

## *What Does Spirituality Mean to You?*

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ [www.buf.org](http://www.buf.org)

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Rev Paul Beckel

### **GOOD MORNING**

All who come in the spirit of goodwill are welcome here. No matter your religious views, race, economic status, education, abilities, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, or immigration status.

*Namaste:* I honor the place in you where the entire universe resides. I honor the place in you of light, of love, of truth, of peace, I honor the place in you where if you and I are in that place then there is only one of us.

### **PRELUDE**

*La Cinquantaine*

Kids' Sax Ensemble

### **INTRODUCTION**

Last week our Sunday service was an hour long ritual with all the elements of symbolism, tradition, holy objects (flowers) and sacred choreography — in this case bringing the flowers to Whatcom Creek, where we watched them reenter the flow of time.

The Sunday before that we talked in practical terms about what we envision for the future of our children's religious education program. And also, based in this vision, we reflected on and reaffirmed our shared ethical values and aspirations. That Sunday we had a quote on the cover of the order of service: "Religious Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire."

A nice sentiment, but it led me to ask, yeah, but why don't we just light it once and be done with it? Why do we have to keep lighting that fire again and again and again?

E.B. White wrote this: "I arise in the morning torn between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor it. This makes it hard to plan the day. I've always liked this, but I've begun to wonder, think about this: I'm caught between my desire to save the world and to savor it. In other words, it's all about me.

My desire. My saving the world. My savoring. Very dualistic. There is me and everything else, everybody else.

Just last night I turned to that great repository of wisdom from the ancients, reinterpreted in in contemporary language — Facebook. And I encountered this quote: The sage was asked, how are we to treat others? Ah, there's the rub, was the response. There are no others.

So how do we get to this place? And then when we enter a new day, how do we get there again? How do we acknowledge that to some degree, it *is* about me? I mean, I am horrified by the separation of young children from their parents. And I am sickened by the murder of yet another unarmed black teenager by police, this week in Pittsburgh. Did you catch that? "I" am horrified; "I" am sickened. Yes, this at least to some degree is about *my* emotional reaction, *my* visceral reaction. It's triggered by distress and injustice out there... but am I just responding to my own experience or heartbreak or distress? Or in my openness to the experience, even to the pain, am I then *one with the victim, and with the perpetrators as well?*

To some degree I find resolution to all of this intellectually. To some degree I find resolution through

action... action within my own sphere of influence, at least, to save the world. And to some degree I am comforted or inspired by poetry. Or by returning to the woods or the water, where I encounter both my origins and my destiny.

To some degree I find resolution in learning how others have responded — to tragedy, and to the astonishing wonders of creation — over the ages, or responding today, with grace and courage.

And finally, in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson: “how many we see in the street, or sit with in church, whom *though silently, we warmly rejoice* to be with!” That is, to some extent: we find solace and inspiration not in knowing or doing, but simply by being present with one another. In this spirit we light the chalice and say together: Love is the spirit of this fellowship, and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

## **LIGHTING THE CHALICE**

### **GATHERING SONG**

A couple of weeks ago we began our Sunday service *singing Gathered here in the mystery of the hour. Gathered here in one strong body. Gathered here in the struggle and the power. Spirit draw near.*

We sang well, even if it might have been overly ambitious to sing it as a four part round when the choir was off singing in Vancouver. Afterward I remembered attempting to lead this song for my former congregation, except in Spanish. With several days of preparation I got the words down pretty well. But the rhythm was tricky in translation, because I was rather stuck on the rhythm that accompanies the English lyric. So I practiced the song to myself while I was training my body in the YMCA pool, trying to establish some muscle memory. And I practiced the song with my voice teacher with whom I was studying at the time.

But when I tried to lead the song with the congregation, I tensed up. And my eyes were riveted to the paper and I messed it up. Later that night I was singing my seven year old son to sleep. And I started singing “Unidos ya-en el misterio de la hora...” Ben, who of course had been in the service that morning said, “Gee Dad, you’re doing it better now without the paper.”

So, in that spirit... with the way the pews are arranged, let’s just do this in two parts, splitting here... and in English. First all together....

**INTERLUDE**            *Winds be Still*            #83

### **REFLECTIONS & DIALOG**

Preaching about spirituality — that is, being didactic, trying to speak in complete grammatical sentences... kind of defeats the purpose. So let’s start with our imagination.

Imagine you took a random assortment of people. Well maybe not completely random. Let’s say that a disproportionate number of these people have kind of a love/hate relationship with religion. They might come together to rally for social change. And do this from a place of deep connection of values. So there’s significant cohesion in that group. Then imagine that these people explicitly acknowledge that among themselves, or certainly among the wider family of religious traditions, there are a variety of theological foundations that can support these shared values. So they talk about abstract theological concepts — but without getting too personal. Just enough to acknowledge that differences exist... and that that’s ok... that’s not a threat... but then leave well enough alone.

So they’ve successfully addressed two of the basic aspects of religion. In ethics — an appeal to universal

values. And in theology — an appeal to the mind. But how do these people worship together?

Since this is a random sample of people including many who have a love/hate relationship with religion and religious language, there are at least a few who prefer not to use this word. I'm not much of a fan of the word myself. Tho traditionalists often remind me that if I were to think of "worship" as such and such then it's a perfectly good word even for a humanist. The thing is, tho, I don't think of it as such and such.... However, sometimes you need to just pick a word, or a symbol, or a ritual, and make the best of it.

