

Big Sky Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship  
FINDING SPIRITUALITY  
1/13/2008  
Led by Jay Johnson

Hi, my name is Jay and I'm a recovering theists. So, what does that have to do with anything? Just what am I recovering from? I hope to explain this in this story of my spiritual journey. It is a story mainly of aimless wandering, punctuated by two events. The events happened in the order described, but whether or not they are the causes of the effects described may be a problem!

Throughout this story I am going to use the term "spirituality" and the phrase "spiritual experience". I consider these to be equivalent to each other-- but I need to think about this more. I do not want to offend anyone. This is only my story, and there is a strong probability that I do not know what I am talking about. So, please don't feel offended if I say something that conflicts with your strongly held beliefs.

The first major change in direction of my life occurred when I was in college. I started college in the education program and I signed up for geology as my science class. I enjoyed what I was learning in that geology class so much that I changed majors. At the time I was an agnostic; I did not know what to believe. As I studied geology I learned more and more about science and scientific method, I found the stories that geologists and paleontologists told believable. They were supported by facts. I evolved into an atheist because I could not believe the stories told in the bible. Furthermore, I learned that events like the Indonesian earthquake and the 220,000 people that died in the tsunami it created and 5,000 people that died during hurricane Katrina were not the judgment of god! They are the natural consequence of living on a dynamic, spinning planet with a liquid core and an atmosphere that is differentially heated by the sun.

The second event in this journey occurred after joining BSUU Fellowship. More about this later.

I am not only a non-theist, but, I do not believe there is anything that is supernatural. There are many unknowns in the universe, but I do not believe there is a supernatural agent or agents directing and/or intervening in events here on earth. I do not believe in a soul or heaven or hell or in a judge that assigns the soul to one or the other.

But, this evolution in my thought left a big huge hole in my psyche because not only did the evolution remove god as an agent, but it also removed the idea that spirituality is something real. In my mind, spirituality was so strongly linked to god that I classified it as part of the supernatural. And, for

years I felt like the person in the song sung by Peggy Lee "Is That All There Is?".

As a child and a teen, all of my experience with "spirituality" was in the context of the church. I was taught, or I learned by osmosis from others, that the experience and the feelings it generated were linked to god, or had their source in god. This early training really stuck, and this is why I consider myself to be a recovering theist. My logic led to this thought: "If there is no god then there must be no spiritual". But, over the years, I came to realize that I have had spiritual experiences. Gradually, with time, I came to realize that a spiritual experience is a real event, and it is not a supernatural event.

My research showed that the spiritual experience is linked to or synonymous with mystical experience, transcendent experience, peak experience, samadhi, bliss, near Death experiences, various drug induced experiences. All of these have been linked to a feeling of communion with the Ultimate Reality, which, by most people is associated with god.

#### THE DEFINITION and A STORY

I learned from studying chemistry and geology that one must start with good definitions of the subject or problem one is going to investigate. But the dictionaries I consulted link spirituality to either the church or to the supernatural or to both and given my position on the supernatural, this was unacceptable. So, I decided to study what other people have to say about the spiritual experience. I think that, when considered as a whole, the following quotes tell a coherent story.

People tell stories to convey concepts or events that have meanings that can not be put into a definition or into simple words. Somehow we human beings can understand something that we can not define. (This may be what it means to be spiritual!!!) We do this by telling stories. This is a disjointed story that consists of a series of quotations from various sources. As a whole, I hope, they convey what spirituality and spiritual experience means to me.

From Wikipedia a peak experience is described as

Peak experiences are described by Maslow as especially joyous and exciting moments in life, involving sudden feelings of intense happiness and well-being, wonder and awe, and possibly also involving an awareness of transcendental unity or knowledge of higher truth (as though viewing the world from a mountain peak). They usually come on suddenly and are often inspired by intense feelings of love, exposure to great art or music, or the overwhelming beauty of nature. The experience can also be triggered by intensely negative situations such as severe illness or confronting Death.

