



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Beyond Spiritual Tourism

By Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

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I don't watch a lot of television, but I have been recently enamored with the situation comedy "Parks and Recreation," a biting satire about life in a small town Parks and Recreation department, complete with an under-functioning, arch-conservative director, Ron Swanson, who would just as well like to see government privatized, and an erstwhile assistant director Leslie Knope, played by Amy Poehler, who wants nothing more than to make her department a paragon of public virtue and service. At one point in the story, Leslie, heartbroken, asks Ron her boss why her current love interest is so interesting but so emotionally distant. Her boss, in a moment of uncharacteristic sensitivity explains it all this way:

"He's a tourist, Leslie. He vacations in people's lives, takes pictures, puts them in his scrapbook, and moves on. All he's interested in are stories. Basically, Leslie, he's selfish. And you're not. That's why you don't like him."

The problem with tourism, whether it is visiting a destination, having an experience or searching for life's deeper meanings is that it lacks authenticity and commitment. After all we just go there, we don't live there. A tourist isn't invested in the outcome of what they are visiting; they are just consuming that experience. There is no authority in just visiting. It is empty of the larger meaning that comes from being a living part of where you are. Like all tourists, we vacation in other's people lives and traditions but we don't live there.

Now, don't get me wrong. I actually love being a tourist. I love to travel and visit places I have never been before. But I am very clear about my role in a new place or new

experience; I am there to learn and appreciate. I am there to spend my money on which their economy depends. I am not there to change their world to what I think it should be. I have a hard time with the so-called eco-tourism idea. You can and should be a responsible tourist, but to pretend that your efforts to clean up the jungle are actually making a difference is ethnocentrically arrogant at best. Rarely, do these eco-tourist companies actually ask the people who live there what they want. Instead they make assumptions about what we, the well-heeled tourists, wants. Our desire for a certain outcome while self-satisfying and perhaps even laudable lacks the conviction and authority of the people who live and experience that place.

So it won't come as surprise to you then that I am not fond of anything that resembles spiritual tourism either. Even worse than assuming what people need by those who don't live their lives, are those who sample from the spiritual buffet and dabble in Buddhist Chanting, Christian Taze, Sufi dancing, Jewish Seders, gospel singing and any number of traditions to which the tourist has no intention of learning more deeply and committing their lives. The Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield says that rather than sample many spiritual paths, we would do better to choose one and dig deeply into that practice so that we might reveal our own souls. Better not to dig fifty holes one foot deep but rather dig one hole fifty feet deep and uncover what is buried there (From [A Path with Heart: A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life](#)) I have come to believe that it is vital that we focus our spiritual life, however we see that life, to paying closer attention to what we practice.

Sadly, this is what America's religious life has largely become. We visit a shrine or a church or a temple and we partake in the gifts of that experience, but we are unwilling to stay, especially at the first sign of difficulty. While this does promote understanding it can lead to a consumerism that borders on voyeurism; a sort of looking in from the outside without owning the inside. It lacks depth and meaning. It lacks the authority that comes from actually diving in a little deeper. Years ago, a Tibetan Buddhist group came to the church I was serving and spent a week making a beautiful sand mandala. It was deeply

powerful to witness the ritual destruction of that mandala during a Sunday morning service. Almost 300 people from our neighborhood came to the ritual sweeping away of the mandala, which illustrates impermanence. I doubt any became Buddhists.

The power of any religious practice lies not in what you “get” out of it in the short-term, but what meaning it gives your life, how it changes you, in the long-term. I have known hundreds, perhaps even thousands, who have come through the doors of our churches hungry for spiritual nourishment. That is, after all, one reason why we exist; to nourish the spirit. But sadly, they don’t understand the give and take of spiritual practice. It’s not just about you, in fact, it’s really not about you at all. You are just the recipient of a by-product of participating in a religious community. And then, at the first disagreeable moment, a congregational meeting, the minister says something you don’t like, the music disagrees with you, or they aren’t serving sushi for lunch, you leave. It’s like spiritual pornography, all images, no real love.

