

**“What Is ‘Spirit’?”**

(Note: sermon outline at bottom of document)

**Skagit Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**

**October 11, 2020**

**Guest Speaker: Rev. Bruce A. Bode,**

**Celebrant: Kathy Roche-Zujko**

**Greeting & Opening Words**

Greetings to you from my home study here in Port Townsend.

Our Opening Words this morning are an adaptation by Unitarian-Universalist minister William R. Murray of Psalm 118:24, which, in the Revised Standard Version translation of the Hebrew scriptures, reads: “This is the day which the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

These are the days that have been given to us,  
Let us rejoice and be glad in them.  
These are the days of our lives,  
Let us live them well in love and service.  
These are the days of mystery and wonder,  
Let us cherish and celebrate them in gratitude together.  
These are the days that have been given to us,  
Let us make of them stories worth telling to those who come after us.

**Reading**

Part of what I will be speaking about in my sermon today has to do with how matter and spirit are related. One of the possibilities I will mention is that one can look at the relationship of matter and spirit as two poles of one larger reality ... and, further, that you can look at that larger reality from the perspective of either pole.

Our reading is a whimsical poem of American poet Mary Oliver in which she looks at the larger reality from the pole of “spirit.” It’s simply titled “Poem.”

**“Poem”**

**by Mary Oliver**

The spirit  
likes to dress up like this:  
ten fingers,  
ten toes,  
  
shoulders, and all the rest  
at night  
in the black branches,  
in the morning

in the blue branches  
of the world.  
It could float, of course,  
but would rather  
plumb rough matter.  
Airy and shapeless thing,  
it needs  
the metaphor of the body,  
lime and appetite,  
the oceanic fluids;  
it needs the body's world,  
instinct  
and imagination  
and the dark hug of time,  
sweetness  
and tangibility,  
to be understood,  
to be more than pure light  
that burns  
where no one is –  
so it enters us –  
in the morning  
shines from brute comfort  
like a stitch of lightning;  
and at night  
lights up the deep and wondrous  
drownings of the body  
like a star.

(Mary Oliver, "Poem," from *Dream Work*)

### **Musical Interlude**

Another thing I will be speaking about in my sermon is the status of "spirits." Are they to be received literally, symbolically, metaphorically? What is their status?

One of the very popular songs in my young adulthood, known, I suspect, to many of you, is the lively song "Spirit in the Sky," composed, recorded, and released in 1969 by songwriter Norman Greenbaum.

“Spirit in the Sky” was Greenbaum’s only hit ... but it was a big one, a world-hit really, ranked by Rolling Stone as #333 on its list of the” 500 Greatest Songs of All Time.”

Norman Greenbaum did compose other songs that he hoped might also catch on, but when his other albums didn’t go anywhere, he gave up his music career and became, first, a cook and, then, a chef in California.

Of Jewish heritage, Greenbaum said he spent a good bit of time working on the music of “Spirit in the Sky,” but only about fifteen minutes on the lyrics ... and admitted that he knew nothing about orthodox Christian theology ... which is abundantly clear from the verse that begins “Never been a sinner I never sinned” ... a sentiment that does not exactly, or even remotely, reflect orthodox Christian doctrine ... for which Greenbaum received a boatload of critical response.

Nevertheless, in 2011, Greenbaum was quoted as saying, “It [“Spirit in the Sky”] sounds as fresh today as when it was recorded. I’ve gotten letters from funeral directors telling me that it’s their second-most-requested song to play at memorial services, next to ‘Danny Boy’.” (see Wikipedia article: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spirit\\_in\\_the\\_Sky](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spirit_in_the_Sky))

I found multiple video versions of “Spirit in the Sky” on the Internet. The one I’ve selected includes some lovely images that accompany this lively, “spirited” song.

