

I really love the hymn *Spirit of Life*. I sing it most days as part of my daily prayer practice. It's one of many instances in the UU orbit of the words "spirit" or "spirituality" being used often. It's all over the place in our hymns and readings. It's how many of us name the Divine. Perhaps not surprisingly, spirit may be one of the words I personally use most in my various *spiritual* practices. And because I prioritize intentionality as part of those practices, I'm forced to reckon with what the concept of "spirit" means? Have you ever thought about that? What comes to mind when you think of spirit? [Pause] For me, usually additional words to describe the concept come to mind. Then I dissect those words, too. Never quite getting to the bottom of it. And, as I continue doing this overly academic exercise, am I doing a disfavor to such a Divine concept? It's complicated. As it should be. Yet, as I intellectualize it all, am I moving away from the real meaning?

Of course, there's the simple etymological connection to "breath." The correlation with breathing already carries a lot of weight – when we breathe the spirit is literally with us. Using this definition, if we expand "spirit" into its longer word sibling "spirituality," then we're talking about our relationship with breath. With life. (This interestingly complexifies the meaning of the phrase "Spirit of Life" for me.)

In the translation of John chapter 3, verse 8 from the Christian bible at the top of your order of service and which I chanted in Latin for our spoken meditation, Spiritus is translated as "wind." "The wind blows wherever it wants. You can hear its noise, but you don't know where it comes from or goes." There are many layers of depth here, not the least of which for our purposes today, is the comparative elusiveness of the word spirit itself. Its meaning is mysteriously fleeting - like a gust of wind on a blustery day (as many of us in Southern California may have experienced last weekend). Likewise, we never know how we're going to be impacted by or how we impact this enigmatic wind. How we might move and be moved by the Spirit. Our relationship with everything is constantly evolving. Changing from moment to moment depending on where you're coming from and where

you're going. As the verse says, "the same thing happens to anyone who has ever been born of the spirit." "Anyone born of this elusive wind." *You* also go wherever *you* want as you're continually impacted by the spirit around you. This correlates with the definition of spirituality that most often works for me. Spirituality is my ever-emerging relationship with everything known and unknown. Yet these are still just words desperately trying to describe something that by this very definition is at least partially unknowable. If not mostly. Or even entirely.

You see, words are just symbols. Signposts that point to something else. Sometimes it's easy to connect the symbol to the symbolized. For example: you point to a rock and say "rock" and there's little question about your meaning. It gets a little more complicated if you're talking to someone who doesn't speak the same language as you; yet, even then, you can point directly at the thing and the translation barrier starts clearing up relatively quickly. Subjective experiences are a little harder to pinpoint than an object though. And, I would say that spirit and spirituality are just that - subjective experiences and not a uniquely identifiable object or creature. I know many folks might believe that spirit is indeed a unique creature that exists (often represented as a dove in some Christian traditions). I'm choosing to set that possibility aside for today. It's my conviction that the words - the *symbols* - we choose matter. They're not insignificant. Especially in the way they impact one's behavior. And, for me, thinking of spirit and spirituality as relational and experiential feels so much more divine, powerful, and, well, relational than some outside force working alone; providing a stronger possibility than other objectified alternatives of helping me encounter each of my myriad daily interactions with a sacred respect. An open spirit.

So, how do we nurture that kind of relationship? How do we experience spirituality when the concept itself is ambiguous at best? For me, it's takes practice. One might even call it: "spiritual practice." **[short pause and smile]** I had to pray this week to keep writing this sermon. I hadn't prayed for a few days and I can always tell when I haven't been caring for my spiritual needs because I start feeling blocked (there was a long time between writing the last sentence and this one). I literally had to

practice what I'm preaching about. Let alone writing a sermon, when I haven't been practicing my spirituality, other important and seemingly simple cognitive abilities start becoming more difficult. Like names of people (which are already a challenge for me) start to escape me even more – sometimes I just can't locate a person's name to whom I might feel very close. Like a mentor or even sometimes family members. I just don't have access to those brain files when everything is muddled in my heart. Then of course embarrassment or even guilt seeps in, which doesn't help anything. I feel less grounded *and* I feel less inspiration (from the Latin word *inspirare*, another word often translated to spirit). When I don't practice my spirituality, I feel lifted away from the connections that hold me safe and close, while also somehow stuck in that airborne position. I inevitably start dreaming about not being able to keep my feet on the ground. It can be downright scary.

But, then I prayed. Using my prayer beads as a physical guide, I began with my usual body scan (checking in with each part of my body from head to toe; remembering that I'm not just a floating brain), followed by singing *Spirit of Life*. Again, like usual. I offered gratitude for all the good fortune in my life. And, I named the Divine. Using the word "Spirit" a whole bunch. (If you want to learn more about this specific prayer ritual and other spiritual practices in our UU context, I highly recommend the book *Everyday Spiritual Practice* edited by Rev. Scott Alexander.) So, as I was praying, little-by-little, I was re-connecting with the holy. With whole-ness. Tearing up, my heart began to open to *inspirare*. To inspiration. To Spirit. And I was set free from my momentary stuckness.

Spiritual practice grounds us and liberates us. My favorite line from *Spirit of Life* captures this mysterious contradiction so well – "roots hold us close, wings set us free." Among many other things, we sit and walk and meditate; pray, sing, dance, draw, write poetry, and read divine words to settle our hearts. To get us unstuck. To connect us to ourselves and that which is bigger than ourselves. Spirituality is relational.

The last thing I do when I pray is to pray for others. I'm not just being set free from my own internal stuckness, I'm being set free from my own limited experiences and worldview. My own happiness. My own grief. I'm reminded that I'm not the center of the universe. In spiritual practice, wings set me free from self-centeredness. In this way, Spirit can also be a quality. A *quality* of love. A texture of love. A color of love. A Spirit of Love. This is what I practice when I pray for the wholeness and well-being of others.

If you combine the notion of a quality of love with the wind metaphor from the gospel of John and enough folks get together with a shared vision, a quality of love can soon become a movement of love. Impacting everything around it for the good. And, isn't that what we UU's are striving to be? Doesn't our faith call us to be a movement of love? Words aren't going to get us there. Not by themselves. To build this movement, we need to do our own individual spiritual practice. Then practice together. All while changing the world. Holding, connecting, and amplifying that which is most holy – community. Beloved Community with the whole and holy interdependent web of existence. "Hands joined together as hearts beat as one. Emboldened by faith, we are answering the call of Love." We are building the *Spirit* of Love.