No, my friends, the real love, the attention of a spiritual practice, comes with the commitment. And it becomes the very bedrock of what holds you through the storm and brings you out the other side. Do you think Martin Luther King (or Dorothy Day or Gandhi) could have done what he did if he did not have the faith of Christianity and the blessing of his church that he served faithfully for years, behind him? His authority came from his spiritual practice, his committed spiritual practice, not from being baptized the day before he marched on Selma. Meaning is made from the attention of our spiritual commitment. Coming here week after week, year after year to sing, laugh, cry and give, that is what makes us spiritual. Do you hear me?

As Unitarian Universalists we are particularly prone to the pitfalls of spiritual tourism. One of the reasons I don’t care for our UU take on the Passover Seder is because it’s not our ritual to enjoy. Most of us did not convert to Judaism, we did not learn Hebrew, we did not become bat or bar mitzvahed, we do not hail from a religious story that includes the bondage in Egypt, the Exodus or the Holocaust. So for me to misappropriate that

ritual is devoid of meaning at the very least, insulting at worst. As a rabbi once told me, “Have the Seder, yes please, but please don’t change the words, those words and rituals tell a story thousands of years old. Please honor that.”

The prayers of a Muslim to submit to the one and only God, Allah, is not the same as the pagan practice of calling the goddess at vernal equinox, and not the same as silence in a Quaker meeting house, and not the same as a Gregorian chant. There may indeed be an ultimate reality that transcends and encompasses all meaning, but dammed if I can figure it out. Can you hear me? And it is hubris to think that all of these spiritual practices are just variations of the same theme. They are not. Each tradition carries its own authority. And we have the duty by our principles to respect those differences.

While being spiritually progressive does mean being open to new ideas, it is not the same as assuming all ideas have the same validity. We must test each against our own experience, reason and authority in order to determine what works, deeply, for us. I tried being a Baptist, I tried being a Buddhist, I really did. I gave each endeavor months of practice and devotion. But in the end, I returned to being a UU. There is power in practicing Unitarian Universalism. There is hope in joining forces today to save the spiritual tourists from themselves and help them share our good news. Unlike tourists, we are here to save real lives. And we are the ones we need to save first. We need to stand firm in our tradition of hope and action. Invite someone off the tourist circuit and ask them to join you in church.

Here together is where we make meaning and change the world. When we pay attention to our spiritual life we are better able to create meaning. More and more people are searching spiritually like never before, searching for ultimate meaning, but are living the lives of tourists rather than travelers. How can we help those spiritual tourists find hope in the time of Black Lives Matter, locking up children at the border, or the tragedy in Syria? Or as my colleague Rebecca Parker put it “how do we live in a way that keeps faith with beauty... and still resist the violence that tears us from one another and the earth?”

("Spiritual Practice in Our Time" by Rebecca Parker in Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life edited by Scott Alexander)

One of my favorite spiritual practices is to observe Sabbath. I only manage a half a day but it's a start. Last week I spoke about extending that Sabbath to our digital devices. Give yourself time to be in your own skin, and only then will you find the strength to go back out into the world. And another one that perhaps we are noticing right now, Tithing. Giving ten percent of your income away. Not all to the church, but that would nice, no, to those causes and values which make our world a better place. It can take a while to get there, so start with two or three percent and work up. Francis and I have been able to do this for years, but it's not always easy. Why tithe? Because it commits you to your values in a way like no other. Moving you beyond tourism to actually inhabiting your spiritual center, or as Rebecca Parker noted of one parishioner "I tithe because it tells the truth about who I am" (Ibid, Parker) It's a start at least. You will have your own spiritual touchstones that move you beyond tourism to really living in the space your body, mind and soul inhabits.

