



“Spiritual, But Not Religious”

Cheryl Fields Tyler

***Eden United Church of Christ
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What do you think of when you hear the word “spiritual?” What images come to your mind? What connotations? If I were to ask you how and where you nurture your spirit, what would you say? In meditation? Prayer? On a hike? Making music? Reading the bible? Doing yoga? Volunteering at a shelter? Walking the labyrinth? Visiting the elders? Shaking hands here today? Reciting Rilke, or Rumi? Meeting with our Seekers group? Chanting Sanskrit prayers? Preparing food for our congregation? Loving your family?

If I were to ask you if you are getting the spiritual nurturing you seek, what would you answer? Does that word “spiritual” resonate with you? Is spiritual growth, spiritual experiences, spiritual awareness something you seek?

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life has been polling Americans on their religious views, practices, and affiliations for decades now. Their polling indicates that this notion of “spirituality” is becoming more and more important to people. For example, when you ask people who were raised in a church why they no longer are affiliated, the vast majority point to beliefs—namely, they stopped believing in the church’s teachings. But when you look the other way around as to why people leave the church they were raised in as children and go to a different church—or choose to find a church even if they were not raised with any religious affiliation—trends are moving away from issues of “belief”. Well over 50% say they left the church of their childhood because their spiritual needs were not being met, and that they left to find a religion they “liked more” where their spiritual needs could be met. In short, people who seek church affiliation as adults tend to leave the churches of their childhood over beliefs—but a very

large number of adults choose to be part of a church because they are seeking to meet something they call “spiritual needs.” I certainly fit this data—and I’m guessing many of you do, too.

Another manifestation of these same phenomena is, I believe, the increasing number of people who call themselves “spiritual, but not religious.” Have you heard the phrase “spiritual, but not religious”? How many of you might use this phrase “spiritual, but not religious” to describe yourself? I’ll admit that I use this phrase pretty often, particularly when I feel that saying “I’m a Christian” will result in someone making a lot of assumptions about me or projecting on to me all kinds of beliefs morally, politically, and theologically, and as a result think I’m someone I’m not. Somehow, this phrase seems to be a bit safer, a little more open, a bit more “God is Still Speaking,” and a lot less “God said it in the Bible and that settles it.”

Well, apparently those of us here who have used “spiritual, but not religious” to describe ourselves are not alone. We are in one of the fastest—if not the fastest—growing groups in the American religious—or should I say “spiritual” —landscape. In a *Newsweek* magazine poll published earlier this year, 30% of Americans called themselves “spiritual not religious,” up from 24% just 4 years ago, and up from, quite literally, not even being a choice in surveys before that.

I’ve already admitted that I’ve used this phrase pretty regularly myself—and I know what I mean when I say it. But I was a little surprised as I researched this sermon to find more variety and contradictions in the interpretations of what people mean by this phrase than I would have expected. For example, some—both adherents and critics of the phrase, interestingly enough—see the phrase as implying that “spiritual” is better than “religious”—that is to say “spiritual” connotes a more evolved, universal, and enlightened understanding or experience, and “religious” connotes something more narrow, antiquated and restricted.

Others use the phrase as a designation—both positively and pejoratively—for those who continually “seek” or “explore,” trying on all kinds of beliefs and practices, trying to find something more, not content with the way things are. Such folk may consider themselves Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindu, or Moslem—or no religious designation all—but they are not content with just one brand of tradition, belief, or rituals. According to this view,

these “spiritual, but not religious” types actively seek and integrate a wide variety of practices and beliefs from a whole variety of places, times, peoples and disciplines, such as native or “first peoples” wisdom traditions, Buddhist, Hindu, Islam, Gaelic, pagan, earth-based, metaphysical, cosmological—you name it, there is someone seeking God through that path. Stephen Prothero, a religion professor at Boston University, has framed this as the “the divine-deli-cafeteria” approach to religion. He says of the phenomenon that “it’s about whatever works. If going to yoga works, great—and if going to Catholic mass works, great. And if going to Catholic mass plus the yoga plus the Buddhist retreat works, that’s great, too.”

Others interpret the phrase as essentially referring to those that feel estranged from or who reject organized religion. The Earl lectures next year are focused on the “Spiritual, But Not Religious” theme and PSR website on the Earl Lectures describes the “spiritual, but not religious” as those who are alienated or who are refugees from a so-called “organized religion,” those who find the church irrelevant, or those who find God’s presence not in religion or in so-called sacred texts or ritual, but in the natural world alone.

I’m sure all of these characterizations of the phrase “spiritual, but not religious” are accurate to one degree or another. I certainly will admit to seeing a bit of myself, both in terms of my conscious use of the phrase as well as some of less positive nuances that some may feel are implied when I or anyone uses that phrase.

But I’d like to consider this phrase today not as another way to describe differences, but more like an address, a way of expressing the location of the individual human condition, a description of where we live, of where I live, consciously or unconsciously as a human being.

Think of it this way: Picture one of those images in the doctor’s office of the human circulatory system. Can you see it in your mind? The big red arteries and big blue veins coming and going out of the heart region, the aorta, the carotid artery and vein connecting the brain and the heart, the femoral arteries and veins going to the legs, the other branches bright red and blue going down the arms.

Now, imagine the human body as a metaphor for the human species. In this metaphor, religion—all of the world religions—are like the arteries of

the human species. These religions are the arteries, the big pipes, the interstate highway transport system that brings oxygen—life force—together with the stuff that regulates, monitors, and heals to the species. Of course, together with the good stuff, the arteries can also be used as a way to deliver toxins and poisons. The transport system does have some safety mechanisms, but, by and large, unless some kind of major injury or disease shuts down an artery, the pipes stay open carrying both the good and the bad.

