade.

Before I left I was so busy that I did not make time to research the area I was going to, so imagine my surprise when I got to there to see that a river really does run through it! In fact, I communed with three rivers while I was there: the Willamette River, which my hotel backed up to, the McKenzie River, which my hospital backed up to, and the Siuslaw River, which I followed along as I drove west to Florence, and bore witness to where it flowed into the Pacific Ocean, where I also spent time. I feel amazingly fortunate to have been surrounded by such beauty while I was working away from home. My colleagues were great but naturally were quite stressed to be navigating new software while simultaneously providing patient care, so to practice personal sustainability, I spent as much time as I could at the rivers so I would feel refreshed and renewed while working with them.

Water has often been used as a symbol for the deepest spiritual nourishment of humanity. My soul has often felt most nourished when I am near water, any body of water, whether it is a lake, river, or ocean. One of my favorite images is in the Creation myth of the Hebrew Scriptures, in the book of Genesis, where it reads, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters."<sup>1</sup> When I am near water, I feel a deep connection to the God of my understanding and a desire for even more. That longing for connection, for God, for the sacred, the divine, mystery, the transcendent or whatever one wishes to call that which lies beyond, is one way to describe spirituality.

But spirituality can be described in many ways. Some find spirituality in traditional religious expression, such as prayer, sacred reading, pilgrimage, or worship. Some connect spirituality with life experiences. These can be as varied as digging in the garden, camping under the stars, kayaking down a river, working shoulder to shoulder for an important cause, or breaking bread together over a shared meal. Whether religious or

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:1-2, New International Version (NIV)

not, most of us connect spirituality with activities and practices that make “more” of us, that take us beyond ourselves, that point us to our core beliefs, and to the relationships that matter most.

Spirituality is a universal human phenomenon; it is found in every culture, in every age. No one religion holds the corner market on spirituality, though they have certainly tried. It seems to be human nature, as our reading illustrates. Spirituality, the “Water of Life”, bubbles up, renews and refreshes us, and then we want to keep it to ourselves. Build walls around it. We create elaborate rules for who can drink that precious water, and we put locks on the gates.

The historical tie between religion and spirituality can be traced back to the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages, where the priest was officially charged with cura animarum, the cure and care of the soul. The church was the center of spiritual activity and the priest was in charge of all spiritual matters. Much of humanity has tied together religion and spirituality ever since but, spirituality and religion are not the same.

There are many spiritual people who are not religious. By the same token, there are many religious people who are not spiritual.

Religion is one path to spirituality but it is not the only path. Genuine spirituality can be found within and beyond the walls of organized religion because the sacred is everywhere. Unitarian Universalism draws from many sources and one of them is the Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life. What that means is that no one can take experiences away from us that we have had with the transcendent or stop us drinking from a sacred stream that fills our souls.

In his book, *Care for the Soul*, Thomas Moore says that, “‘Soul’ is not a thing, but a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value, relatedness, hearts, and personal substance.”<sup>2</sup>

In our time, the word ‘soul’ has most often been associated with theology and religion. But in Ancient Greece the word ‘psyche’ meant ‘soul’ and it was a human term that referred to the center and deepest passion of the human being. It is still difficult to define but I would suggest we return it to its humanistic meanings from Ancient Greece.

I think it is difficult to define because we Westerners, and especially we Unitarian Universalists, like to be rational, but the soul is not wooed by rationality. It is wooed by mystery and imagination. It is stirred by music, or a poem, in a ceremony, or by a symbol. It is touched in our lovemaking. The catch of the breath, the awe in the heart,

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<sup>2</sup> Moore, Thomas. *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating and Sacredness in Everyday Life*. Harper Perennial, 1988.

the lump in the throat, the tears in the eyes—these are the signs that let us know we have touched our souls, and the souls of others.

Shall we gather at the river, where bright angel feet have trod,  
With its crystal tide forever flowing by the throne of God?  
Yes, we'll gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river,  
Gather with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of God.  
The evening before I left for Oregon, I had an appointment with my new therapist.  
Apparently I failed to impress upon her how busy I was going to be because she thought it was a good idea to give me some homework, you know, to keep me engaged in the therapeutic process while I was away.

She asked me to watch a Youtube video of Brene Brown, who is a research professor at the University of Houston's Graduate College of Social Work. Her TED talk is called, "The Power of Vulnerability".<sup>3</sup> I said to my therapist, "I'd rather read a good book." But, I watched the video, and what I learned is that Brene would have also preferred to read a good book about vulnerability, rather than experience it herself, but that is now how life turned out for her.

In her 20-minute video, which now y'all get to watch because I'm giving you homework, Brene makes some powerful statements. She says, "Connection is why we're here. In order for connection to happen, we have to allow ourselves to be seen. Really seen. Vulnerability is necessary." She goes on to say, "Spirituality is inherently vulnerable. It is believing in things we don't understand or really can't see. It is allowing ourselves to soften into loving someone. Into caring about something passionately. It is learning to love with our whole hearts even though there's no guarantee."

Part of my work at St. Joe's Hospital is as the chaplain on the palliative care team. Palliative Care is specialized medical care for people with serious, life-limiting illness. The goal is to improve quality of life for the patient and family. Sometimes as we improve quality of life, a person lives longer; but sometimes, even with increased quality, a person's body wears out from the disease process and they die. Our goal at that point is to make them as comfortable as possible. Palliative Care is work that I am passionate about but it is not work that I ever imagined myself doing.

