

SPIRITUALITY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

By David Herndon

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First Unitarian Church
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The large telescope on Mt. Palomar in California, which was built in the 1940s, has a mirror with a diameter of two hundred inches, or 5.1 meters, while the twin Magellan telescopes on Las Campanas in Chile, which were built in the 1990s, each have a diameter of 6.5 meters. Out in space, the mirror of the Hubble telescope has a diameter of 2.4 meters, while a new space-based telescope still in the planning stages has a diameter of 6.6 meters. But all of these large telescopes will seem small compared to the new land-based telescope planned for Las Campanas which will include seven mirrors, each with a diameter of 8.4 meters.

Intuitively, you might think that the larger the mirror, the more powerful the telescope, and that is, indeed, how it works. The website for the new space-based telescope says this: “A telescope’s sensitivity, or how much detail it can see, is directly related to the size of the mirror area that collects light from the cosmos.”¹ Thus, the quest for larger and larger telescopes is really a quest for the ability to look further out in space and further back in time, as well as a quest to see closer objects with greater clarity.

My topic this morning is spirituality, not telescope mirrors, but telescope mirrors provide an image related to spirituality. To speak from my own experience, part of my task as your minister is to reflect back to you what I observe about you as a congregation as well as what I observe about you as individuals. I listen, and watch, and read, and feel, and the better my internal mirror, the better I can reflect back to you a useful image of who you are and who you are becoming and what your aspirations are and what your struggles are, as a congregation and as individuals.

Here is where telescope mirrors provide an image related to spirituality. In order to reflect an accurate image, the surface of a telescope mirror needs to hold its shape. If the surface of a telescope mirror is bumpy and lumpy, if it is cracked, or if it is smudged, it will offer only a distorted image. Just so, if the surface of my inner mirror is bumpy and lumpy, cracked, or smudged, I will reflect back to you a distorted image.

For the Magellan telescopes on Las Campanas in Chile, the shape of the surface of the mirror is controlled within a tolerance of five hundredths of one micron, or two millionths of an inch.² As an imperfect human being, I do not expect such precise

¹ http://www.nasa.gov/vision/universe/starsgalaxies/mirror_size.html

² <http://www.ociw.edu/Magellan/>

regulation of my own emotional response. Nevertheless, I can usually tell when my own inner mirror is not in a good reflective state. One clue is that everyone in the East End suddenly starts driving too slowly, and I observe that from inside my car I start to urge everyone to go a little faster please and stop wasting my time. Another clue is that not only is everyone driving too slowly, they all start driving in stupid and unforgivable ways, and, as a public-minded citizen, I find that the duty falls to me to honk loudly at these people. Thus, when everyone drives too slowly, or when they drive in stupid and careless ways, I can be pretty sure that my inner mirror has become bent out of shape well beyond two millionths of an inch and that it has become bumpy and lumpy, or cracked, or smudged. How kind of all these people to provide this information to me!

When I receive these clues and other similar clues that my inner mirror has become bent out of shape, then I know that the time has come for me to pay attention to my spiritual state. This might mean changing focus, backing off, chilling out. It might mean getting some exercise. It might mean getting some rest. It might mean having a helpful conversation with another person. It might mean getting away from people for a while.

These remedies usually work well to produce short-term adjustments to my mood, restoring the surface of my inner mirror to a workable smoothness, and you probably have similar mood-improvement strategies. But I would reserve the word “spirituality” for the deeper challenges. You may employ a mood-improvement strategy to deal with your disappointment about the outcome of some project you have been working on. But a deeper challenge might be the perfectionism that leaves you constantly disappointed with all the outcomes of all the projects you work on. You may employ a mood-improvement strategy to deal with your discomfort in hearing about a life-threatening medical challenge that another person is facing. But a deeper challenge might be the fear that your own life will have little meaning or significance that will endure after your own death. You may employ a mood-improvement strategy to deal with your sense of alarm or unfairness or dismay with current events. But a deeper challenge may be your inability to begin to work toward making even a tiny improvement in the world around you because you believe that hope is a feeling that comes and goes rather than a deliberate choice.

These deeper spiritual challenges are probably not going to be resolved with a short-term mood improvement strategy. They are probably not going to be resolved by listening to the remainder of this sermon this morning, but in the time remaining I would like to offer two spiritual tools or insights that go beyond short-term mood improvement strategies, although you will have to decide for yourself what might be helpful in addressing the deeper spiritual challenges of your life.

The first spiritual tool I would like to offer is this quotation from the Book of Hosea: “The wilderness will lead you to your heart, where I will speak.” No doubt there are many ways to interpret this passage. Here is my interpretation. In this context, I think “wilderness” means a desolate, lonely, fearsome place. It recalls the forty years of wandering of Moses and the Hebrew people after they left Egypt. It recalls the forty days of struggle endured by Jesus. It recalls Mohammed’s inhospitable cave. It suggests difficulty, anxiety, and uncertainty. Routine has been set aside. Comfort has been set aside. Safety cannot be assured. But in this wilderness, in this troubled place, one discovers one’s heart. “The wilderness will lead you to your heart,” says the passage.

