

Human Spiritual Growth

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In a River Road covenant group session, our hope is for a sharing time that is like enjoying a gentle rain that travels between our word drops. What happens is an electric space where meaning flashes between people. Then imagination billows in a steamy cloud swirling in foggy pictures for the eye of one's mind to see. Henry Nelson Wieman calls this mystery "divine creativity". He calls this group discussion "creative interchange." Thandeka relates this to perceiving one's own divinity. She says this "embodiment of experiences gives us deeper understanding of ourselves as religious beings." Roy Phillips put it in terms of deepening and living the life of the spirit. This creative expression comes out of our relating to others with wholeness and integrity. Judith Downing says this is "the human capacity for relationship or connection that goes beyond the senses and is experienced not as an act of will, but as a gift or as grace." These quotes come from Unitarian Universalist ministers.

We draw out meanings with our questions (Wieman's "searching dialogue"). We draw out meanings with appreciation, of all sorts, and find common threads amongst ourselves through spontaneous "comparison and cooperative analysis." Wieman also says, and I agree, this drawing out of meanings is a natural human quest. It requires letting yourself go, releasing your pure inner, feeling self and emotionally relating to the personal stories of the circle. We UU's don't get our answers from discovered values revealed by another human authority. When in a covenant group session, we do it with our own sensitivity and responsiveness, based on our own reality checks of first-hand experiences.

To sum up, this approach expects spiritual growth to come from a person's accumulation of meanings, enrichment of experience by that person recalling the context and feelings of particular original experiences and, during creative interchange, opening to expansion of one's appreciative awareness. In creative interchange, we engage our whole selves with expressing mind-and-heart-pictures that expose our vulnerabilities and aspirations while gaining insights from the same sort of visionary imaginings of others. Together we find commonality along with respecting our differences. This value-questing "framed by tradition and lived in creative action in the world," as Rev. Judith Downing says, comes out of our liberation of having no creed or dogma. We are participating in the evolution of humankind.

Now, let's go back to getting soaked with the group's word drops. At River Road, this rests on creatively interacting with others as they relate to their natural and cultural environments ("transmitted to us by our contemporaries and by the age we live in" as Rev. Kuhwald puts it.) When we share those experiences in meaningful terms, it can point toward actively belonging to the UU movement. As religious beings, we see ways to turn what we understand to be the ideal into what's real.

We facilitators are change agents promoting sustainable growth for each covenant group participant. Leading from one's spirit or intuition in creative interchange, we foster belonging to the greater UU enterprise. This means being attuned to seizing opportunities for encouraging growth in individuals as they participate in the group sessions. I see this support of growth and identifying with the UU movement as cooperating with the harmonious creative power that resides in natural life.

As the sessions go on, this religious conversation can become an "art, in the sense of a skillful outer expression of an inner vision." (Wieman). This expression "always involves a degree of

incompleteness and mystery.” (Wieman). This cocreativity comes out of a matrix that liberates in the deliberately arranged format order of the session plan. Structure is in place for freedom to thrive.

Together, the group is generating a healing community and an accumulation of meanings in the progression through the sessions and the time they take in the year. Out of this comes religious growth through maturing levels of one’s own consciousness and visceral learning. We are gaining understanding and new levels of truth from learning of the goal-seeking activities and assessments of life from the others in the group. We see what fits in our own lives. It’s a process of transforming the culture that surrounds oneself to fit one’s needs for finding one’s own truth. Each in the group is practicing living with integrity and authenticity. Liberation happens for the participants, giving them ongoing expansion of value and a habit of creative interdependence that can extend outside the group.

This religious inquiry is intimate value-sharing that can reach the level of releasing intuitive insights. It requires the passionate and disciplined quest for a working understanding of life—one that can be applied to the everydayness of one’s life. There’s no pat outcome to predict from engaging in creative interchange, but to me, the kind of deep understanding that can come relates to the participant’s ultimate value perspective. Perhaps, it comes by identifying an abiding resource or resources or spiritual energy upon which one can repeatedly rely for strength in facing life’s problems and deeply savoring life’s joys. Both Wieman and Thandeka would see this as getting in touch with the divine-human relationship.

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