

***Spiritual Pathways of the Mind*** by Rev. Doug McCusker

A Zen Master was walking in silence with one of his disciples along a mountain trail. When they came to an ancient cedar tree, they sat down under it for a simple meal. After the meal, the disciple, a young monk who had not yet found the key to mystery of Zen, broke the silence by asking the Master, “Master, how do I enter Zen?”

He was asking how to enter the state of spiritual consciousness, which is Zen.

The Master remained silent. Almost 5 minutes passed while the disciple anxiously waited for an answer. He was about to ask another question when the Master suddenly spoke. “Do you hear the sound of that mountain stream?”

The disciple had not been aware of any mountain stream. He had been too busy thinking about the meaning of Zen. Now, as he began to listen for the sound, his noisy mind subsided. At first he heard nothing. Then, his thinking gave way to heightened alertness, and suddenly he did hear the hardly perceptible murmur of a small stream in the far distance.

“Yes, I can hear it now,” he said.

The Master raised his finger and, with a look in his eyes that in some way was both fierce and gentle, said, “Enter Zen from there.”

The disciple was stunned. It was his first satori – a flash of enlightened consciousness. He knew what Zen was without knowing what it was he knew!

They continued on their journey in silence. The disciple was amazed at the aliveness of the world around him. He experienced everything as if for the first time. Gradually, however, he started thinking again. The alert stillness became covered up again with mental noise, and before long he had another question. “Master, he said, “I have been thinking. What would you have said if I hadn’t been able to hear the mountain stream” The Master stopped, looked at him, raised his finger and said, “Enter Zen from there.”

That is the question we will ponder, “How do we enter Zen?” or to put it differently, what pathway to spiritual consciousness do we take? As the Master instructed, enter it from where you are. Take the path that is right for you. No one size fits all when it comes to spiritual awareness. There are as many paths as there are people. And no path is exclusive. We each have our unique qualities which allow us to experience the aliveness of the world around us in different ways. However, for the sake of discussion, I have organized the pathways into the familiar categories of Mind, Body and Soul. It’s an arbitrary sorting with no claims of precision, but it does help us communicate.

Gary Thomas, in his book *Sacred Pathways* identifies 10 groups of spiritual seekers, such as Ascetics, Activists, Caregivers, Sensates and Intellectuals to name a few. The Hindu religion identifies 4 paths to spiritual liberation: knowledge, duty, devotion and meditation. In our Spirit in Practice class, which was held in the fall, we used a Buddhist framework called the 8 spheres of spiritual growth. There was a lot of overlap with Gary Thomas’ sacred pathways, they just called it different things. But just about any model you choose will include the Mind or Knowledge as a way that we as

humans seek to understand our connection with the mysterious forces and structures that make up the universe.

Before we go any further, I'd like to identify what I mean by spirituality. Unitarian Universalist Minister, Scott Alexander, in his book *Everyday Spirituality* defines it as our "deep, reflective, and expressed response to the awe, wonder, joy, pain and grief of being alive." The Journal of Palliative Care says that spirituality is the way that individuals seek and express meaning and purpose. Parker Palmer, the well know Quaker writer says it is "the external human longing to be connected to something beyond oneself." I would add that spirituality is our relationship with the universe. In all these descriptions, there is a common recognition of our need to express what we experience in our connection to life itself. I believe that is a good working definition of spirituality: a need to express what we experience in our connection to life.

How many times have you heard someone say something similar to, "you have to get out of your heads and into your hearts" as a prescription for spirituality? I've insinuated such in some of my sermons. Contemporary notions seem to consider the intellect and the spiritual as mutually exclusive. But even ancient writings have said the same thing. Take the *Tao Te Ching* verse 48 that says "In pursuit of knowledge, every day something is added. In the practice of the Tao, every day something is dropped." I believe that these views lead us to see a false dichotomy between the faculties of the intellect: reason and knowledge and the faculties of the spirit: intuition, wisdom.

Buddhists use the term mindfulness which in a way means to clear one's mind and to fill one's mind with a singularity of thought and focus. The mind

is our shorthand term for all those cognitive faculties that provide consciousness and perception. It's where imagination, curiosity and learning converge. Many of the world's most rational thinkers find that the more they learn, the more they appreciate the majesty and magnificent mystery of life. Einstein once said "One cannot help but be in awe when one contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality." And, isn't that another good definition of spirituality – that which deepens our appreciation of the magnitude of life?

This is a gross generalization, but if you wanted to identify a predominant spiritual pathway for Unitarian Universalism, I would say that we, as a group, are more disposed to the Intellectual Mind. That doesn't mean we are smarter or wiser than other religions, but that we focus more on the mind and reason as our source for truth and meaning. I was speaking to someone from another church who said she used to attend our Fellowship, but we were a bit too intellectual for her, so she moved on. She didn't say it as an indictment or criticism, but as an observation of a style that didn't fit with her preferred spiritual pathway. We often say among ourselves, that UU's will debate and question anything. Maybe we are the place of refuge for Intellectual seekers who don't fit in other churches.

