

ADULT SPIRITUAL GROWTH
Sermon, © January 4, 2009, by Rev. Peter Tufts Richardson
Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Augusta, Maine

I may be a few days late for those of you who made New Year's resolutions. But perhaps they are malleable enough to include some new aspect of spiritual growth. It is important to have a broad idea of what it is and is not, and how you may be able to measure your progress. This morning I will propose a model and invite feedback from you with further insights.

If you enter any good bookstore you will encounter a large section on self-help spirituality. Just about anything will do, and numerous books will give you five steps to get there. Oprah has invited to her show pop psychologists and pop gurus who propose variations of spiritual fluff. Even MPBN when they are raising money will bring on pop spiritual teachers. And I suppose you get what you pay for.

The first advice I would give about spiritual growth is that it is dangerous! I remember right next to the main entrance to the Catholic Cathedral in Assisi is a large sculptured fierce lion and it has a human head in its mouth! At the third gate of the great Buddhist temples of East Asia you will find 4 fierce demon killers, fearsome to behold. Confucian temples also have large lions guarding the gates. The beloved goddess Kali of India wears a necklace of skulls and the goddess Durga rides a lion with a lance piercing the heart of a demon. So the journey is not to be entered into lightly.

I am fortunate in a way that I came to this topic of adult spiritual growth as a historian as well as a minister and practitioner of Jungian psychological type. I like the New Year image of the Roman god, Janus, the two faced god of doorways, one face looking to the past, the other face looking toward the future. Spiritual growth is like that, informed by the best experience of the human past, but always focused on our unique and very personal journey, often in consultation with our friends in congregation.

Most of us remember profound emotional or mystic experiences over the years. Usually we will give them interpretations, that they point to some thing or reality beyond our common lives. The problem in all such experiences lies in the interpretations. Do they prove anything, and if so what? Spiritual growth involves transforming the self so that our interpretations of experiences are broadened and deepened. We become

more spacious inside so that we can hold diverse interpretations without closing down and pinching out the importance of our experiences.

Such growth often does not begin until midlife. And tragically for some, never. But at some point we feel restless about our lives. Whether we are successful or not by the standards set by society, we never the less ask, “Is this it? Is this what my life has to give? Is it downhill from here? The Buddhists call this vague general feeling, *Dukhya*, often translated “suffering” but really meaning a pervasive unsatisfactoriness with our lives. *Dukhya* is the door through which the journey begins in earnest.

Behind this juncture in our lives is our perception, the assumptions we will bring to the journey. Paul Bloom of Yale University has done extensive work with infants, toddlers and young children studying how they perceive the world around them. He has concluded that children are natural animists and dualists. Children learn about objects around them and perceive minds behind the objects. Somehow some sort of mystery, behind what we can see, manipulates the objects we relate to. It isn't my mother but my mother's mind. It isn't a rock in my hand but the mind behind it. It isn't me but my mind. “I didn't do it.” Young children confronted by the fact that we have brains, are likely to say, “well the brain helps,” but are unwilling to scrap the idea of mind that gives them dreams and all sorts of imaginary scenarios behind things. “I didn't do it.” “I don't know what came over me.” “God made me do it.” “The devil made me do it.” Some strange power.

So it is quite easy for us, from our earliest point of thinking about it, to ascribe to earth and sky, sun and moon, animistic qualities. Humanity from earliest times has filled our world with hidden spirit initiatives. Mother earth is wise, as the first and last word in what happens – womb to tomb. Father sky is all seeing, all knowing. Sun enters the world from sky heroically and rules. Moon is a beautiful goddess bringing mystery out from earth for us to see, to be healed, to rescue the soul. Yes, in a primitive sense like children we too have that mind behind things, the real us, a soul.

Now children do eventually learn that there is no ghost with evil intentions under the bed in the shadows. There comes a time when they can sleep through the night without fear most of the time. But the basic dualism of objects and minds behind all the people and things we relate to, an animistic assumption never leaves the great majority of adults. We always imagine

some sort of mysterious presence. Our eyes glaze over, a shiver goes down our spine, we are held in this presence. We project into earth and sky an animate presence.

Is there any way to counter these projections, this original surmise of infancy, that reality is not what we can see but is behind what we see. How can we as adults grow up, put behind us childish things, grow spiritually?

