

*"Spirituality Boosted by the Great Outdoors", by Bill Spence, Ph.D.*

Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. These were the four elements that the ancient Greeks believed to be the foundation of the tangible universe. Primitive religious beliefs, as beautifully described by Joseph Campbell, often imbued natural phenomena with special and sometimes religious properties. When I was asked to do a summer service here – something that I've never done before – I thought that talking about something very close to me at the moment would be a good approach. This something is the beauty of our natural surroundings. This is part of the reason that Sue and I moved to the valley three months ago. And what is it about this beauty that is so fundamentally enticing? Well, I am not a theologian and my comments this morning are mine alone and meant to stimulate further discussion later on. Also, after this meeting, you're invited to join us for a bite to eat at the usual venue.

Little did I realize that my chosen topic – Spirituality Boosted by the Great Outdoors – would lead me to classic writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and so on, but also thinking about the nature of spirituality, particularly as one's spirituality connects with nature.

We UUs talk a lot about spirituality. Spiritually almost defies a concise and meaningful definition that would be universally accepted. For example, we hear about someone being the spiritual leader of a town or a sports team – that implies someone who has trusted judgment and a trusted point of view.

Personal spirituality is something different. I have come to believe that spirituality refers to a special state of being, characterized by being at peace with one's self and with one's particular operational universe.

Typically, religious practitioners try to achieve spirituality through ritual and liturgy, prayer, and other mechanisms for appealing to a power believed to be outside one's self. I am fascinated by the emerging research field of psychotheology. This field even merited a cover story of Time Magazine a couple of years ago.

There now are medically sophisticated methods for mapping activity in the brain. In psychotheological experiments, numerous subjects were chosen for being masters of their particular religion. Hindu mystics, devout Christians, devout Muslims, and others were wired up and asked to move towards and

into their chosen spiritual state. The surprising finding is that the brain activity for these subjects was essentially the same – the brain centers that deal with spatial orientation and time shut down. These individuals, while feeling that they were alone with God, actually may be alone with themselves, without much external stimulus. That is, their sensations may simply be the result of brain activity/inactivity. My feeling is, that if revelations or ideas come to a person in this state, it would be useful for them to re-examine them when totally conscious. One could use these results to conclude that the God concept is not an external force with personal interest in the subject individual, although this interpretation admits that the God concept may take some other form.

OK , enough of this digression. I believe that we all can agree that it is mentally healthy to regularly achieve some detachment from the hustle and bustle of our days. We recognize that spirituality is a way to achieve this universally desirable commodity but that spirituality is not necessarily the exclusive property of the typically religious and prayerful person. We UUs can also share in the benefits of spirituality but we have chosen to find it through other means. I believe that being in a spiritual state is becoming totally absorbed in what one is doing, to the point that most self-absorption disappears.

There are probably several ways to achieve a spiritual state. A humanist would delight in the company of another person – think of the pleasure of seeing or calling an old friend. A writer can achieve a writer's high. Indeed any creative pursuit can achieve a spiritual detachment and it is indeed wonderful.

Can there be too much of this good thing? Hindu mystics and other deeply holy souls try to live spiritually over sustained periods. So, it is possible to be so spiritual that one is not functional in the sense of a modern human. **I think that the trick is to live a full life and to have a natural spirituality on call.**

So, now to the main point of this talk. One of the more obvious ways to achieve spirituality and one available to each of us is to allow one's self to be enthralled by something beautiful in nature. Think of the awe inspiring feelings induced by a brilliant rainbow, a prolific lightning storm, a rushing river, a particularly beautiful bird or wild animal.

Two of the better known practitioners of spirituality via nature are John Muir and Henry David Thoreau. These individuals were extreme in this regard, deriving fulfillment from nature by living long periods alone. Thoreau and his musings at Walden Pond have led to great literature. Muir and his amazing walks from Oregon to the Gulf of Mexico and throughout the High Sierras led to a recognition of the special place that is Yosemite and ultimately its inclusion as a very early national park.

Sue's reading from Muir's "The Treasures of the Yosemite" captures some of this awe. While we may not be able to recount our experiences in such luxuriant prose, we surely can try to have great outdoor experiences that have spiritual side benefits.

How can we achieve some of Thoreau's or Muir's oneness with nature? We live in a very special place and it only takes some time or special effort to connect in a spiritual way with nature. One doesn't achieve this by noticing a rainbow or rushing water by blasting past in one's car or on one's bicycle. One needs to find a good place to stop, safely, and drink in the experience. Spirituality needs the investment of time.

Sometimes the goal of a spiritual experience needs to be actively pursued. When is the last time you hiked up to one of our local sanctuaries – Hanging Lake? When you were there did you sit down someplace quiet and become one with the beauty? I have yet to visit Rifle Falls, which I hear is beautiful. When I go, I want to use my body for good exercise but I also want to find some place special there and let my mind wander until I'm in a peaceful state. The trick, I think, is to take some extra time to really be WITH and part of nature – be part of the extended web of life, as alluded to by Chief Seattle. It is worth working very hard to achieve this extra dimension of living **and we each have it here in our grasp, by living in this beautiful region.**

Can spirituality be shared or is it so personal that it exists only within one's self? A bonus from a humanist's perspective is that beauty can be shared. If one can be at real peace at a water cascade in the company of another person, then the spiritual quality of the experience is enhanced. This takes silence and the investment of time.

Now, we can't have special experiences every time we need a break from life's pressures. But, planning a future outing can give one hope for a future

spiritual experience. This can be fulfilling in itself, sort of anticipatory spirituality. And when we want a spiritual break, we can always close our eyes and summon up a favorite memory of something beautiful. Sue and I hiked to a pair of wonderful high lakes last Sunday, and that set of images has been my spiritual retreat for the past week. I like the concept of having one or a very small group of spiritual snapshots in one's memory bank. **By living in the mode of having natural spirituality on call, we can achieve a balance point between spirituality and being functional in today's world.**

So, the ancient Greeks had a lot right. Earth, Air, Fire, and Water are basic parts of our natural universe. We can use these basic parts as departure points for spiritual experiences. They also said that beauty is truth and truth beauty. We agree. So, let us use nature to bolster our spirituality. **It is good.** Let us not become so busy or distracted that we forget to let our sense of awe be kindled by the great natural beauty that we are privileged to have around us.

## Discussion

Now, departing from this personal exploration, we UUs, as realists in our world, see the degradation and even destruction of our natural sanctuaries. The balancing our nation's energy "needs" with protection of our natural resources is a hotly debated subject. We have a situation at our Roan Plateau that requires great finesse. Trout Unlimited is lobbying hard to save the threatened water rights of the Shoshone Hydroelectric Generator here in Glenwood Canyon. To what degree can we allow the usurping of our natural treasures to feed the interests of increasing population and the development that goes along with it? I believe that we have a spiritual mandate to work to protect these sanctuaries, for this will help preserve elements that are critical to the well-being of each of us and the well-being of our society.