

“Identity and Spirit”

Reverend Arlin Roy, (9/7/25)

Identity is that reasonably durable sense of self that defines who we are at our core and guides our emotional connection to each other and the world, our values, morals and ethics, our choice of mate and vocation, and our affiliation with a larger community. Identity comes from words that indicate “sameness,” as in the same characteristics of a thing or a person over time or between different contexts. Identity is that part of the psyche that fits together reason, motives, and spirit in a way of life that is reliably consistent in relating to the world. Nobody’s perfect at this, but when an identity is consistent and cohesive it gathers trust and mutual respect with others. The person with a consistent identity has a guide to ethics and morals they trust, and others do too. A reliable identity protects people from acts like what a construction company CEO impulsively did at the US Open. A successful tennis player pointed out a youngster in the crowd, signed his cap, and gave it to him. The CEO snatched it off the child’s head in front of many cameras. What, if anything, was he thinking? For a moment, there was an experience of shared outrage and a common value that you don’t steal from children.

That story leads us back to how common values evolved over time. The casual separation of spirituality and religion became a commonplace in American

culture about forty years ago. A large subgroup of single people began describing themselves as “spiritual but not religious” in singles online meeting sites, perhaps signaling flexibility for possible mates’ religious identity. Hundreds of quantitative instruments attempted to measure spirituality, probably derived from hundreds of doctoral dissertations. JHACOA, the joint commission that appraises hospitals, began requiring spiritual assessment as part of hospital intakes. Social work schools began offering courses in spirituality. I was then teaching at a postgraduate pastoral psychotherapy program, and I saw this as interesting and a way to legitimize our training. I wrote academic papers I gave at hospitals and schools. As a UU minister and social worker, I looked like the perfect combination of credentials to present such material, so supervisors and professors booked me.

However, I began to see the effort as an endless academic rabbit hole of ambiguous contradictions. The traits these quantitative questionnaires measured varied from assessing whether people felt connected to God or a higher power, or how their spirituality guided their moral choices, or what social supports people derived from a faith group, to whether they were ambivalent about their faith. Nobody agreed about a definition of spirituality because such definitions cannot travel cross-culturally. Cultures—and people—are too complex.

In sum, as one author observed:

Adding to the complexity of establishing a definition, the constructs are both multidimensional and dynamic. These concepts evolve during an individual's lifespan and are inextricably embedded in cultural, social, and communal dimensions. To tease out the bidirectional and intersectional nature of spirituality and religion is a challenge. ("The Role of Spirituality and Health in Mental Health, NetCE, 8-20-25, pg. 15)

We cannot separate spirituality from religion, so long as we do not confine ourselves to a conventional definition of religion as, for example, culturally recognized Roman Catholicism or Presbyterianism. Any religion functionally binds together people with similar worldviews, values and beliefs, holds regular meetings with prescribed rituals, passes on insights about human nature and spirituality, and seeks to support its members with information and concern. We then can comprehensively view Alcoholics Anonymous, Al Anon, the leftist affinity group Indivisible, and the Masonic Order as religions, despite their denials of that label. One of my clients, a well-known, retired Methodist minister, got much more support from Indivisible members when he was terminally ill than from church members. The Baptist minister in my hometown refused to allow any mention of my father's Masonic membership at his funeral because the minister viewed it as a rival religion.

Jen Hatmaker is one example of how developing a spirituality that exceeds the precepts of your religion can be unsettling. Ms. Hatmaker presented herself as a traditional, conservative Christian minister's wife for decades and built a career

as an influencer online and book author. Then, about a decade ago, she realized that Jesus spoke of ALL people as deserving love. She publicly broke with conservative Christianity to successively support antiracism, criticize Trump, and affirm the LGBTQIA community's right to respect. Her conservative Christian followers cancelled her. Her speaking engagements were erased, her books were pulled from the shelves, and it looked like her career was over. Except that hundreds of thousands of women who found themselves in a similar spiritual conflict flocked to her support. She revived her career.

Then she realized that her husband of 26 years was having an affair and ended her marriage. That divorce was big news in the evangelical world, and she was so scarred by the shame evangelicals heaped on her that she withdrew from church. She has worked through the hurt enough to see her own part in her divorce. She no longer participates in organized religion as she knows it, but I think she has a robust spirituality of her own making.

Scott Janssen was an atheist social worker for hospice, who said:

"I didn't have a spiritual bone in my body. I believed life had no inherent meaning. There was no soul, no overarching moral or spiritual order, no afterlife or reward for a life well lived." (Jon Blake, "An atheist began caring for the dying. What he saw changed his view of faith—and the afterlife" 8-17-2025, CNN, pg. 3.)