But look beyond the big pipes and see the smaller and smaller branches leading to places where the need changes from transport to exchange, where things change from carrying to communion, where the river gives way to the wetland and in turn to the places where we live.

Now we are in the capillaries—the tiny vessels with walls just one cell thick. Here is where the exchange happens, here is where the cells get rejuvenated, where the dead material is flushed away, where the actual exchange of life force happens in ways that are mysterious, miraculous, and largely unseen, but as common and as ordinary as mud.

Here's the thing: When you look close at what's going on in the capillaries, what's distinctive is how thin and holey the walls are. Look under a microscope and you see that a one-celled wall of a capillary looks like the earth's crust in Canyonlands, so deep and wide are the spaces and the cracks between cells. Can you see the capillary walls resilient and strong, and yet full of chasms, canyons, and holes? Can you see what is strong and present and holding—and can you also see the spaces and the holes? Can you see the place of holiness?

This capillary—this place of holiness—this is the location of human being, this is our address as individuals. We all live somehow related and connected to the arteries, but it is in our life, in our very life, that the holy exchange of human and divine happens. *Spiritual, but not religious* is another way to try to locate, to designate, to name this place of walls and spaces, another way talk about this place, another way to identify and name this terrain.

So what about Hannah, the story that Alliene read so beautifully this morning? What about Hannah standing outside the temple, childless and aching for a child, loving a man who her religion and culture said she had to

share with other wives, so very fraught with love, grief, fear, desire? Intoxicated, crazed. Flooded with yearning, out of her mind with anxiety and with longing. Troubled, pouring out her soul, making a spectacle of herself, making promises to God that she had no idea she would ever be able to keep.

This is a capillary story. This is life in the human individual where the walls are cracked and full of holes, where the space between our now and what we yearn for feels like a canyon. The Bible is full of these stories: Adam, Eve, Abraham, Issac, Jacob, David, Job, the woman at the well, Zaccheus, Mary washing Jesus' feet, the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Saul's encounter with the light on the road to Damascus. The Bible is full of these stories, these portals where we can see in at the capillary level, like a microscope magnifying a specific place in time, but showing something that is happening everywhere, all the time—people meeting God, not in their “religion,” or in their belief, but in their lives, in their experience. Not in the places where the walls of their world and beliefs are firm and muscular and impenetrable, but in the places where there are cracks, where there are chasms, where there are canyons, where there are holes.

Whether we know it or not, regardless of what labels we use, what beliefs we hold, what cultural lenses we have, every human being, every individual shares this solitary terrain, this private canyon land, this holy wilderness. The stories in the Bible, and specifically the Hannah story today, I believe are there not to reinforce the strong muscular walls of religious belief, to transport explanations or reasons about why things are the way they are, or what God's thoughts are about the whole endeavor. Indeed, generations have tried to stick all that is in that book together into an impenetrable wall of truth—and despite our mental gymnastics and fanciful reasoning, it still leaks like a sieve.

No, I don't believe these stories are to give us solid ground. I believe these stories are to help us live in the canyon lands, in the places where it doesn't all fit together, where there are holes and pain, and grief, and love, and passion, and loss, and yearning, and promises, and trouble, and anxiety, and waiting. The places where what is, isn't enough. The places where we feel utterly alone. The places where we feel barren. These stories don't tell us how to get out this place of flimsy, holey walls. These stories give us assurance that God meets us there, that this place, this incarnate, human place, this is indeed holy. Like the microscope shows us the ordinary

miracle of the capillary, these stories show us that this is precisely where God can show up—where walls are flimsy and thin, where there are holes, where there are chasms.

My friends, this kind of truth is not what comes via religion, or beliefs, or tenets, or catechisms, or creeds—this kind of truth is known through your own life, through your experience, in your own places of canyons, cracks, and holes. Your own places of holiness.

I think many if not most of the people who seek for “spirituality” at church or who say they are “spiritual, but not religious” are using prose to try to talk about this place where we find ourselves as human beings. And I think when we come to church to “meet our spiritual needs” we are saying we want church to be a place where we acknowledge and share this experience.

But this kind of truth doesn’t take well to prose. Language fails us. It’s like a wild thing once caged—it may still live, but it is no longer what you sought to catch and keep.

That’s why we have art, story, myth, music, and poetry. So many of the texts of our faith are in this form—so many of the world’s sacred memory is in these forms—and there’s a reason for that.

I’d like to share an excerpt of a song by Leonard Cohen’s—Tom and I saw him in concert Friday night, and if you don’t know his work, he’s absolutely amazing. A lot of his poetry and music is located at the address I’m talking about today, this place where the walls are thin and holey. But there’s one of his pieces that describes this place better than I ever could. I’d like to share it with you now, as a closing and as a prayer. It’s entitled “Anthem.”

The birds they sang
at the break of day
Start again
I heard them say
Don't dwell on what
has passed away

or what is yet to be.
Ah the wars they will
be fought again
The holy dove
She will be caught again
bought and sold
and bought again
the dove is never free.

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

We asked for signs
the signs were sent:
the birth betrayed
the marriage spent
Yeah the widowhood
of every government—
signs for all to see.

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

You can add up the parts
but you won't have the sum
You can strike up the march,
there is no drum
Every heart, every heart
to love will come
but like a refugee.

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

That's how the light gets in.