**“Spirit in the Sky”  
by Norman Greenbaum**

When I die and they lay me to rest  
Gonna go to the place that's the best  
When I lay me down to die  
Goin' up to the spirit in the sky

Goin' up to the spirit in the sky  
That's where I'm gonna go when I die  
When I die and they lay me to rest  
Gonna go to the place that's the best

Prepare yourself you know it's a must  
Gotta have a friend in Jesus  
So you know that when you die  
He's gonna recommend you  
To the spirit in the sky

Gonna recommend you  
To the spirit in the sky  
That's where you're gonna go when you die  
When you die and they lay you to rest  
You're gonna go to the place that's the best

Never been a sinner I never sinned

I got a friend in Jesus  
So you know that when I die  
He's gonna set me up with  
The spirit in the sky

Oh set me up with the spirit in the sky  
That's where I'm gonna go when I die  
When I die and they lay me to rest  
I'm gonna go to the place that's the best  
Go to the place that's the best

(“Spirit in the Sky” by Norman Greenbaum: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swIcX57vYDI>) (4:17)

## “WHAT IS ‘SPIRIT’?”

### Introduction

My two sermons with you this past summer, as well as sermons I’ve given for other congregations this summer and early fall, have related directly to the current social and political scene in our country. And though, of course, there’s always plenty to address on that front, this Sunday and next I’m giving the social/political scene a rest ... and I’ll be speaking on is what I typically refer to as “the spiritual dimension of life.”

Some years ago, I gave an eight-part sermon series on this subject to the Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship here in Port Townsend, and what you’ll be getting this week and next are some of the main ideas from that series.

My aim in this first week is to try to get a handle on the words “spirit” and “spiritual” – not an easy task, as they are used so variously. My Webster’s dictionary, for example, lists fifteen different meanings of the word “spirit.”

This morning I will briefly explore six different ways in which we commonly speak of “spirit” or the “spiritual dimension of life.”

### 1) “Spirit” as the animating principle of life

So: what do we mean when we use the words “spirit” or “spiritual?”

Let’s begin with “spirit” as the “animating principle of life.”

What makes living beings alive? What gives them their vitality?

The answer is “spirit.”

“Spirit” is a word that we use to refer to the life-principle – the vital, dynamic, animating, activating aspect of living beings. Without “spirit” there is no life.

From ancient times, “spirit” as the active life-principle has been connected with the breath ... for

breath is that which is moving and active and dynamic in a being. So long as a creature is breathing, it is alive. When the breath stops, the body grows cold; it is no longer alive or animated. Its “spirit,” we say, has departed.

Because of this common experience, the words for “spirit” in many languages are connected with breath. The Hebrew word for spirit is “*ru'ach*,” whose root means breath. In Greek, “*pnuema*” has to do with breath. In Latin, the word is “*spiritus*.” And in German, it’s “*Geist*.”

As the principle that makes one alive, a person “full of vitality” may be said to be “spirited” or “inspired.” Lacking such vitality, a person is said to be “dispirited.”

A “spiritual life” or “a life of the spirit” has a lot to do with paying attention to that which keeps one vital and alive. What makes you come alive? Where is the energy in your life?

A spiritual life can, thus, be understood as following that energy. Following that energy can be seen as your “spiritual path.” Keeping track of that energy is staying on your spiritual path.

Hinduism, for example, speaks of four basic spiritual paths or *margas* ... four basic ways that one may track and express the “spirit,” the vital energy of life ... four different “*yogas*.”

“*Yoga*” means union. One’s “*yoga*” is one’s way of spiritual union ... union with the vital energy as it manifests in you. And the four main *yogas* or spiritual paths (*margas*) of Hinduism are:

- 1) the Way of Meditation (*Raja Yoga*);
- 2) the Way of Knowledge or Discrimination (*Juana Yoga*);
- 3) the Way of Devotion or Love (*Bhakti Yoga*);
- 4) the Way of Works or Service (*Karma Yoga*).

In the sermon series I mentioned I gave here in Port Townsend, I devoted an entire sermon in that series to these “spiritual paths,” but don’t have time today to give further detail.

At any rate, one usage and understanding of the word “spirit” has to do with the animating, vital energy of one’s life.

## **2) “Spirit” as the non-material side of reality**

A second understanding of “spirit” is as the non-material side of life.

Throughout history, we humans have found it helpful and even necessary to conceptualize life, not just with one term but with two basic terms.