Peter Morales, minister, Jefferson Unitarian Church, Golden, Colorado wrote (from UUA web site): When I reflect on my own spirituality, I think of my deepest, most enduring sense of who I am and how this deep part of myself, the real me, relates to the world. For me, spirituality is more a feeling than an opinion. Because of this, it is

fiendishly difficult to put into words. Words occupy too small a part of our brains to ever fully convey the wholeness, the integration, that is at the core of what I term spirituality. Indeed, the word is woefully inadequate. What I call spirituality involves all of me-my heart, my head, my body, my awareness. There is a wonderful wholeness and harmony about that state I call spiritual. There is a sweet serenity, a sense of belonging, of surrender, of clarity, of joy, of peace, of aliveness (the root of the word spirit, after all, is the same as the word for breath). A spirituality worthy of the name involves deep awareness. It is that sense of profound openness and awakening in the Buddhist tradition. A true spirituality also involves our whole selves. It includes our intellect, our emotions, our senses. It is the bittersweet chill of a clear winter night, the yellow sunset, and salt air at the seashore. It is staring, awestruck, into the heavens. It is music that washes over us, music that we feel as much as we hear. It is singing together. It is the embrace of a lover, the clasp of a child's hand. It is the taste of mountain water, of wine, of chocolate. Spirituality is sensual. Spirituality is also an elegant mathematical proof, the insight gained in a scientific experiment. It is crying for joy at a reunion, laughing with good friends, being present at birth and Death. It is feeling loved and being loving.

Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myth* (p. 207) states:

Anyone who has had an experience of mystery knows that there is a dimension of the universe that is not that which is available to his senses. There is a pertinent saying in one of the Upanishads: "When before the beauty of a sunset or of a mountain you pause and exclaim, 'Ah,' you are participating in divinity." Such a moment of participation involves a realization of the wonder and sheer beauty of existence. People living in the world of nature experience such moments every day. They live in recognition of something there that is much greater than the human dimension. Man's tendency, however, is to personify such experiences, to anthropomorphize natural forces.

Carl Sagan in *The Demon -Haunted World* (p. 29) states:

"Sprit" comes from the Latin word "to breathe." What we breathe is air, which is certainly matter, however thin. Despite usage to the contrary, there is no necessary implication in the word "spiritual" that we are talking of anything other than matter (including the matter of which the brain is made), or anything outside the realm of science. . . . Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality. When we recognize our place in an immensity of light-years and the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty, and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined is surely spiritual.

As alluded to above, it isn't always happy or joyful thoughts that accompany a spiritual experience. Listening to NPR a few weeks ago I was deeply moved by the reports of the disaster in Bangladesh. 3100 dead, and a second wave of dying on the way caused by disease, exposure, starvation and lack of clean drinking water. I consider this a spiritual moment, although it certainly wasn't a happy moment.

## BRINGING ALL THIS TOGETHER (I HOPE!)

My first change of direction on my spiritual path occurred in my first geology class which offered a different, and new explanations for the way things are. These explanations are based on facts they are not based on authority. The second change of course in my spiritual journey occurred a few weeks ago, here during a BSUU fellowship meeting. During the meeting a person explained that she has a spiritual experience when we sing "Spirit of Life" and when we hold hands and sing "Sholeum Haveriem". Her saying this triggered a reorientation of my perspective. Much like the gestalt shift that occurs in the face-vase illusion, where in the background becomes the mind's focus and you see two profiles, and the vase disappears.

This change in MY perspective made me realize that I've always been a spiritual person. I think that we all are. Like the profiles in the face-vase illusion, my spirituality was always there. I just didn't perceive it as such. My spirituality was just a part of the "background" and I was focused on the vase. Since that gestalt shift I've become aware that I have had spiritual experiences (though of differing intensity) all the time! When I practice the banjo and I can suddenly play a phrase that had been giving me trouble. Or, while walking by the duck ponds, I look up and suddenly see the full moon just above Mt Baldy, covered with snow, lit with a golden light from the setting sun--AW!

I find myself longing for EXPERIENCE! And, to appreciate that experience. So, how does this realization of what encompasses a spiritual experience change me? By itself it doesn't change me at all. But it establishes an objective; that is, to be more aware of my feelings and to try to recognize the spiritual experience when it occurs. Hopefully, this will change me. My journey isn't over so this is a work in progress. All this agonizing, and searching was for something I already had but didn't realize. I had to find it for myself, within myself. I suppose this is true for all spiritual, religious, transcendental experiences.

## POST SCRIPT

All scientists know that they need to be careful in their research. Sometimes they find what they want to find or are predisposed to find. And later, after more reasoned work they find their original work to be in error—I may be in that position.

My journey continues. One thing I've learned since first writing these ideas down is that I need to practice my spirituality – it does not come by itself. My view shifts back to the way it was before and I see the vase and not the faces. If I want to be a spiritual person I will have to work at it.

Thank you for listening. We will now have a few moments of silence.