



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Spiritual But Not Religious?

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On airplanes I always dread the conversation with someone who finds out I am a minister and wants to use the flight to explain to me that he is “spiritual but not religious.” Such a person will always share this with me as if it were some daring insight, unique to him, bold in its rebellion against the religious status quo. Before you know it, he’s telling me that he finds God in the sunsets and in walks on the beach.

These words are from the Lillian Daniel, senior minister of the United Church of Christ of Glenn Ellyn, Illinois. She has written a book titled *When Spiritual But Not Religious Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church*. Like me, Daniel loves church, and believes it is a place where religion can transform people’s lives. Like me, she wants church to continue to be vibrant and relevant to the world. But statistics say that the number of “spiritual but not religious” people like the person on the airplane Daniel describes is growing.

According to the Pew Forum for Religious and Public Life, fifty-five million Americans, or 23% of our population now identify with no religious tradition at all. There is a generational trend in this affiliation—a third of adults under 20 are in this group, compared with just 9% of those 65 and older.

Most of these people who reject religious affiliation understand themselves as actively pursuing spirituality in their lives. Many of us want to know—if so many Americans can’t consider themselves religious but consider themselves “spiritual,” what exactly is the difference between spiritual and religious?

Many would say that when they mean spiritual, they are interested in seeking spirituality outside of the traditional, typical religious institutions. Religion, the Latin word “religare,” to bind, signifies a set of rituals, practices, ethics and sacred texts connected with a long-standing historic institution. Spirituality implies the personal exploration of matters of the sacred and transcendent, untethered from an institution, creed or doctrine. A common phrase that comes up in studies of the spiritual but not religious folks is, “I am not religious, which is about the past — I am spiritual, about the present.”

Of course, inherent in any historical religious context is a personal spirituality. Many criticize contemporary “spirituality,” as superficial with a focus on personal fulfillment that can border on narcissism. Sociologists David Voas and Steve Bruce sarcastically comment that “Spirituality is a label for a ragbag of beliefs and practices that have slightly exotic origins, participation in which is becoming less rather than more like religious activity.”

The Fetzer Institute is a private foundation dedicated to helping support the emergence of new forms of inclusive spiritual communities that in their words “affirm spiritual freedom and

support spiritual transformation.” This fall, two Fetzer fellows, one preparing for Unitarian Universalist ministry created a report called *Where We Belong: Mapping American Religious Innovation*. In it, they are most interested in understanding the scope of the “spiritual but not religious” movement in the US, those people we call “nones,” or no religious affiliation.

What the Fetzer Institute report discovered is, remarkably, that people who joined a group or religious organization are more likely to find themselves encountering the kind of spirituality they were seeking on their own. People are more likely to try spiritual practices in groups, and to have a sense of accountability in being surrounded by others following the same philosophies and practices. Columbia University Professor of Religion Courtney Bender’s study of non-traditional spirituality called *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* explores this.

In it, Bender writes, “Spirituality is not ‘sui generis’ but rather learned in communities that persist over time, somewhat contradictory to spiritual but not religious people’s self-perceptions. There is something in the theology of spiritual groups that actually refocuses their practitioners from thinking about how they fit into a long continuous spirituality.”

In my own life, I often interface with the “spiritual but not religious” community, i.e. the majority of my friends and family, while pursuing a life and career within organized religion. I do not come from a family of active churchgoers, and am often seen as the most religious person people know. Being connected to the LGBTQ community, the arts and the progressive political movement, many are wary of religious community for good reason. As oppression and discrimination from the religious right continue to masquerade as “religious freedom,” I don’t blame people for staying away. However, being a representative of institutional religion has created room for surprising connection. I serve as an impromptu minister when the LGBTQ community has a needed religion—happily for a rite of passage like a wedding, tragically in the cases of memorials, and often, for prayer and counsel. I am grateful to serve as a positive representative of religion. I find I can slowly crack open the door to experience the benefits of religion that people would not always find on their own. While I am passionate about my secular friends having spiritual lives, and more than hopeful those young adults raised Unitarian Universalist who have drifted away will find a home within our congregations, I have found that my ministry is more in helping people connect to the resources of a caring and supportive spiritual community, regardless of religious affiliation.

Ten years ago, I was serving as a chaplain in a hospital in Portland, Maine for the summer. A friend of mine had just gone through a terrible break up, and she was seeking a spiritual path to try to recover from the excruciating pain and suffering. She knew I was preparing for ministry and had recently been through a break up myself, and wanted to spend time together, so I invited her up to Maine from New York City for the weekend. She arrived in a state of bitterness and anger, lashing out at everyone in her path. Eager to try to help her in some way, we decided to go up to my family’s cabin near Acadia National Park to relax a bit. She brought along her stack of Pema Chodron books and spent much time alone reading, marked by breaks

for meals and silent meditation on the dock. She wanted to take nature walks which she felt would heal her, so we headed to Acadia National park to a beautiful pristine lake. The lake turned out to be a popular destination also being enjoyed by other families at the height of the tourist season. No sooner had we put our blanket down than from her own misery she began to curse the children laughing and splashing.