Thus, we have spoken of “material reality”: that which is available to our five senses and ruled by space and time. This is the physical, concrete stuff of life that we can touch, taste, see, hear, and feel.

But this has not been enough. There’s more to reality ... another dimension ... a non-material

dimension that we speak of as the “spiritual dimension.” This dimension is more difficult to get a handle on because it’s non-physical, non-spatial, non-temporal, and unavailable to the five senses in a direct way.

Let me give you three models or paradigms of how these “material” and “spiritual” dimensions are conceived and related to each other:

a) One, is to see the “spiritual dimension” as prior to and preceding the “material dimension” ... to see the “spiritual dimension” as the source of the “material dimension,” the invisible source out of which all visible forms are but temporary and changing manifestations.

The Hindus, for example, speak of the spiritual as the eternal, unchanging dimension that puts on and throws off material forms just as a person puts on and takes off clothing.

This is known as “philosophical idealism.”

b) A second way of relating the spiritual and material dimensions is the other way around: that is, to see the material dimension as the source of the spiritual ... and the spiritual, then, as the flowering of the material dimension.

This is “philosophical materialism” or “philosophical naturalism” ... in which “spirit” evolves from “matter.” Matter is the source of spirit; spirit is the fragrance or bouquet or flowering of matter.

Matter comes to *self*-consciousness. Matter becomes aware of itself. Thus, matter is no inert thing, but something imbued with spiritual potential.

Theologian Paul Tillich, for example, uses the term “ecstatic naturalism” – nature in ecstasy, matter blossoming into spirit.

c) Then, a third way of relating the material and spiritual dimensions is to see them as two poles of one larger entity.

In this approach, it’s not so much that matter emerges out of spirit or spirit emerges out of matter, but that all things are ever and always *both* matter and spirit, with neither being the product or the manifestation of the other.

They exist, rather, like two sides of one coin ... so that one could describe the coin from the spiritual side or the material side. It just depends on what side you’re looking at. Yet together they form one inseparable reality.

Even a stone could be looked from the side of spirit. You could say, a bit playfully, that the spirit of hardness and opaqueness has become concrete or physical in a stone.

Or, again, you could define each pole in terms of the other: “matter” is the physical or outward expression of “spirit;” “spirit” is the animating or inward expression of “matter.”

Author Charles Baudelaire puts it this way, “The natural world is a spiritual house.... We walk through forests of physical things which are also spiritual things, that gaze upon us with affectionate looks.”

### **3) “Spirit” as a “spirit world” or a “world of spirits”**

A third understanding of the spiritual dimension has to do with a kind of “spiritual world” or a “world of spirits.”

This is the realm populated by gods and goddesses, demons and devils, angels and archangels, souls of the departed, ghosts and fairy tale figures, sprites and gnomes and nymphs and elves and leprechauns – spirits of all sorts – “Spirit in the Sky,” as the spirited song we heard earlier by Norman Greenbaum puts it.

The question that comes up with respect to this understanding of the spiritual dimension is what status to give it. Are there in fact “spiritual beings,” that is, beings that exist but without material form? And if they exist, what is their nature, and how do they relate to the material plane?

The tendency with the coming of science is either to completely reject this realm, for which it is difficult to find scientific validation, or to hold onto it literally and dogmatically.

A third way, however – the way I prefer – is to interpret this realm of the spirits in a symbolic, mythological, or metaphorical way. That is, this realm of spirits is not literal, but yet real – real in expressing qualities and potentialities of the human spirit and of life in general.

Thus, I think it’s important both to recognize the difference between the literal and the metaphorical and to keep the distinctions clean ... but also not to dismiss the metaphorical and mythological realm, because without that realm the human imagination would suffer a great loss.

### **4) “Spirit” as a spiritual discipline or practice**

A fourth understanding of “spirit” and the “spiritual dimension” has to do with certain disciplines or practices that are called “spiritual.”

And these are many and varied: meditation, prayer, chanting, journal keeping, dream work, drumming, yoga, tai chi, participation in one of the arts, gardening, walking – there are multitudes of spiritual disciplines. And, again, I have detailed these disciplines in another sermon in this series, which I don’t have time to go over today.