So let's imagine, for now, that these congregated people, let's call them a congregation... let's imagine that they've agreed on a set of words to imperfectly express what words cannot express.

So how do they do it? How do they express joy and sorrow and gratitude and wonder? There are many learning styles among them. But that's the easy part.

Here's where it really gets tricky: what are they pointing toward? What are they seeking?

I find this amazing: There is even more religious unity, and more plurality, than we ever realize. Because those who use the same language and the same methods, may find unity even though *they have very different spiritual aspirations*. And those who are baffled or even offended by each other's words or means... often share nearly identical spiritual aspirations.

So let's talk together about all of this, dropping the façade of the imaginary congregation. Instead of generalities, let's make it personal.

What are the most effective methods thru which you encounter the sacred... and what the heck are you talking about when you use the word "sacred," or whichever words or images you use as a placeholder for that which is beyond words?

[See order of service insert below — we looked at each section and shared personal reflections on these prompts.]

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I encourage you to take these notes home and reflect on how you might develop a personal practice of reflection... or maybe a practical strategy for spiritual skill building.

Please know that I am always available to talk about any of these things if you wish. Contact me [paul@buf.org](mailto:paul@buf.org) or call the office.

Because your spiritual growth, and mine — our spiritual growth — is vital in our shared ministry. Not our spiritual status quo... but our ongoing practice... is vital to our success in bringing our mission, our covenant to life in the world. As individuals, as parents and teachers, mentors, friends, and neighbors... and as one people, one with all that has ever been, and all that is to come.

Serenity/Peace of Mind..... Enthusiasm/Passion  
 Self Confidence/Toughness..... Humility/Vulnerability  
 Lightheartedness/Flexibility/Spontaneity..... Discipline/Seriousness  
 Assertiveness..... Ability to Accept Criticism  
 Caution/Being Methodical..... Courage/Ability to Take Risks  
 Perseverance..... Surrender  
 Decisiveness..... Patience  
 Nurturance..... Succorance  
 Sensitivity/Understanding.....Strength to Hold Others Accountable  
 Autonomy.....Connection

Generosity with my time  
 ...with my money  
 ...with my heart  
 ...with forgiveness  
 Hope/Trust/Joy  
 Honesty  
 Kindness  
 Friendliness  
 Anger Management  
 Gratitude  
 Self-Awareness

Devotion, praise, gratitude — expressed with quiet, or enthusiasm

*Empowerment and determination — expressed with quiet, or enthusiasm*

Experiencing power within myself, or beyond myself

*Finding comfort in not-knowing, and not-controlling*

Letting go of loss, habits, grudges, stuff...

*Acknowledgement of moral weakness or failing*

Lament for those who suffer injustice

*Appeal for resilience or wellbeing for others, for myself*

Quiet (highly adaptable to a variety of needs)

*Learning about how other people live, pray, create, love, think...*

Being challenged and emboldened by stories of courageous action or graceful surrender

*Stretching my mind and heart thru stories or parables with counterintuitive conclusions*

Considering different sides to a social or interpersonal ethical issue

*Being called to take responsibility*

A sense of immersion into all, mystery, unity

*Being renewed by the presence of allies, of children, music, or a dry place to sit inside*

The joy of being hospitable

*Playfulness/imagination/serendipity*

Ritual — brief or extended... with words, music, symbols, bodily motion

**Any of the above in other aspects of BUF life:  
 meetings, dinners, pledging, volunteering, seeing BUFsters around town...**

Yesterday I was clever,  
so I wanted to change the world.  
Today I am wise,  
so I am changing myself. ~ *Rumi*

No man so multiplies his bonds with the community as he  
who watches most jealously over his own perfection.  
~ *William Ellery Channing*

A person will worship something—have no doubt about  
that. That which dominates our imagination and our  
thoughts will determine our lives, and character.  
Therefore it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for  
what we are worshipping we are becoming.  
~ *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

A finished person is a boring person. ~ *Anna Quindlen*

Our consciousness rarely registers the beginning of growth  
within us any more than without us: there have been many  
circulations of the sap before we detect the smallest sign of  
the bud. ~ *George Eliot*

We are not unlike a particularly hardy crustacean.... With  
each passage from one stage of human growth to the next  
we, too, must shed a protective structure. We are left  
exposed and vulnerable—but also yeasty and embryonic  
again, capable of stretching in ways we hadn't known  
before. These sheddings may take several years or  
more. Coming out of each passage, though, we enter a  
longer and more stable period in which we can expect  
relative tranquility and a sense of equilibrium regained.  
~ *Gail Sheehy*

One can never consent to creep  
when one feels an impulse to soar. ~ *Helen Keller*

1. When/where/how were my most intense experiences of connection, inspiration, meaning, or transcendence?
2. *How do I make myself receptive to direct encounters with that which inspires awe and humility?*
3. To many of us, accomplishing goals, acts of service, and learning are expressions of our religious commitments — they create in us a sense of wholeness and purpose.  
Other than through these rather tangible forms, are there trans-rational experiences through which I have felt wonder, power, or egoless-ness?
4. How might we reconcile our genuine differences around creating sacred space — for example, when some respond best to movement and spontaneity, and others respond best to stillness and steadiness?
5. What barriers am I willing to overcome in the interest of creating meaningful shared experiences of worship at BUF?  
Religious language, for example:
  - my determination not to use or hear particular religiously fraught words...
  - or the opposite: an inability to experience the holy when specific language or ritual that helps to open my soul is absent.
6. *What do I need to learn... in order to*