

*Spiritual or Religious? How 'bout Both?*  
Sunday, March 8, 2020

Reading: *Gratitude* by Barbara Crooker ([read the poem here](#))

On the evening of Sunday July 15, 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Unitarian minister, poet, philosopher, and essayist preached a sermon to the young men about to be graduated from the Divinity School at Harvard. His sermon helped to send them out into the world. Almost 150 years later his sermon sent me to that divinity school, where my room that first year was down the hall from the chapel where he'd delivered those inspiring words. In my application I quoted Emerson's injunction to those long-ago seminarians: to preach to their congregations always that each "is an infinite Soul; that the earth and heavens are passing into [their] mind[s]; that [they are] drinking forever the soul of God." That, I wrote, was what I wanted to do with my ministry. But it didn't take me long to understand that Emerson's words, while inspiring, weren't enough. And so though I wrote about Emerson's inspiration on my way in, it was the inspiration of another Unitarian minister, Henry Whitney Bellows, whom I wrote about on my way out.

"Who?" you may be asking. Henry Who? Henry Whitney Bellows was a contemporary of Emerson's, but while Emerson was all about the individual spiritual experience, Bellows understood that in order for us to live out the insights which flash upon us in those moments, we need religion. Though Emerson is the one we look to as a leader of our tradition, without Henry Whitney Bellows we might have no tradition. Bellows was an institutionalist. It's thanks to him that we have the American Red Cross – it grew out of his administration of the American Sanitary Commission, along with the Universalist Clara Barton, during the Civil War. Bellows realized that all these individual efforts to care for wounded soldiers needed to be coordinated and so he set up the mechanism to do so. And after the War, when he saw society undergoing a spiritual crisis as people grieved for the generation of young men who had died, he believed that Unitarianism offered the solace for that grief and the views of humankind we needed to form a more just and equal union. And so in 1865 he invited representatives from all the Unitarian churches to a National Conference of Unitarian and other Liberal Churches. That conference became an organization to help all those disparate churches coordinate and strengthen their work. Bellows led it for 15 years. That organization evolved first into the American Unitarian Association of Churches and then in 1961 into the Unitarian Universalist Association of Churches. Bellows knew that spirit on its own doesn't accomplish much. Spirit needs religion to make it viable and visible.

So when people today say they are spiritual but not religious, they are channeling Emerson. I wish they would channel Bellows a bit more.

Spirit without religion is like breath without a body. It's like light without a refractor. But by religion I don't mean a system of doctrines to which one must assent. By religion I mean the ways we try to make meaning. Often those meaning makings get codified into doctrines – which is what Emerson was railing against – but Emerson himself wasn't trying to get rid of religion. He was just trying to wake people up to understand that they needed to make the meaning for themselves, not accept without question meanings offered by others.

Forrest Church, another Unitarian minister who inspired me to go to divinity school, wrote in the quotation I used for our words for meditation, “Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.” And he also used to say, “Life is a gift, not a given, and the price we pay for it is death.” Forrest was the minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City which I attended with my family as a young adult. Interestingly, Henry Whitney Bellows was the first minister of that church and served it for 40 years, but before coming to All Souls, Forrest had served as a minister at the First and Second Church in Boston, the church Emerson had served. So it's fitting that Forrest was able to bring those strands of our history together, talking about spirit in a way I had not found before, and building a church community which fed that spirit and then encouraged its members to go out into their community and embody it in caring for the homeless, people with AIDS, and children living in poverty. Religion is the framework which allows the spirit to make change in us and in the world.

Religion comes from the Latin verb “religo.” It's a compound of the roots “re” or “again” and “ligo” from which we get our word ligament. So religion is like a cord which binds us. Often we think as being bound as bad, as being imprisoned, and some religious understandings and practices do bind people in ways that spread fear and stunt their growth. But in its true form, religion is more like the ligaments in our body which bind muscle to bone – without them we wouldn't be. Religion binds us to one another but it also binds us in our selves, connecting those experiences of the spirit to the rest of our lives.

Think of Barbara Crooker's poem *Gratitude*. She describes one of those moments when we are lifted out of the ordinary to be stabbed with the beauty of our lives. That moment is housed in her awareness of death and suffering, and though we don't know what comes after her awareness of the goodness and joy that moment contains for her, we can imagine that as it passes it leaves her with questions – why

am I living in this comfortable home, loved, when others are dying, suffering, wanting? What do I do with my experience? And how do I live with the knowledge that this moment will pass and that someday I too must die?

The moment is spiritual. The questions and their answers are religion.

Human beings are the only creatures who know that they will die. Yet we also have the capacity to imagine what it would be like to live forever. How we grapple with this tension is the subject of religion. The philosopher Kierkegaard divided people into four groups: Those in the first group try to ignore their mortality. They act as if they will live forever, and so give no thought to how they spend their time. The second group recognizes their mortality but try to distract themselves from it by focusing their energy on work, or their family, or extreme sports, - or religion (but religion without spirit) – or drugs or alcohol. The third group also recognizes their mortality but they rage against it. They are angry at everyone and themselves and focus on all the ways life is never good enough as if that will make it easier to give it up in the end. And the fourth group doesn't just recognize their mortality – they accept it. They are able to see their lives as part of something larger, the continuum of all life, God, love, the universe – it doesn't matter the word - just that they see themselves as part of a larger story which their lives help to shape and in which their lives matter even though they will end.

I think that Barbara Crooker is part of this group, and I think that most of us if not there yet, know that we want to be part of that 4<sup>th</sup> group. Because that's why we get out of bed on a Sunday morning, even one when we've lost an hour's sleep. We come to be reminded that we are part of a larger story, that the moments of grace and awe do mean something, that others share our fears, our awareness, our questions. I don't know what brought you to church in the first place – perhaps it was an illness, an accident, or the death of someone you loved that made you feel the need to wrest meaning in the face of finitude. Maybe it was a milestone birthday. Perhaps because of your family history, you, like me, have been aware of your mortality for as long as you can remember. Perhaps something happened in the world – 9/11, the recession, the climate crisis, the corona virus which pushed you to look for something more. Perhaps it was joy – falling in love, the birth of a child – which made you realize you needed to confront your fears of losing what you have. Perhaps it was flashes of connection in the garden, listening to music, watching the waves, contemplating a painting, walking the woods, which made you want to give form to the fleeting beauty which had opened to you. Perhaps you met someone who had a depth of peace and centeredness and you wanted what they had. Probably it's a combination which brought you here.

And here you found people asking the same questions, people who know what you mean when you talk about those moments of transcendence when the world and all of life shimmers – and when you talk about the shimmer of those moments of intimacy when you see the divine in the eyes of another. Here you found worship and ritual which try to give form to those questions and those glimmers. Here you found ways to connect your story to others' stories, giving greater meaning both to your life and to theirs. Here you find, I hope, that you are an infinite soul drinking forever the soul of God, as Emerson said, but also that you are part of “a communion of souls sharing your individual gifts and graces from the common stock for the benefit of all.” That’s Henry Whitney Bellows’ definition of a church. We are a communion of souls – we are here as spiritual beings embodying that spirit together. We are meaning-makers, answering what Garrison Keillor called “life’s persistent questions” with a “Yes.” Yes, we must die, but yes, our lives do matter, and yes, we are not alone, and yes, as another UU theologian and poet Rebecca Parker wrote in the words which opened our worship: *There is a love holding us..* (Beth starts to sing and invites congregation to join in:)

*There is a love holding all that we love.*

*There is a love holding all.*

*We rest in this love.*