On Being Religious
A sermon preached at UUCLV, July 3, 2016
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When couples meet with me to talk about their wedding ceremonies, they sometimes think they have to explain why they don't have a minister of their own. More times than I can count, they have explained it like this: "We're spiritual, but we're not religious."

"Spiritual but not religious." You've certainly heard the phrase. Maybe you've used it to describe yourself. I learned not too long ago that it's an official category you can check on Match.com. (No, I wasn't on there looking, it came up in a conversation with a single friend.)

Now we could spend the morning arguing about the definitions of the words "spiritual" and "religious." But we're not going to. I'm reminded of the bit in Lewis Carrol's book Through the Looking Glass, when poor Alice winds up in a bewildering conversation with Humpty Dumpty and challenges his use of words. "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful one, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."

So I would ask – not scornfully, but hopefully – that you will go along with me as I define these terms, and just understand that that is how I am using them this morning. You don't have to agree with my definition, but at least you'll know what I'm trying to say.

In my experience, most people tend to use the world "spiritual" to describe an individual, personal journey. "Religious," on the other hand, usually connotes a more structured, organized and communal experience. That's how I'm using them this morning. They can coexist very nicely – for some people, their religion – the organized, communal structure – provides the framework within which they develop, explore and experience their spiritual life. Others prefer to explore the spiritual dimension of their life outside the framework of any organized religious structure.

Of course, people often equate the word "religion" with rigidity, dogma, and religious conservatism – all things of which Unitarian Universalists tend to be skeptical. But why should we allow the conservative, rigid and dogmatic voices define what it means to be religious people? While "spiritual but not religious" can be perfectly sufficient for an individual, personal journey, Unitarian Universalism is – dare I say it out loud? – a religion. You're all here this morning, not meditating alone or walking in the woods, lovely though those things might be. You've chosen to come be part of this intentional religious community that is part of a liberal religious movement. And if a religious movement can't identify as religious, it's lost a lot of its power.

Listen to these words from A. Powell Davies, the great Unitarian preacher of the '40's and '50's:

"The religion that says freedom! – freedom from ignorance and false belief . . . freedom to seek the truth, both old and new, and freedom to follow it; freedom from the hates and greeds that divide human kind and spill the blood of every generation; freedom for honest thought, freedom for equal justice, freedom to seek the true, the good and the beautiful . . . the religion that says humankind is not divided – except by ignorance and prejudice and hate; the religion that sees humankind as naturally one and waiting to be spiritually united; the religion that

proclaims an end to all exclusions – and declares a brotherhood and sisterhood unbounded! The religion that know that we shall never find the fullness of the wonder and glory of life until we are ready to share it, that we shall never have hearts big enough for the love of God until we have made them big enough for the world-wide love of one another."

And then he goes on: "As you have listened to me, have you thought perchance that this is your religion? If you have, do not congratulate yourself. Stop long enough to recollect he miseries of the world you live in; the fearful cruelties, the hate, the bitter prejudices, the need of such a world for such a faith. And if you can still say that this of which I have spoken in your religion, ask yourself this question: what are you doing with it?"

Davies wasn't one to mince words. He was passionately committed to his religion. He knew that for us to have an impact in the world and to be a meaningful partner in any kind of religious or interfaith dialogue, we had to claim our power as a religious movement. And he was unapologetic about it. He didn't say "Well, we're not really religious, we're sort of 'religion-lite,'" as I've heard some contemporary UU s say. He claimed religion as a powerful and positive force.

It's understandable that many of us are uncomfortable with the label of religion. Many of us have experienced religion as restrictive, disrespectful or oppressive. And "religion" is some commonly defined as a set of specific beliefs and doctrines that it may be hard to imagine that it can be bigger than that.

But I am convinced that religion is much more than a set of proscribed beliefs. I have been a Unitarian Universalist all my life. I am deeply committed to our movement and to the communal nature of our explorations. My beliefs about God, human nature, the universe, the meaning of life – all those things have changed many times, have grown as I have grown. I have been fiercely atheistic during long segments of my journey. Now I am a UU Christian worshiping with the Mennonites. But at every step along the way I have known myself to be a religious person.

You may never choose to claim the word "religious" as a positive part of your identity. And that's OK. But I'm a religious leader in a religious movement, and if I don't have a positive understanding of the word, I've got a real identity problem.

I said earlier that "spirituality" tends to imply a more inward, individual journey, while "religion" describes a more collective experience. Of course the two can work together. Some of my spiritual life takes place outside of the realm of an organized religion – moments of meditation, singing along with music that speaks to my heart, sitting on a rock watching the endlessly changing ocean – all those can be spiritual experiences for me.

But much of my spiritual life takes place within the realm of organized religion. When I sing hymns with a community of fellow seekers – and for me, singing hymns is a deeply spiritual experience, especially when I sing harmony, which I simply can't do alone – when I go to the deep places to write a sermon, or am taken to the deep places listening to someone else's sermon. When I participate in a community that encourages my transformation, that inspires me to greater service and provides opportunities to serve. Much of what I need to be authentic in my spiritual development comes to me through my involvement with religious community.