The truth about spiritual attention lies somewhere between our own courageous exploration and our attempts to remain empathic in a world largely bereft of compassion. Spiritual attention marries our love for the transcendence of nature, so evident in this sanctuary with our call to liberate the world.

The theologian Kathleen Fisher tells of her experience meeting the poet Mary Oliver for the first time. She was waiting in a long line for an autograph, when she noticed the woman in front of her who shuffled forward, bent by worry and sadness. When the woman before her got to the poet, the woman leaned in to speak to Mary in a soft voice. Watching the weary woman with the poet, Kathleen wondered if she carried a wearying sorrow. Perhaps she had come to share her own salvation story, to tell of poems that honor her heart. As the woman spoke, Mary Oliver put down her pen, grasped her hands, looked into her face, and received her words with a kindly intensity. She attended to her

warmly and generously, undistracted by the many people still waiting in line. “Real attention,” says Mary Oliver, “needs empathy; attention without feeling is just a report.”

Kathleen Fisher wrote of Oliver: “Bereft of a loving human gaze in her own abusive early life, Oliver escaped to the woods and ponds which knew nothing of malice or neglect.” “The great black oaks,” Oliver writes, “recognized and responded to my presence, and to my mood. They began to offer, or I began to feel them offer, their serene greeting. It was like a quick change of temperature, a warm and comfortable flush, faint yet palpable ... The ferns and Dutchman’s-breeches growing beside the streams presented their delicate beauty as a gift, without expectation. The just-hatched geese wobbling in the pond’s shallows, unaware of the turtles eyeing their next meal, cautioned her about life’s awful and wondrous cycles. ‘What does it mean, say the words, that the earth is so beautiful? And what shall I do about it? What is the gift that I should bring to the world? What is the life that I should live? What will you do with one, wild and precious life?’” Mary Oliver’s gift would become her poems. Her life would become the work of faithful attention....

Years of devotion to black oaks and hummingbirds, to cold ponds and summer clouds, to “brotherly” Whitman and scholarly Emerson, were present in the brief exchange with the weary woman at a book signing on a crisp fall night. By chance, Kathleen Turner witnessed the moment and felt its grace. She could only ask herself: “What is the gift that I should bring to the world? What is the life that I am paying attention to?” (Adapted from Kathleen Turner “Attention is the Beginning of Devotion” in Anglican Church of Canada Journal Nov. 2018)

When I defended my doctoral thesis Creating Theology Together (which Rev. Shelly and I will be teaching next year), I suggested that we as UUs need to move towards a doctrine of Ultimacy, some higher power to which we as a religious people can serve and from whom we derive our authority. Dr. King had that power, Dorothy Day had that power, Nelson Mandela had that power. Why can’t we have that power? One professor challenged me on this point. How do we, true to our religious tradition, think we can

speak the theology of every UU there is? Perhaps a congregation or even a leadership of a congregation can decide on that authority, as my curriculum tries to do, but not an entire liberal religion. As I walked the cold streets back to my hotel it occurred to me that we do have that higher power, that authority and attention that makes us more than tourists. It's in the beloved communities we spend our time creating; communities such as this one. Here is the god of our own making, not in some spiritual abstraction, but in our hearts and in our hands. That's the home we have found, the dream we are yet to become, the slice of heaven we are trying to create, the justice we witness for, the food we serve, the comfort we offer, here, in each other. It's about nothing less than that. We are the hope. We are the courage. Together we are more.

I close with Mary Oliver in her poem "Wild Geese":

You do not have to be good.
 You do not have to walk on your knees
 for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
 You only have to let the soft animal of your body
 love what it loves.
 Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
 Meanwhile the world goes on.
 Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
 are moving across the landscapes,
 over the prairies and the deep trees,
 the mountains and the rivers.
 Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
 are heading home again.
 Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
 the world offers itself to your imagination,
 calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting
 over and over announcing your place
 in the family of things.

(From Dream Work by Mary Oliver)