But the point of these disciplines is to focus one’s attention on the “life of the spirit”:

To quiet the spirit,  
    restore the spirit,  
        center the spirit,  
            deepen the spirit,

open the spirit,  
enlarge the spirit,  
lift the spirit,  
adjust the spirit

... and to enable one's spirit to be:

more gentle,  
more kindly,  
more loving,  
more compassionate,  
more generous,  
more gracious,  
more humble,  
more forgiving,  
and less judgmental.

Thus – and this is an important point – it's not the activity itself that is spiritual; rather, these activities, disciplines, and practices can be called “spiritual” by virtue of their focus and intention ... and there is often some confusion here, so that we mistake the spiritual discipline or practice for the spiritual life.

Spiritual disciplines or practices are not ends in themselves. Teachers of the “life of the spirit” are aware of the temptation of their students and disciples to be thrown off the spiritual path by the very disciplines or practices that are supposed to lead to a greater appreciation of the life of the spirit ... to be thrown off the path, for example, by miracles or by exotic and paranormal occurrences.

Jesus, for example, would give no demonstration of power to those who asked for a sign or miracle. This was not “of the spirit.”

One of my favorite stories in this regard is a teaching story that comes from Buddhism and goes like this:

One day a disciple rushed to his teacher in great excitement crying, “Master, master, I've finally done it. After all these years of fasting, meditation, concentration, study, and practice, I've finally done it: I've walked on water all the way across the river.”

“Oh, that's too bad,” said the teacher in dismay. “Didn't I tell you? ... I meant to tell you ... I should have told you ... I'm sorry I didn't tell you ... but just up the river there's a ferry, and you could have crossed there at any time for only a nickel.”

You could, perhaps, compare spiritual disciplines and exercises to physical disciplines and exercises. Just as physical exercises are meant to “tend the body,” so spiritual exercises are meant to “tend the spirit.”

These disciplines and practices don't make us spiritual persons because we are already spiritual

persons! ... but they may help to bring the spiritual dimension to greater awareness and to deepen it in us.

### **5) “Spirit” as related to a certain type of experience**

A fifth understanding of “spirit” has to do with certain experiences that we call “spiritual experiences,” as in the common statement, “It was a spiritual experience” ...

... which may apply quite broadly to occasions in which we feel ourselves related, connected, or even identified with that which is greater than ourselves ...

... and, at its height, one may feel lifted, as it were, out of one’s body, out of your everyday, ordinary reality to touch the fullness of Being, to catch a glimpse of the “face of God” ... an experience of beauty, wonder, harmony ... of sublimity and exaltation.

I have found, for example, in adult religious education classes that I’ve led, when I ask folks to relate what they would regard as a “religious” or “spiritual” experience, it is typically this kind of experience that is spoken of: an experience in which the boundaries between things blur, all division falls away, things cohere and come together, waves of love roll over one, and one experiences, if only fleetingly, a sense of the unity and oneness of things, which includes even one’s own limited and very finite particle of being.

Such experiences, though fleeting, seem to us to touch the very essence of life and being, and are viewed as touchstones to which we return time and again in the daily routine of life. “Our faith comes in moments;” writes Ralph Waldo Emerson, “our vice is habitual.”

There are any number of examples in literature I could give. Let this one from Annie Dillard’s book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, suffice. Annie Dillard writes:

Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of fire abated, but I’m still spending the power. Gradually the lights went out in the cedar, the colors died, the cells unflamed and disappeared. I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck.

### **6) “Spirit” as a quality of awareness**

Then, finally, “spirit” can be understood, not only as a certain type of experience, but also as a “quality of awareness.”

This is an understanding of “spirit” that I picked up from my main mentor in the ministry, the Rev. Dr. Duncan Littlefair.

Dr. Littlefair, senior minister for thirty-eight years at the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where I was an associate minister for twenty-two years, wrestled intensely with the nature of “spirit,” particularly in the latter years of his ministry. “What is spirit?” he wanted to know. “How does it develop?”