“I can’t stand all these people in my nature!”

I was so angry and frustrated with my friend. She seemed to feel ok when by herself, but the second people entered into the picture, she lashed out again. She was deeply afraid to let anyone see the pain that lay behind the anger. All the books and time alone in meditation couldn’t show her the path to healing—what she needed most was her friends and those friendly strangers she could not stand but were seeking something beautiful and healing just like her. I stuck in there with her and did my best to love her. The weekend began to soften her hard edges. When she returned home to New York City, she began to seek out a meditation group to support her, as difficult as it was for her to let others see her pain. All these years later, she is now leading Buddhist meditation sessions and is a counselor for others in her sangha.

I tell this story because it may ring true for many of us. Like my friend was, we are drawn to spirituality to help us with our suffering in some way, to help us live a more balanced and meaningful life. Spirituality appeals to us in some pure form—reading a spiritual book, practicing meditation or yoga, walks in nature. We can experience the benefits of these practices personally, set apart from the rest of the world. And yet spiritual growth is only truly possible in a community where we can share our hopes and struggles. In her book, Pastor Lillian Daniel writes:

Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn’t interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you.

In community, we learn where our needs are deepest as we show up and are vulnerable with one another, allowing others to hold us even when we can’t figure out how to hold ourselves. Sometimes, as with my friend, we find ourselves more vulnerable than we would like. We wonder who, if anyone, will accept us, flaws and all.

Congregations like ours are safe spaces for us to explore our growing edges and to have others by our sides as compassionate witnesses. We covenant with each other to stay on the path together, and to keep each other on the path, even when we don’t feel at our best.

Just to risk showing up and sharing ourselves, imperfect as we are, can feel hugely intimidating. But there’s more! To join a church in the age of spiritual but not religious means

you are making a commitment to grow. Wait- what am I saying? You want us to show up, just as we are, but then change? I know, I know, it seems hard.

For our newest members, I must tell you joining this church does not automatically mean you grow spiritually. We promise to give you tools, and to offer the support of the ministry and this community to support you on your journey. We don't, however, provide the creed, the rule book, or the road map to do so. We don't mandate how, when or where you'll do your spiritual practice. But we do ask you to practice. We ask you to come to church, to let the experience of worship shape and challenge you. Try singing in the choir, ushering or welcoming people, try meditation, teaching our children. And to do this practice, again and again and again, and see how it changes you. Yes, we accept you as you are, but invite you to grow.

The Reverend Kendyl Gibbons, who recently retired from the the First Unitarian Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota has used James Fowler's faith development work to craft a body of work on spiritual growth for our denomination. Gibbons believes that the task of the religious community is for us to become "spiritual grownups" who are better equipped to live loving lives of healthy connections and service to our world. She calls this "spiritual maturity." In a sermon on the subject, she writes:

Every point on the spiritual path has its own validity, but there is a direction to it; if we are doing it right, we progress -- not toward finality and certainty, but nearer to those qualities that fascinate and inspire us when we find them in others. There is a quality of spiritual maturity which is distinct from physical, intellectual, or emotional maturity. It involves attributes of compassion, integrity, awareness, gratitude, connection, humility, acceptance, and trust. People who are spiritually mature are engaging and challenging to be around; they are at peace with themselves, and by their presence, they call others to be their own best selves.

All faith traditions have wisdom about spiritual growth. In the book of Galatians in the New Testament, Paul talks about the "fruit of the Spirit," as the way you know you are growing spiritually. ". . . the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

For Unitarian Universalists, the fruits of our spiritual lives are much the same. We know we are growing when we as individuals and families are able to live more fully integrated and balanced lives. We know we are growing when we are able to cultivate an appreciation of nature, beauty and experience awe and transcendence. We know we are growing when we can speak to each other and listen to one another with curiosity as we share what is sacred and holy in our lives, whether or not the word God is uttered. We know we are growing when we are able to freely give and receive love, and to meet struggles of life with resilience and grace. Finally, we know we are growing when we have the ability to understand ourselves as committed and belonging to something greater than ourselves, and when we are able to

understand and act appropriately as a responsible steward of the institutions and communities of which we are a part.

Becoming spiritual grownups requires us to seek out community to share and deepen our spirituality. Like Shug tells Celie in the Color Purple, people don't come to church to find God, we come to church to share God. Rev. Gibbons writes:

I suspect that in the end such maturity can only be nurtured in communities of faith – by which I mean groups in which we are faithful; to our commitments, and our values, and our aspirations. And faithful to each other; not only in the present acceptance of who we are, but also in the vulnerability of growth, and in the accountability to the greater maturity that we might yet achieve.

Finding a spiritual home in Neighborhood is not the end of the spiritual journey, it is a vehicle to accelerating it. This is an invitation to be both spiritual *and* religious. While being spiritual gives you the freedom, something you can do on your own, being religious requires you to grow and to change, in a community of witnesses. To find strength and courage through the rhythms of the church year, in the company of your fellow travelers.

Spiritual and religious, that's who we are. And we are so grateful to keep growing our Neighborhood, with each new member bringing us into the abundance of a future transformed by our togetherness.