Liberal religion, which Unitarian Universalism is considered one of the predominant denominations, traces its beginning as a movement to Friedrich Schleiermacher's seminal book: *On Speeches to the Cultured Despisers*. It's probably not on anyone's best seller list, but it's required reading at my seminary. Schleiermacher wrote his book in 1799 as a response to the rationalist view that scientific reason was the only valid way to make sense of how the world works. He argued that religion was rooted

in human feelings, describing the core of religion as "a sense and taste for the Infinite in the finite."

Judeo-Christian religion had always emphasized knowledge, especially divine knowledge through revelation. In the beginning God appears on the scene through the creation of light. God reveals himself to the prophets and bestows his grace on humans.

In his book *Faith Without Certainty*, Unitarian Universalist Theologian Paul Rasor writes that in the doctrine of divine revelation, God self discloses to human beings. Scripture is understood as God's revealed word.

During the Age of Enlightenment, the emphasis was on reason and rational deduction to reveal ideas that led to universal truths. Rasor points out two examples of this: Descartes affirmation of his existence as a thinking being, you know "I think therefore I am", and the empiricist theory that all knowledge is based on data received by the senses.

Then along comes Schleiermacher who philosophically grounded spirituality and religion in experience. Of course humans had always experienced awe and wonder in the face of the mysteries of the universe along with an intuitive connection with something beyond us. But Schleiermacher's claim that personal inward experience was ultimately the authority upon which religion rested, not scripture or papal hierarchy, became the basis of liberal theology.

He said "Religion's essence, is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling. What we experience is a relationship with the universe and a consciousness of being absolutely dependent." That sounds like our 7<sup>th</sup>

principle: “respect for the interdependent web of all life of which we are a part.”

He set in motion the theology of individual intuition of the pre-existing forces of the universe. Only after we experience this connection, and then reflect on it do we communicate it through language. That means that the experience comes first and the doctrine and beliefs are byproducts of trying to articulate that which is beyond language.

Here is where it gets interesting. 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers began to look closer at language and they determined that the meaning of words is determined by their actual use. New words pop up all the time as we feel the need to describe something like “tweeting” or “bummed.” Language always takes place within a social context. It is shared meanings that make communication possible.

We are always interpreting what we experience, and we use language to do that. Language helps us understand things through a social and historical lens. In this linguistic view, we don’t first have experiences or understand a reality and then put words to it. We create the reality that we experience through language that was supplied to us by our culture. What can be said establishes the boundaries of what can be thought.

What that means is that which we think of as an inner experience cannot be brought to our conscious awareness without the frame of reference provided by language. We could not understand a particular experience as being of God unless we first had the word and concept of “God” to draw upon. It is our collective, relational nature as social beings that enables us to have spiritual experiences. In this sense, our relationship with the

universe, or God has as its real grounding our actual interpersonal relationships at the human level.

In March, we will be kicking off our small group ministry program called Chalice Groups. Each month the groups of 8-10 people will meet to share their reflections on experiences related to our monthly topic. In March it will be Spirituality. A couple of weeks before the group meets, they receive a packet from their facilitator with spiritual exercises designed to engage them in some activity built around the topic. For instance, they might choose a mantra for the month or work with a partner to hold each other accountable for making a particular change in their life. Then when the group convenes, they share their experiences of doing the spiritual exercises. What insights did they gain; how did it deepen their understanding of the topic? Additionally, the packet includes a bunch of deep questions for everyone to wrestle with and discuss as a group.

The goal of the Chalice Groups is to form connections among congregants while creating an environment of shared learning and spiritual growth. Back in the Fall, I taught an Adult Religious Education class here called Spirit in Practice, which was like a precursor to the Chalice Groups. During one class, we asked everyone to check-in by sharing an “a-ha” moment in their lives when something became clear that wasn’t known before. It was supposed take 1 or 2 minutes apiece, but we didn’t realize the power that an “a-ha” moment has, especially when shared with a group. People started sharing some deeply spiritual experiences in their lives, so my co-teacher and I just let go of time and allowed people to take as long as they needed. It was an incredible experience.

I wouldn't call that discussion intellectual per se, but with just a little structure, folks were offering a glimpse of the wisdom and insights that helped form the spiritual pathways of their minds. I imagine that this is how language and spiritual experiences have co-developed over the evolution of humanity. Our interpretations of whatever we encounter are always partial and limited. They are influenced by the cultural and relational experiences we've had, but they can never account for the sheer immensity of the universe. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Approach life with a holy curiosity. Open yourself to the aliveness around you; to the relationships that ground your awareness, and enter Zen from there.