His philosophy was a naturalistic one, and so he wanted to know how does “spirit” emerge from and relate to “matter?”

After his death, I wrote a eulogy in which I try to summarize his understanding of “spirit,” and I’ll close this first sermon in this two-part series with a part of that eulogy:

For Duncan Littlefair, the “spirit” can be understood as both the capacity for and the expression of a certain quality in our life, namely, a quality of awareness, attention, discernment, and gratitude for the miracle of our life.

The spirit, he said, is “no incendiary flame,” but rather “the still, small voice.”

It is, he said, “so quiet, so soft.” It’s “the stir of wonder” that may quietly marvel at any natural event. Though born of the natural, physical life, the spirit stands apart from nature in wonder and amazement.

The spirit, Duncan said, is “a homely thing” and can be easily overlooked both by ourselves and others. But the “spirit,” he said, doesn’t care whether it is seen or not, because it is itself a quality of seeing. It is, he said, “a feeling of awareness” or a “feeling awareness.”

The “spirit” can also be overlooked, he said, because it is “so non-productive.” The spirit doesn’t have anything to do with achievement or production of any kind. It is the quality of awareness with respect to achievement, but not the achievement itself.

It takes, said Dr. Littlefair, a long time to “grow a spirit.” “Cultivation of the spirit,” he provocatively quipped, “can’t really begin before age forty.” (Please, note that he said that when he was in his eighties.)

The “spirit,” this “quality of awareness,” he said, is always in danger of “being crushed” by the physical and material dimension of life.”

And, he said, the spirit is difficult to hold in many circumstances – not just in poverty and physical pain and debilitation, but also in relation to “getting on in the world.” We are so much with the world that we have no time for reflection, gratitude, or appreciation.

On the other hand, sometimes the awareness of spirit emerges out of very difficult circumstances, even disasters.

This quality of awareness and appreciation, once felt, Dr. Littlefair said, can “insert itself into all our life.” Once we catch this spirit as “the quality of awareness,” we may recognize it as the essence and aim of being human.

And, he said, it will have “ethical and social consequences.” A person who has found and developed this quality of awareness will eschew cruelty, violence, hatred, jealousy, and subjection of others.

Such a person will seek to lighten the load of others so that they, too, might experience more fully the possibility of “the life of the spirit.”

### **Next Sunday**

This has been a brief survey of six common ways we use the words “spirit” and “spiritual.”

In next week’s sermon titled “What Is ‘Soul’?”, I will distinguish and contrast the meanings and values of the two words “spirit” and “soul.”

### **Closing Song: “Spirit of Life”**

Our Closing Song is probably the most popular and familiar song among Unitarian-Universalist congregations, “Spirit of Life.”

Spirit of life, come unto me  
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion  
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea  
Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice  
Roots hold me close, wings set me free  
Spirit of life, come to me, come to me.

### **Closing Words**

Our Closing Words are from the Rev. Dr. Richard S. Gilbert:

As we leave this community of the spirit,  
May we remember the difficult lesson  
That each day offers more things than we can do.

May we do what needs to be done,  
Postpone what does not,  
And be at peace with what we can be and do.

Therefore, may we learn to separate  
That which matters most  
And that which matters least of all.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the live-Zoom service given by the Rev. Bruce A. Bode at the Skagit Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mt. Vernon, WA on October 11, 2020. Rev. Bode retired as senior minister of the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Port Townsend, WA in June 2018, and is now minister emeritus.)

**“WHAT IS ‘SPIRIT’?” (Sermon Outline) Speaker: Bruce A. Bode  
Skagit Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, October 11, 2020**

**Introduction**

- a) Not easy to get a handle on the words “spirit” and “spiritual” for they are used so variously.
- b) This sermon will look at six different ways in which we commonly speak of “spirit” or the “spiritual dimension of life.”

