

FIVE ELEMENTS OF A SPIRITUAL EDUCATION
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READINGS

From an essay by UU Minister Annie Foerster

During one of our Continental General Assemblies of Unitarian Universalists, I arrived for breakfast one morning at the head of the crowd. Selecting a table, I asked the man eating there, "Mind if I join you?" He waved his assent.

It wasn't until I was seated that I noticed his name badge didn't look like mine. "You're not a Unitarian Universalist?" I asked inanely. "I'm an ophthalmologist," he replied without a hint of irony.

It seemed that the two conventions were overlapping at the hotel that weekend. While the Unitarian Universalists were arriving for their event, the eye doctors were departing, having completed their agenda.

We exchanged names and personal data. He was an ophthalmologist who had entered research when he retired from practice, and was quite excited about the possibilities of his recent inquiries into the causes of glaucoma. "I've always liked my job," he told me, "Because I was able to do something for other people. Now I'll be able to do something for people I've never met, years after I'm gone."

Then it was my turn. I told him about the two churches I serve and the joys of ministry and its trials. I spoke of my excitement regarding the UU movement, the kinds of ideas that intrigue me and how they inspire and inform the sermons I write.

He listened intently, and when I had finished, smiled at me as though he had made a profound discovery. "You know, he said, "I think we are both in the business of helping people to see better."

What a perceptive man. Seeing better is what it's all about, isn't it? And what we're all working on. All of our doubting, and thinking and discussing and learning, of being open to new experiences and intrigued by old truths - this is our way of trying to lift the scales from our eyes and see where we are in the world, and why.

** REFLECTIONS **

"May you have the misfortune to live in interesting times," is a familiar curse of purportedly Chinese origin. Hardly a day passes that I don't wonder whether our own culture, our own generation, isn't the victim of that curse, for these are most certainly interesting times. And for those of us familiar with the religious aspect of our culture, they seem particularly interesting.

What makes them interesting are the contrasts and the contradictions. On the one hand, we have witnessed in recent decades an upsurge of interest in religion of the most reactionary and irrational sort. Prior to that quasi-religious blockbuster **Avatar** the most watched movie of the new century was **Mel Gibson's** over-the-top depiction of Christ's passion. The best selling books of the last decade - the **Left Behind** series - describe with lip-smacking delight the apocalypse and Christ's glorious triumph over Satanically-inspired liberalism. Conservative evangelical mega-churches have drawn throngs to worship each Sunday and claim memberships of up to 80,000.

But then there is the flip-side to all of this. The number of Americans claiming no religious affiliation continues to grow as well, and now stands at over 20% of the population. Dismay over the inordinate influence of the religious right in our own country, and of fundamentalist movements world-wide, has caused increasing millions to forswear organized religion altogether. This helps explain why books like *The End of Faith* by **Sam Harris** and *The God Delusion* by **Richard Dawkins** have become surprise best-sellers. The result, it appears, is a more polarized religious climate than we've seen in quite some time.

There is also a second set of contradictions, brought fully into focus by the recent economic downturn. Tens of millions of Americans, encouraged in many cases by Evangelical "prosperity" preachers like **Joel Osteen and T.D. Jakes**, abandoned financial common sense for a half-baked vision of suburban paradise. Instead of basing their lives and defining their ambitions in terms of non-material values - family, friendship, service, learning, communion with nature -- they grabbed for the proverbial gold ring, only to realize that what they were really holding was a sub-prime mortgage.

What happened, we might ask, to those quintessential American virtues extolled by Philadelphia's own **Ben Franklin** and a host of pragmatic successors: prudence, patience, thrift, diligence, moderation. These remain important themes in the work of thoughtful modern writers like **Wendell Berry, Kathleen Norris and Bill McKibben**, but they are hardly mainstream.

Thanks to a corporate-controlled mass media, the ethos of over-consumption remains firmly in place and those who encourage greater restraint are like prophets crying into the wilderness.

Now, some might say that this is basically an economic and social problem, but I would maintain that it is rooted in an idolatrous form of spirituality. And so we ask: where do we find a faith-based community in which dogmatism - whether theistic or atheistic - does not prevail? And where can a person go to explore viable alternatives to the seductive but ultimately unsatisfying message of today's consumer culture. Where can we find support in living with intellectual integrity, moral responsibility and mature spirituality?

For me, and I hope for you, the answer is self-evident: Unitarian Universalism.

What I find most compelling and most attractive about the liberal religious tradition is that it gives far less weight to spiritual conversion than to spiritual investigation. Progressive churches and fellowships are and always have been "universities of the spirit," and it is this more curious, inquisitive approach to the religious enterprise that I'd like to focus on today.

I believe, and Unitarian Universalists in general believe in the power of religious and spiritual education to redeem human experience. If I were of a different religious persuasion I might emphasize the sacraments, faithful reception of God=s revealed Word, or charismatic renewal as central to the soul's health and well-being. My confidence, however, is in the capacity of human beings to learn and to find fulfillment through that ongoing, open-ended endeavor.