The wilderness will lead you to your most sincere place, your most earnest place, your place of deepest hearing. It might be that the comforts and routines and securities and distractions of home would also lead you to your heart, but this passage is addressed to people who have somehow already come to a wilderness in their lives, people who have somehow already come to a troubled, confusing, desolate time in their lives, and it holds out the hope that in the midst of all the loneliness and messiness and fear one has the opportunity to come to a deeper acquaintance with oneself, that one has the opportunity to encounter oneself with greater clarity or honesty or insight.

But then the passage concludes with these words: “where I will speak.” In this translation, the phrase “where I will speak” modifies the word “heart,” as if to say, “Your heart is the place where I will speak.” I have suggested that “heart” means your most sincere place, your most earnest place, your place of deepest hearing. But who is the “I” that is speaking? Before answering that question, I would like to share with you another quotation. A psychologist once said, very wisely: “The message of religion is that whether or not there is a God, we are not it.” With this in mind, let us return to the quotation from the Book of Hosea. Who is the “I” that is speaking? For the person who wrote down these words, the speaker of these words was God. The passage presents the reassuring message that if you have somehow come to a wilderness in your life, you have the opportunity to come to a deeper acquaintance with the most earnest and sincere aspect of your personality, and there, in that most earnest and sincere aspect of your personality, you have the further opportunity to hear God speaking to you. Even as you struggle with troubling and challenging and fearsome circumstances, you have not been abandoned by God; in fact, your troubling and challenging and fearsome circumstances may make it more possible for you to feel a sense of God’s presence.

And if you do not understand God in this way, or if you have no role for God in your worldview, think back to the quotation from that psychologist: “The message of religion is that whether or not there is a God, we are not it.” This quotation suggests the importance of an honest humility, quite apart from where or not there is a God. Thus, in the midst of troubling and challenging and fearsome circumstances, perhaps what breaks into our understanding is a renewed awareness of larger meanings and purposes and outcomes which transcend our own more limited and even trivial concerns, larger meanings and purposes and outcomes which we may choose to serve because doing so gives greater significance to our own lives.

“The wilderness will lead you to your heart, where I will speak.” To summarize my interpretation of this passage: Out of desolation and loneliness and uncertainty may come a deeper acquaintance with the most sincere and most earnest aspect of your personality, and as a result you may come away with a stronger, more meaningful sense of purpose or calling: just as Moses and the Hebrew people experienced at Mt. Sinai, just as Jesus experienced in resisting temptation, just as Mohammed experienced in the recitations he wrote down.

The second spiritual tool I would like to offer this morning is the importance of attentiveness or mindfulness, and the accompanying sentiment of appreciation and grateful acceptance. With regard to attentiveness and mindfulness, sometimes excessive routine dulls our ability to connect with the world around us. With this in mind, I took a slightly different route to work one day, and I found myself noticing things in a way that I would not have noticed things had I taken the same old route to work. In particular, I

noticed a beautiful birch tree growing in someone's front yard, and I still have a vivid memory of noticing the beauty of that tree. One Buddhist teacher has conveyed this message of the importance of mindful awareness by putting a shiny new spin on a familiar phrase: "You must be present in order to win."

With regard to appreciation and grateful acceptance, sometimes excessive imagination about other times and places, or excessive attachment to goals and ambitions dulls one's ability to enjoy the present. Singer and songwriter Richard Shindell offers this image of appreciating one's place in the world. These are the words to his song "Hazel's House."

There's a two-lane county road in northern Jersey
Winding up a hill beside a lake
Just before the road winds to an end
Is Hazel's house

Long white picket fence around the front yard
A wagon wheel someone made into a gate
Flagstone steps will lead you to the front door
Of Hazel's house

And Hazel will have seen you from the window
She's waiting for you as you climb the steps
She says, "Thank God, we were starting to get worried.
Come on in."

It's New Year's and the place is overflowing
Cousins, aunts and uncles gather round
"How long has it been? It's good to see you.
How you've grown."

And the uncles all have one eye on the Rose Bowl
One by one they slink back to the den
Everybody else heads for the kitchen
You go with them

She always has the crumcake at the ready
Today is no exception -- there it is
The order of the universe intact
At Hazel's house

And no one seems to know that this is heaven
They say we only know it by and by
That someday all will be revealed
Well, here it is

Not every situation in every day is perfectly heavenly, of course. But heaven is mixed in there with all the rest of life, and it is an unfortunate mistake to hold it all at arm's length because it differs in some way from what you had imagined, or from what you saw on television, or from what others have in their lives. Perhaps Hazel's house is a place you have visited many times. Perhaps Hazel's house is your house, the place where you live.

I use my inner mirror to reflect back to you what I observe about you as a congregation as well as what I observe about you as individuals, to reflect back to you a useful image of who you are and who you are becoming and what your aspirations are and what your struggles are, as a religious community and as particular people. This is a model derived from pastoral counseling, and while ministerial leadership involves more than pastoral attentiveness, certainly pastoral attentiveness is always present. You may have people in your life for whom you have the privilege of using your inner mirror to reflect back to them who they are and who they are becoming and what their aspirations are and what their struggles are. May you keep your inner mirror smooth and free from lumps, bumps, cracks and smudges, at least most of the time; and may you do that not with short-term mood improvement strategies, but with real spiritual growth, using these tools I have mentioned this morning or others that will work well for you.

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