Janssen saw much of religion as focused on fear and social control. He had hundreds of unusual encounters over the 33 years he served with hospice and through hearing first-person accounts that confirmed for him the existence of human souls, the afterlife, and “something spiritual beyond the natural world.” He came to believe in “a unifying, conscious energy or force that connects us all.” (pg. 9) He also said:

I’ve come to trust that beneath this surface, beneath the fear, we have this inner place of goodness, resilience and the ability to deal with and navigate things we didn’t think we could. For 33 year I’ve been watching people do it.” (pg.11)

Although I may not come to the same conclusions, I believe that if Hatmaker and Janssen, came to us we could welcome them as free and responsible searchers for truth and meaning. Some people are not so lucky. I know a couple, call them Mr. and Mrs. Smith, who attended a Unitarian Universalist congregation where they felt they received spiritual support and stimulation. They were socially active there and contributed substantially--personally and financially. But it became clear over the past year that they were not appreciated by some in the congregation. Mr. Smith was clearly and directly told twice by fellow congregants that his belief in God was unacceptable, but Mr. Smith thought that his belief in a Higher Power had saved his life. He had attended that UU congregation for several years, but the minister’s sermons no longer spoke to either marital partner. The congregation enthusiastically celebrated togetherness and commitment to social change but not

spiritual searching. Ironically, Mr. Smith had contributed greatly, personally and financially, to antiracism and antipoverty work. Mr. and Mrs. Smith felt rejected and unjustly ostracized.

Do people even have to believe that they are spiritually motivated for it to be true about them? No, although Sarita's parents were World Federalists, a group that supported the aims of the United Nations and was led by a UU Minister, they did not consider themselves spiritual. They worked for two years in Nicaragua with the Peace Corps, and returned twice afterward, first with a Catholic relief agency helping people rebuild after a massive flood and once with a Quaker agency helping after an earthquake. Since humanism is also a source of spiritual motivation, I'm going to give them that status.

We need to be accepting of many different viewpoints. If each person is genuinely trying to understand how the spirit has moved them to explore the search for truth and meaning, they deserve our respect. Recently, at an interfaith clergy meeting, I was challenged by a prominent rabbi to defend our level of acceptance. The assembled clergy, Lutheran, Jewish, Catholic, etc., were explaining our various faiths to the group and when I said that we accepted people from all traditions a rabbi asked, "And if a Satan worshipper attended your congregation would he be welcomed?" Although that has never happened, I responded with: "Of course." If a Satan-worshipper came to us with a desire to learn more about

spirituality we would be pleased to take their questions seriously. Anyone who is trying to find a deeper sense of spiritual grounding is welcome here.

There are certainly destructive spiritualities and religions, such as the hate- and fear-inspired Ku Klux Klan. The murderous violence and intimidation perpetrated by the KKK is horrible, but their rhetoric fulfills the basic definition of a Christian religion. How to defend against that? Help people with critical thinking. The free and responsible search for truth and meaning asks about belief statements: “What is the evidence for that?” “How can this be verified?” “Does this logically make sense?” Help people who may be spiritually vulnerable to a destructive cult by nurturing a strong and diverse social circle that provides a reality check and emotional support. You have heard a UU minister, Chris Antal, who spoke from this pulpit, who was shaken in his Unification church beliefs when he accompanied a group of clergy from his previous religion on a tour of the Southern Civil Rights struggle sites. They went to the Edmund Pettus bridge and legal agencies supporting equal rights. When he saw how his peers could not accept equal rights for those with a different skin color, he was dismayed enough to search for something else. It takes negative experiences, but it also takes the energy to look deeper and look elsewhere such as in Building Your Own Theology workshops, and I quote:

Unitarian Universalists are very definitely happy heretics. We choose to “do theology” in a liberal religious mode. But if we are living, breathing, hurting, laughing, crying, questing human beings, it is impossible not to be theologians. Theology traditionally has to do with the study of God or divine things, but there is another definition as well: it can mean “field of study, thought, and analysis that discusses religious truth.” Theology has to do with ultimate concern and commitment by whatever names we call them. While theology can be, and often is, stuffy, deadly dull, and unutterably boring, it can be, and often is, exhilarating, exciting, and endlessly fascinating. Why? Because it has to do with the stuff of human experience, the meaning of being and becoming. (Building Your Own Theology, pg.1)

Starting on October 12, a Sunday, at 12:30PM and going for six sessions, Sarita and I will present the Building Your Own Theology curriculum. Through readings, careful reflection, journaling, discussion, and values clarification exercises, we will enable course participants to examine what they believe spiritually. We are responding to people asking for this. Just tell me or email me at arlinroy@yahoo.com that you wish to join. There is a limit of ten people, so tell me soon.

Sometimes change is welcome. We can be challenged by each other and supported to be our best selves at the same time. We do not always agree with the content or application of another's views. But someone's beliefs can be instructive. A deep dialogue, one that listens more than tells, can be helpful to each person's spirit. Acceptance does not mean endorsement. Acceptance means a kind of loving attentiveness that seeks to support the best in each other. The search for

truth and meaning is a core concern for Unitarian Universalists, because an ongoing search informs our spirituality and identities. Identity means the condition of being oneself, and not another, but responding to changed circumstances and conditions. A correspondence between values, impulses, and thought. The free and responsible search for truth and meaning is aspirational, because it is never perfectly fulfilled. But still worth the effort.