I suspect that for most people - perhaps even most ministers - religious education suggests content: the bodies of doctrine, moral and ecclesiastical obligations and institutional nuts & bolts that give any particular faith tradition its concrete identity.

A content-centered spiritual education would require learning by rote the elements of a catechism, and someone so oriented would possess a basic knowledge of the confessions, rituals, behavioral norms, decision-making mechanisms and sources of authority for their chosen faith.

Without denying its importance, I would argue that for religious liberals education of this sort is not of the essence and it is not the key to spiritual development and deepening. Why? Well, for one thing, once the catechism has been studied, it is then laid more or less permanently aside. Infrequently do

members of faith communities integrate those core teachings into their lives, or attempt over time to mine them for deeper meaning.

One woman's experience in a mainline protestant church was all too typical. After "shopping around" for a number of years, she finally decided to make a commitment to a congregation where she felt reasonably comfortable. Learning of her desire to become a member, the minister directed her to a catechism class, which she began avidly to attend. But the further the class progressed, the more exception she took to that denomination's doctrines. Disappointed, she went back to the minister, saying that she had decided to forego membership because she couldn't in good conscience endorse the creedal statements.

"But my dear," the minister responded, "You don't have to believe them, only to memorize them."

As troubling as that minister's hypocrisy was the underlying message conveyed by his response: we don't take our spiritual traditions very seriously, and neither should you.

Personally, I do believe that acquaintance with the sacred history, sources of inspiration, theological underpinnings and shared rituals of one's faith community contributes significantly to our identification with and commitment to it. The more we know about such things, the greater the likelihood that a religion will become part of our own identity and the less likely we will be to drift away after the first flush of excitement has subsided.

But if discrete historical and ideological information is all that spiritual education consists of, it simply won't be compelling enough. Why? Because it will have failed to address the reasons people are drawn to faith communities to begin with. For that sort of education, and to respond to those promptings, we must look elsewhere.

A more complete and encompassing education would, in the first place, highlight the difference between **needs and wants**. Throughout history, this perennial spiritual and psychological issue has received attention from Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in the Ancient Mediterranean, from the Benedictine and the Franciscan friars in Christian Europe, and from Buddhists and Jains in the Far East.

All of these traditions drew a similar conclusion: that somewhere between the extremes of asceticism and self-indulgence a happy medium can be found - a "middle way" that creates the optimal conditions for spiritual growth and the attainment of true serenity.

Those who fail to draw this critical distinction will forever be victimized by their own powerful craving -- their unslaked thirst for superfluous satisfactions whose acquisition only whets the appetite for more. The Bible calls this "covetousness" and it not only produces dissatisfaction, it warps the entire personality. It is the taproot of resentment, envy, self-pity and a host of other vices.

Perhaps no era needs this knowledge as much as our own, an era largely defined by the relentless manufacturing and marketing of new "wants." Writing in *Harper's Magazine*, Curtis White complains that "most of what we actually do with our money is tragic and stupid...because most of the things we buy are not necessities but hindrances."

As already mentioned, words like "moderation," "frugality" and "temperance" that were once meaningful are today considered antiquated and even a tad unpatriotic. Someone who is spiritually astute would embrace these values and understand that both their own and the planet's long-term health demand that we distinguish between "needs" and "wants." As **David Callahan** observes, "Nearly everyone is buying more stuff than they need - even as nearly everyone complains that our society lacks so many things it requires" - quality schools, better transportation, affordable child care for instance.

The second aspect of spiritual education compliments the first and helps us understand the difference between **gratification** and **happiness**. Even as people in a consumer culture have grown increasingly confused about needs and wants, in our daily pursuit of gratification many of us have literally forgotten what constitutes true happiness.

Happiness, I believe, has to do with how we feel about ourselves; it assumes that we accept and are at peace with who we are. It also is connected with the feeling of "at-homeness," the sense of being connected to a loving community and a safe, nurturing environment. It may also involve self-expression, the exercise of our creative faculties. The educational process itself elicits happiness. "The best thing for being sad," **Merlyn** insisted in T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, "is to learn something."

Now, the culture at large scoffs at such notions. Instead, people are taught to feel inadequate, because that's how the free market induces us to buy so many superfluous products. We also are taught to "move up and move out," as **Wallace Stegner** put it. If you aren't happy in one town or neighborhood, just pack up and plop yourself down somewhere else. Worst of all, we

are conditioned to believe that over-stimulation and instant gratification are consistent with and conducive of true happiness.

If all of this were the case, Americans ought to be the happiest people in the world. Yet practically every psychological profile, every measure of emotional well-being taken in recent decades shows that Americans are more anxious, more fearful, more aggressive, and more depressed than people in less "privileged" cultures, and that they are more dissatisfied today than they were 50 years ago. The **Dalai Lama** has said that the ultimate function of religion is to give human beings the tools and teachings they need to be not superficially, but deeply happy. It is a critical element in any spiritual curriculum.