So for me, the fact that I have a religion – Unitarian Universalism – gives me a home, a framework and a community within which to explore and deepen my spirituality. Not all people need a religion within which to do that things. But I do, and I believe many people do. I'm guessing that at least some of you do. After all, you're here this morning. The religious scholar Houston Smith once said that religion gives traction to spirituality. Religion gives traction to spirituality. It gives us the structure and support to do the things we want to do, and know are good for us. It provides a vehicle for the living out of our ideals and values. Religion both challenges and supports us in our efforts to live as our best selves. I can't do that alone.

So I've begun by suggesting that spirituality and religion are two sides of the same coin, one more individual, one more communal. But even if we accept that distinction, there are plenty of people who don't consider Unitarian Universalism a religion, primarily because we don't have a common set of beliefs or require a belief in God.

So what does make us a religion? What are the characteristics of religion? I know most dictionary definitions begin with references to a belief in God, but they also go on to then acknowledge a broader understanding having to do with systems of beliefs, practices, and ethical values that are not exclusively theistic.

Several of my colleages have come up with beautifully succinct definitions. The late Forrest Church said that religion is the human response to being alive and having to die. Galen Guengerich said “In my view, religion is constituted by two distinct but related impulses – a sense of awe and a sense of obligation.” I'll come back to that one.

I have my own set of themes that I consider fundamental to what it means to be religious. Of course, any of these themes could be a sermon series of its own, but let me touch briefly on each of them. There's overlap among them, and as I played with them I found that each one seemed to lead naturally into the next. So here we go:

First – community: One element of religious life is the choice to come together in an intentional, covenantal community. Obviously there are lots of communities that are not religious in nature. But when we join in religious community, we are bound together by the promises we make, by our way of being with each other, in a way that secular communities are not. We don't do it perfectly, of course. But we lift up the building of that community as part of our reason for being.

My second theme I've identified is reverence, which is intertwined with gratitude. Reverence for life was the cornerstone of Albert Schweitzer's life and work. It's the experience of standing in awe before the beauty and complexity and sometimes even the pain and sorrow of our experience. Reverence requires awareness – and it evokes gratitude. The experience of reverence doesn't depend on a belief in God. It's equally accessible to theists, humanists, people of all religious affiliations. It's a universal human religious response, one that can unite rather than divide people of different faiths.

And through that experience of reverence, we begin to experience another dimension of what it means to be religious – a connection to something larger than ourselves. Some of us use language of God or spirit to express that larger reality. For others, it has to do with

experiencing our place in the cosmos, the vast and complex natural world in which we live. For still others the emphasis may be on the deep connection among human beings and the community we form together. I have always loved the language of our opening hymn – the Life that makest all things new. But however we feel and name it, it allow us to realize that it's not all about us, but that we are part of something astonishing that is much bigger than we are. And religion at its best helps us to experience and appreciate that connection and try to understand our place in it.

Religion also calls us to cultivate compassion. Religious historian Karen Armstrong has argued that compassion is the common ground among all religious traditions. Like reverence, it's a universal human religious response, born out of our experience of being connected – to each other, and to the world in which we live.

These things all build on each other. Because if we have truly experienced reverence, and connection, and compassion, then we are led naturally to a desire for service. Religion can't only be about looking inward, but also about looking outward, seeking to transform the world. I come back here to Galen Guengerich's words: "In my view, religion is constituted by two distinct but related impulses: a sense of awe and a sense of obligation." The awe is what I have called reverence, and when we experience that and all that it brings to us, then we begin to accept our obligation to contribute, to serve others, to preserve and improve this astonishing world in which we find ourselves.

And finally, I believe religion is about breaking down barriers. It's so easy to see the way that religion can put up the barriers between people, drawing lines in the sand to define who belongs and who does not. But religion at its best is about reaching across those boundaries, seeking to know and understand the people on the other side. Jesus crossed boundaries all the time, and it's a major theme of his preaching and teaching, although it sometimes gets left out of the Christian message. Because this element is sometimes neglected in other religious traditions, we have a particular obligation to lift it up, to celebrate and promote the ideals of inclusion and acceptance, of reaching out and seeking to understand and appreciate people we experience as different from ourselves.

I believe that all religions encourage us to do or experience these things – to be in community, to live with reverence and gratitude, to cultivate compassion, to feel our connection with a larger reality, to serve others, and to break down barriers between people. I believe that religion at its best is about these things, and that is why I want to be a religious person.

But I also recognize that religion is not always at its best. Including our own. So I want to close by repeating the challenged posed so eloquently by A. Powell Davies: "As you have listened to me, have you thought perchance that this is your religion? If you have, do not congratulate yourself. Stop long enough to recollect the miseries of the world you live in; the fearful cruelties, the hate, the bitter prejudices, the need of such a world for such a faith. And if you can still say that this of which I have spoken is your religion, ask yourself this question: what are you doing with it?"