**1) “Spirit” as the animating principle of life**

- a) “Spirit” may refer to the life-principle – the vital, dynamic, animating, activating dimension of living beings.
- b) From ancient time, “spirit,” as the active life-principle, has been connected with the breath. The Hebrew word for spirit is “*ru'ach*,” whose root means breath. In Greek, “*pnuema*,” has to do with breath. In Latin, the word is “*spiritus*,” and in German it's “*Geist*.”
- c) A person full of vitality and life may be said to be “spirited” or “inspired.” Lacking such vitality, a person is said to be “dispirited.”
- d) A “spiritual life” has to do with paying attention to what keeps one vital and alive. What makes you come alive? Where is the energy in your life?
- e) A “spiritual life” can be understood as following that energy. And following that energy can be seen as your spiritual path.
- f) Hinduism, for example, speaks of four basic spiritual paths (*margas*), four basic ways that one may track and express the vital energy of life of one's life, four different means of spiritual union (*yogas*): i) the Way of Meditation (*Raja Yoga*); ii) the Way of Knowledge or Discrimination (*Juana Yoga*); iii) the Way of Devotion or Love (*Bhakti Yoga*); iv) the Way of Works or Service (*Karma Yoga*).

**2) “Spirit” as the non-material side of reality**

- a) Humans have found it helpful and even necessary to conceptualize life not just with one term but with two basic terms: material reality and spiritual reality.
- b) Three models/paradigms of how the “spiritual” and “material” dimensions are conceived and related to each other.
  - i) Spiritual dimension as prior to and preceding the material dimension – the invisible source out of which all visible forms are but temporary and changing manifestations (philosophical idealism).
  - ii) Material dimension as the source of the spiritual dimension – spirit as the fragrance or flowering of matter (philosophical materialism or philosophical naturalism).
  - iii) Material and spiritual dimensions as two poles of one reality – all things are ever and always *both* matter and spirit, with neither being the product or the manifestation of the other.

**3) “Spirit” as a “spirit world” or a “world of spirits”**

- a) A third understanding of the spiritual dimension has to do with a kind of “spiritual world” or a “world of spirits” – gods and goddesses, demons and devils, angels and archangels, souls of the

departed, ghosts and fairy tale figures, sprites and gnomes and nymphs and elves and leprechauns, etc.

b) Question of what status to give this. Are there “spiritual beings” that exist but without material form? And if they exist what is their nature, and how do they relate to the material plane?

- i) Reject completely
- ii) Accept literally
- iii) Understand symbolically/mythologically

#### **4) “Spirit” as a spiritual discipline or practice**

a) A fourth understanding of the spiritual dimension has to do with certain disciplines or practices that are called “spiritual.”

b) The point of these disciplines is to focus one’s attention on the life of the spirit and to deepen the spirit.

c) Often there is confusion in mistaking the spiritual discipline or practice for the spiritual life.

d) Spiritual disciplines or practices are not ends in themselves.

e) Just as physical exercises are meant to “tend the body,” so spiritual disciplines are meant to “tend the soul or spirit.”

#### **5) “Spirit” as related to a certain type of experience**

a) A fifth understanding of spirit has to do with a certain type of experience that is called a “spiritual experience.”

b) This is an experience in which you feel yourself related, connected, or even identified with that which is greater than yourself – lifted out of your everyday, ordinary reality to touch something beyond yourself.

c) Quotation from Annie Dillard’s book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

#### **6) “Spirit” as a quality of awareness**

a) “Spirit” can be understood as both the capacity for and the expression of a certain quality in our life, namely, a quality of awareness, attention, discernment, and gratitude for the miracle of our life.

b) In this regard, Dr. Duncan Littlefair emphasized the following:

i) The spirit is no “incendiary flame,” but rather “the still, small voice.”

ii) It is “a feeling of awareness” or a “feeling awareness.”

iii) Spirit doesn’t have anything to do with achievement or production of any kind.

iv) Always in danger of being “crushed” by the physical and material dimension of life.

v) It takes a long time to “grow a spirit.”

vi) Difficult to hold in many circumstances.

vii) Once we catch it, we may recognize it as the essence and aim of being human.

viii) This understanding of spirit will have “ethical and social consequences.”

#### **Next Sunday**

In next week’s sermon titled “What Is ‘Soul’?”, I will distinguish and contrast the meanings and values of the two words “spirit” and “soul.”