A third component of spiritual education is suggested by something **Ralph Waldo Emerson** once said: "Human beings want to be awakened; their souls yearn to get out of bed, to be aroused from their deep, habitual sleep."

Here **Emerson** paraphrases an insight that has been around since at least the 12th century B.C. when the Hindu Vedas were composed. There is more to the world - more to us - than meets the eye. Resourceful as it is, and tangible as it seems, the **Ego is not the true "Self"**. Nevertheless, the ego produces the very convincing illusion that it alone matters, it alone is.

Through the ages, wisdom teachers have insisted that the ego - the discreet personality - ought to be recognized for the clever, but nevertheless incomplete and limited faculty that it is. For the most part, however, our academic disciplines -- our social and physical sciences -- have promoted the ego's perspective exclusively. "The world as we know it has been built up without consciousness of soul." **Gary Zukov** writes.

The ego takes on airs, and imagines itself to be self-sufficient and autonomous. It is constantly striving to differentiate itself from and assert itself against the surrounding environment. Competition and constant striving are its "modus operandi."

By contrast, the soul or true Self is fully aware of its contingent nature: its indissoluble connection to the web of life and its participation in a trans-personal, common consciousness. This deeper self is an ecological self, a mystical self that stands revealed only when we've learned to look behind the ego's façade or, to return to **Emerson's** metaphor, when we've shaken off its hypnotic spell.

Etymologically, the word "education" means "to draw out" -

more specifically, to draw out something that lies latent within us. Here, then, we are dealing with education of the most fundamental sort, for what we seek is our hidden, but true and deeper nature; that soulful-self that feels at-one with the larger family of things.

If there is too much Ego and not enough Soul in the world that also explains why there is so much more **cleverness than wisdom**. Understanding the need for better balance between these two types of intelligence is the fourth element of a spiritual education.

"What do you fear the most?" **Mahatma Gandhi** was asked late in life. "The cold hearts of the educated citizens," he replied. Echoing **Gandhi's** sentiments, an anonymous wag has suggested that, "Life is extinct on other planets because their scientists were more advanced than ours."

Such comments are not meant to disparage either education or science, but to remind us that a one-dimensional intelligence - call it "instrumental rationalism" or "scientific materialism" - is no better than ignorance. Indeed, because of the unbelievable power technical intelligence generates, it is likely to be far more dangerous than ignorance.

Cleverness likes to solve problems; wisdom wants to improve lives. Cleverness takes pride in its ability to control and dominate; wisdom has respect for limits. Cleverness is impatient and wants results; wisdom takes precautions. Cleverness exhausts its resources; wisdom tries to conserve them. Cleverness is manipulative; wisdom is compassionate. Cleverness creates the "means," wisdom establishes the "ends."

But lest we create a false dichotomy here, I should emphasize that it is possible to be both clever and wise. One can be a brilliant problem solver and still live and work in a caring, conscientious and modest fashion. You just don't see those qualities combined often enough, which suggests that our current systems of spiritual education aren't serving us very well.

The fifth and final item to be highlighted is the same one made famous in the Greek legend of **Pandora** and her fateful box. Spiritual education instructs us and encourages us in hope - not "pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by" hope, not a hope that merely comforts, reassures and pacifies, perhaps not even an audacious hope, if that implies wishful thinking.

A realistic hope, a wise and responsible hope doesn't trivialize or blithely ignore the challenges our world faces. But it does encourage us to keep faith with life, recognizing

Nature's amazing resilience and humankind's vast creative and compassionate potential. The hopes that I nurture are based not on the remote possibility of a "deus ex machina" or the second coming of a celestial Savior, but on my own repeated experience of human goodness. All evidence to the contrary, I still think that as a species we are resourceful and insightful and caring enough to resolve our most pressing problems.

Such an education is not, as my friend **Professor Bill Cronon** has pointed out, like a catechism that we ultimately master.

It is not a *state*. Rather, it is a way of groping toward wisdom in full recognition of our own folly, a way of educating ourselves without any illusion that our education will ever be complete.

Short of death, the hoping and the groping must never stop. The way leads on and as long as there are eager companions to accompany us, our riches will be many and our regrets few. It's good to be on this journey together.

MEDITATION

From Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. (adapted)

Trust in the slow work of the spirit.
We are naturally impatient in everything to reach closure
without delay;
And we are always prone to skip the intermediate stages of a
journey.
We are impatient with the process, being "on the path" to
something unknown, something new.
We want to "be there," and often the pace seems too slow.
And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing
through some stages of instability,
And thus the journey may take a very long time.
Let your ideas mature gradually - let them grow,
Let them shape themselves, without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on, as though you could be today what
time will make of you tomorrow.
Who can say what this new spirit gradually forming within you
will be?
Give yourself the benefit of believing that some greater wisdom
is guiding you,
And accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense, and

deliciously incomplete.