To begin I simply ask that you place before you an image of a tree. It must be a tree you know well. It must be a tree you have stopped and stared at. [The tree on the cover of my book, *Archetype of the Spirit*, which presents this model of spiritual growth, I saw in California. I stopped my car, jumped out with my camera, and gazed into this image.] It is a wonderful powerful tree. There have been others: a large white pine beside the forest path, an old gnarled apple tree in the orchard beside my window, a linden tree at the corner. We all have at least one tree in our lives. This is the Tree of Life, the ancient tree in the Garden of Eden, the tree upon which Jesus was crucified, the Bodhi-tree, the gnarled tree of Chuang-tzu. The tree is the great symbol of spiritual growth.

As you know, in the Garden of Eden story, it was eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil that led to our human liberation. (The tree of eternal life was next.) We grew up, left the paradise of childhood innocence, went out into the world, grew our own food, wove cloth for our own clothes, gave birth to our human posterity. So remember that tree in the Garden, with the serpent wrapped around it, Eve on the right hand or lunar side of the tree, Adam on the left hand side or solar side of the tree. This image in one form or another is found in every branch of human culture.

The Tree of Life is the central image of an ancient model of adult spiritual growth I call the Archetype of the Spirit. But that image is not really out there in a Garden; it is within us all. We have to bring that wonderful projection in. The oak tree in the field is really a presence inside. The Tree of Life is the human spine. We are walking examples of the archetype. The Garden of Eden is really within us. To paraphrase Jesus, "The kingdom of heaven is within you and you do not see it."

Those of you who have worked with Yoga traditions know the centrality of the spine in all Hatha exercises and the four Yoga philosophies: Jhana,

Bhakti, Karma and Raja, or Sky, Earth, Sun and Moon. If you have become proficient you know metaphorically of the seven chakra centers along the spine from earth to sky and the solar and lunar serpents wrapped around the spine: Pingala on the left, the solar serpent, and Ida on the right, the lunar serpent. Those of you who have visited Crete in the Mediterranean, have seen the snake goddess there, her feet planted on the earth, on her head a bird symbolizing sky or enlightenment and in her two hands two serpents. That is the model in a nutshell.

[X]

In other words the model for spiritual growth is embodied. We have been living in it all along. We have not seen it but we have been living it. The task before us is to find ways to safely bring in our projections, to work on balancing all the polarized energies of our human nature, within ourselves, to bring these energies into balance and into a greater spaciousness of person.

Let's unpack the elements of the Archetype of the Spirit to see what guidance it holds for our spiritual growth. For those of you familiar with psychological type (the MBTI) I will mention just enough to enrich your understanding but there is much much more.

We all begin with mother earth, that part of the Tree of Life below ground, the roots and nurture of our lives. The base of the spine, the abdomen, give our lives vitality, connecting us to all others, literally as one body. The orthodox use the term, one "body of Christ." This is the lower half of the cross, of the tree, the spine, the first three chakras, sensing feeling spirituality, the Journey of Devotion. Earth is our beginning and our ending, womb to tomb. This spirituality is therefore direct, tactile, immediate. Here is the bread and wine, the preparing and tasting, here is the arranging of flowers upon the altar, here is the sacrifice of grains and coconut oil, the anointing of the forehead with an oil paste, here is the kneeling, the recitation of certain ritual words, the polishing of candle sticks and lighting of candles. Here are the direct actions of service to ameliorate sufferings of people we meet and know. In the words of Mohammed, "The best of almsgiving is that which springeth from the heart, and is uttered by the lips to soften the wounds of the injured." Picture St. Francis here or Mother Teresa.

At the opposite end of the spine is the crown of your head, the ten thousand petaled lotus, the focus of enlightenment, those moments in our lives when we are in mystic oneness with all life, all cosmos. Here we ascend to the mountain top, like Martin Luther King, we have a great embracing vision of human well-being, where “justice shall roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” There is a polar opposite built in here between social service of earth and social justice of sky. This sky spirituality is a large intuitive thinking embrace, the opposite of earth it is a wide horizonless reach, an abstract world of understanding, like lines of latitude and longitude, like a great sky god which is everywhere and nowhere, that you cannot see but you know. The Mongols out on the steps of Asia identified their religion as under the “Eternal Blue Sky.” And indeed it was the peoples of the plains and deserts of the world and particularly the mariners who brought this spirituality into human history. Remember the reference in Psalm 8 to “the paths of the sea” and the restlessness of Odysseus, “to follow knowledge like a sinking star, beyond the utmost bound of human thought.” In this Journey of Unity think of Albert Schweitzer, William Ellery Channing, the Buddha, Thomas Merton, Buckminster Fuller.