I used to be afraid of death and dying. My younger brother, Richard, was murdered by gun violence at the age of 25. It was as horrible as you could possibly imagine and I was not sure I would recover from it, or that I even wanted to try. I felt like my soul was mortally wounded. I became afraid of death and started to fear that everyone I loved would die violently.

My pastor at that time helped me find a wonderful therapist so I could begin a healing journey. Over the years, and with much support, I started to realize that I was still

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzlf7o>

connected to my brother. That relationships do not end after someone dies. The Law of Conservation of Energy states that, “Energy cannot be created or destroyed. Energy never disappears but it does change form.”<sup>4</sup>

As I connected ever more deeply with my spirituality, with the God of my understanding, and with my beloved faith community, I began to heal. I was also blessed with an amazing partner in healing, my beloved Lisa. I’m happy to say we just celebrated our 17<sup>th</sup> anniversary. With my healing, came gifts, and I believe they came from Richard. Over time in my parish and hospital ministry, I started to notice that I was able to be with people in their most vulnerable times of dying and death. I willingly entered into that space and helped hold it for them. I eventually wound my way into Palliative Care, which is where I do some of my deepest spiritual and emotional work with patients and families. I believe that Richard and I do this healing work together in partnership. He has given me the courage to be present at times like this, and I believe that every time I gently and lovingly touch someone who is dying, it brings healing not only to my patients and families, but also to my brother. It heals his soul from the violent death that he suffered, and it heals my soul, too.

This past Wednesday, October 5<sup>th</sup>, while I was still in Oregon, marked 19 years since my brother died. Richard and I gathered at the beautiful River, and I was reminded that love is stronger than death.

Spirituality is inherently vulnerable. It is learning to love with our whole hearts even though there are no guarantees.

All the great religious traditions teach us that spirituality is about relationship. Relationship with ourselves. Relationship with others. Relationship with the God of our understanding. Relationship with the Great Mystery that is this Cosmos we find ourselves living in.

Our relationships matter. Our partnerships matter. A spirituality of partnership considers all that we do to enrich the spaces between and among us. From love and healing, to commitment, to fostering right relationship, mutuality, and growth, to name just a few.

Here are some questions to explore about our partnerships: Are our partnerships places of honesty, encouragement, and safety? Or are they fraught with conflict and resentment? Do we empower one another in our partnerships or do we insist that others play small so that we won’t feel threatened? I would ask us to consider all that we can do to make the spaces between us worthy of the designation “sacred”.

And finally, let’s consider the aim of spirituality. Dr. David Elkins, in his book *Beyond Religion* says, “The aim of spirituality is compassion. The word compassion literally means ‘to suffer with.’ Spiritual life springs from the tenderness of the heart, and

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<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservation\\_of\\_energy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservation_of_energy)

authentic spirituality expresses itself through loving action toward others.”<sup>5</sup> I would offer to you that in fact we are our brother’s and sister’s keeper. That because we are touched by the pain and suffering of others, we join hands with them, and work toward the common good.

One of the best examples we have of that here at BUF is our partnership with Community to Community. So many of you stand shoulder to shoulder with them for a great cause. And after nearly three years of marches, walkouts, lawsuits, and pickets urging a boycott, farm workers at Sukama Brothers Farm in Burlington, Washington, voted on Sept. 12 to join a union. We are going to hear more about this in just a little bit from our guest.

Cura animarum, the cure and care of the soul, used to be the responsibility of the priest. But the Protestants came along in their Reformation and said that one’s spirituality should not be mediated by the priest or under the control of the Institutional Church. The message of the Protestant Reformation was that it honored the individual conscience over the power of the Institution. The Renaissance came along and took the freedom of the individual to an even higher level. But as we know, with freedom comes responsibility. Cura animarum is now our personal responsibility. That means we have to find ways to nurture our souls and the souls of those we love and partner with.

Spirituality then can be understood as the care and feeding of the human soul, and just a like a river, the care and feeding of our souls can come from and flow in many directions.

Spirituality does not protect us from the tragic realities of human existence. What it does is sustain us during the dark night of our soul, so that we might find the healing we need, and so that when we do, we can offer it to others.

Spirituality is universal. The longing that flows in our veins is no different than the longing that flows in the veins of every woman, man, and child.

Spirituality is inherently vulnerable and being vulnerable with one another changes us because it opens up a space where there is room for many things to flow between us.

A spirituality of partnership considers all that we do to enrich the spaces between and among us.

In the days ahead, may we drink deeply from the rivers of healing.

May we enter the stream of connection and let the space between us flow with love, commitment, mutuality and growth.

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<sup>5</sup> Elkins, David. Ph.D., *Beyond Religion: A Personal Program For Building A Spiritual Life Outside The Walls Of Traditional Religion*. Quest Books, Wheaton, Illinois, p 33.

May we nurture an authentic spirituality that awakens our souls, that connects us with the Sacred, and that gives us a passion for life, so that no matter what season we find ourselves in, we can say this:

When peace like a river attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll,  
Whatever my lot Thou has taught me to say,  
“It is well, it is well, with my soul.”  
It is well (It is well)  
With my soul (With my soul)  
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Blessed be and amen.