

Articulating spirituality

Wow! I never thought it would be so difficult for me to put my spiritual journey into words.

I want to share with you some of my stories from my background as a first generation Chinese-American to perhaps help you understand how I have come to be as I am today, a fusion of different cultures with a mix of values and beliefs.

How many of you are familiar with Unitarian Universalism? I was first introduced to UUism eight years ago, and I claim it as my faith community because I have found in it a community of people who embrace differences and perpetually question the status quo. But UUism does not necessarily foster my spiritual development. I consider spirituality to be quite personal, although inherent at all moments of time. I am reminded of the Mormon quotation, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience." I especially like this saying because I frequently feel like my spirit is at odds with my human experience. But the more I thought about articulating this phenomenon the more confused I became. I often associate the heart with the spirit, but question the validity of this association. After all, I don't think the spirit expresses itself in words, and it has been more often in silent moments that I have been able to touch that tender spot we call spirit.

Over a year ago, I took a trip to China to explore my roots. My brother said I was "wandering the earth." I didn't leave with clear plans on what I would do during my time there, nor the logistics of my visit. I considered it a sort of rite of passage, and a big leap of faith. I was placing trust in the Universe and my own capacities and wondering what would happen. How would I change? Who would I meet? What would I choose to do? I packed light and brought Pema Chodron's When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times. I did sitting meditation regularly when I first arrived, but as I traveled I found this to be increasingly difficult, and altered my meditation to while I was walking, riding a bus, and generally being mindful of every little thing I did. I very intentionally spent most of my time alone. I was determined to understand the world through my own eyes, knowing that I automatically adopt other people's views over my own. I was trying to live in a vacuum of my own experience. All in all, I was in China for 7 months.

I guess it's needless to say that this trip changed my life. I am still coming to understand what it has changed for me. I realized while preparing for this presentation that I cannot explain how I characterize my spiritual experience. This trip has obscured many of my previous beliefs, and only brought more questions into my journey. I don't have any answers to present today. I only hope that you will take something with you from this brief talk, whether it's a reminder

of what it was like to be twenty four and figuring out how to incorporate your spiritual self into your material world or practice in compassion and patience in hearing an awkwardly shared story from an inexperienced public speaker.

I want to tell you about my family. My mother's a practicing Buddhist and my father's an atheist with a religious history dabbling in Christianity, Catholicism and Buddhism. He was very poor growing up in a town thirty minutes from here and converted to whichever faith offered the most food. He didn't become Buddhist until moving to the U.S. to create greater cohesion with my mother. When I first went to a Unitarian Universalist youth conference at age sixteen, my father thought it was a cult because I came back happy. I was often depressed growing up in the conservative, predominately white American suburbs of Denver, and the joy I came home with from that weekend retreat was VERY uncharacteristic of me. Throughout my high school years, the Unitarian Universalist friends that I made would influence me in ways I would have never imagined. It was the first place I had gone where I felt my differences embraced and encouraged rather than shamed and shunned. I was grateful for the loving environment and felt that I had found something special. As I graduated high school and went on to university, I felt that I lost that community but was so distracted by the new experiences I was having living on my own for the first time that I didn't think much about it. I

was also redefining my race identity having believed I was just like all the white people I grew up around. When I tried to find a congregation as a young adult I had some poignant negative race-related experiences that made me question UUism as my chosen faith religion. At a point when I was ready to give up, I was told about a conference on the west coast for Asian and Pacific Islander Unitarian Universalists. Attending that conference, I was around progressive Asians for the first time in my life! I was so surprised! My parents, and all the Asian people I grew up with modeled conservative and traditional values to which I simply could not relate, and I spent a lot of my upbringing feeling guilty for or being angry about being different. I believe that being a thoughtful daughter of immigrant parents made it impossible for me to subscribe to traditional notions. After all, how could one choose one attitude over another? I was too open-minded for Middle America. To me everything seemed more grey than black or white. Unitarian Universalism was just perfect for me. UUs like grey area. We like questions. Sometimes we enjoy discussing them over practicing them. It is hard to choose a faith among many when they all have so much to offer. UUs are renowned for neglecting to choose a particular faith, and for drawing from all of them depending upon what suits their personal situation. As a hybrid myself, I can relate to this faith practice.

So far, I have avoided the subject of spirituality. I've shared my family history, religious affiliation, and some of my life experiences, but I have somehow averted the heart of this talk.

Now, I'd like everyone to close their eyes and take a few deep breaths. Check in with yourself and be where you are. Let the thoughts clear away, and feel your feet on the floor or wherever they are. Notice your ankles, shins and knees, and at whatever pace works for you, steadily make your way up to your neck, face and crown of your head. For some of you this may take longer than the time we're allotted here. As you do this, recognize this very moment. Where we all are gathered at this very moment. With each passing second something is changing, and the moment we just had has gone. Impermanence... makes the preciousness of life clear to us. It is in being present that my spirit shows up. The rest of the time I'm just going through the motions of this human experience.

Thank you for sharing these last few minutes with me. It has been an honor for me to have had your attention. I hope you enjoy the rest of your week at the Congress.

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