These are the two great primary spiritualities, earth and sky. If you ascend the spine towards sky you practice a subtractive strategy; you give away your possessions, you simplify your life on the way to enlightenment. Your feet may lift above the ground so heaven oriented is your attention. On the other hand if you descend the spine towards earth, you may take off your shoes to increase your connection to earth, you journey towards fulfillment, an additive strategy filling your life with enriching experiences, relationships, nitty-gritty roots and nurture. If you can balance these two goals, enlightenment and fulfillment, sky and earth, you are well on your way into spiritual development.

About midpoint along the spine, at the crosspiece of the ancient cross are the remaining two spiritualities. On the left as you face the image is the sun. This orientation brings sky insights towards earth. The solar law gives bring order to society. Like the hero Moses coming down the mountain, they bring laws to live by, laws to regulate how we relate to each other in society. The message is simple, if we all do our part the whole of society will work for us all. Confucius called this reciprocity and developed perhaps the world’s most sophisticated ethical system around this cohering approach to society. Solar spirituality emphasizes action; you will know me

by seeing what I do. I call this spirituality the Journey of Works, sensing thinking, our lives based in a social covenant. Think of Moses, Confucius, Gandhi, Unitarian minister Edward Everett Hale, Marcus Aurelius, even George Washington.

Believe it or not there is a polar opposite spirituality. In a world of order, actively administered, where a strong sense of duty and prudence reigns, something in us begins to get restless even in the best of times. Lunar spirituality enters the world to shake loose the creative side of our natures, a compassionate idealism, an inspired variety, a healing balm, a poetic grace. It is an intuitive feeling, Journey of Harmony. Here we find the saviors who bring a vibrant love into the world, a new dance of gratitude, who are often martyred for their disturbances of “the way things are.” Jesus enters in Mary’s arms riding a crescent moon. As a young man he is crucified for opposing the received theology. Lao Tzu, a librarian, feels he must leave the kingdom into exile by the west gate, handing the gatekeeper his Tao te Ching. Rabindranath Tagore, author of our first hymn, created a new school where children may learn of the wonders of life outdoors under the trees. Our own Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote of self-reliance and the poet-prophet. Walt Whitman wandered through the landscape singing of an expansive, tolerant democracy, the freedom of kinship with all human qualities.

So in our great embodied **X** we all have something of all four spiritualities within. When we are young we specialize. It is a major accomplishment to bring just one of these four orientations to some level of competence. With experience you can recognize them in yourself or in those around you: an earth sensing feeling spirituality, a sky intuitive thinking orientation, a solar sensing thinking, a lunar intuitive feeling spirituality. By midlife some of us begin to realize there is more to our lives than our own perceptions. We have invested a good deal of self-esteem, or ego centered identity around only one of the four. But there is more in us to live. An expansion of powers, a balancing of our lives, is an arduous undertaking. It is dangerous to move beyond the familiar, the tried and true, the identity you and those around you know and love. But we can recognize within ourselves a kernel of each of the four journeys in the Archetype of the Spirit. And so hopefully with help from our friends, particularly support from others in congregation, we begin to venture into the dangerous waters of spiritual growth, to the expansion and balance of our natures.

Now I have to warn us lest we ever forget, there is not really a mind animating earth or sky, sun or moon, there is not really a tree inside us with two serpents and seven centers. But it is helpful to keep these elements discretely in mind so we can evaluate how we are progressing, and when in times of confusion, transition, and pain, we can see how things may yet unfold, how we may journey past fierce lions at the gate and demon chasers to the promised land. There is so much more, to this patient work of growing up, of leaving the warm and familiar primitive behind, of making space within ourselves for the complexities of the world, to be able to hold them intimately, to bring an openness to the profound unity that may be glimpsed, welcomed, entered. It never ends, the goal marked by Confucius in our reading, the Shenren, is always enlarging, always transcending our own past, with all the discomfort of leaving one life for another more complete. And I must warn, you will not be lost in bliss nor in fire, you will become more alone than you were before and the great consolation for your progress is the congregation which surrounds you and loves you.

Happy New Year!

Sources:

P.T.R., Archetype of the Spirit, 2007.

P.T.R., Four Spiritualities, 1996.

Robert Kegan, In Over Our Heads, 1994.

Henry Rosemont, Rationality and Religious Experience, 2001.

Analects of Confucius, 2: 4.

Psalm 8: 8.

Tennyson, Ulysses.

Luke 17: 21.