

## Becoming “Spiritual *And* Religious”

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

25 August 2013

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland

[frederickuu.org](http://frederickuu.org)

Lillian Daniel has been the Senior Minister of First Congregational Church of Glen Ellyn, Illinois since 2004. I first heard of her back in 2009, when I read a book she co-authored titled *[This Odd and Wondrous Calling: The Public and Private Lives of Two Ministers](#)*. It’s a funny and honest reflection on the life of being a minister in the early twenty-first century. It’s a good book, but I don’t think it was a *New York Times* bestseller. And it was her second book; she published an earlier book about preaching that I haven’t read.

Then almost two years ago she wrote a short blog for the *Huffington Post* — a mere 374 words — titled, “[Spiritual But Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me](#).” For whatever confluence of reasons, that blog post went viral. Suddenly, it was popping up all over the Internet. Everyone was seemingly linking to it, sharing it, and commenting about it. (Admittedly, my social media world includes more than the average number of religion nerds, but still....)

That viral blog post resulted in a book she published this past year titled *[When "Spiritual but Not Religious" Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church](#)*. However, in full disclosure, you should know that the title mostly applies to only the first fifteen pages of the book, which is an expanded version of that original blog post.

The reason I’m bringing this up is that Lillian Daniel was the keynote speaker at this year’s Ministry Days, which is a two-day conference for Unitarian Universalist ministers held immediately before each year’s UU General Assembly.<sup>1</sup> There were hundreds of UU ministers registered for Ministry Day. Now, if you had the opportunity to put one speaker in front of a captive audience of hundreds of UU Ministers who would you choose? Well, the UU Minister’s Association does have that opportunity annually, and since they deemed Lillian Daniel’s message

---

<sup>1</sup> For my blog post about Lillian Daniel’s keynote address to the UU Minister’s Association, see “Spiritual and Religious: Highlights from Lillian Daniel among the UUs,” available at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2013/06/spiritual-and-religious-highlights-from-lillian-daniel-among-the-uus/>.

significant enough for all UU Ministers to consider for a few hours, I thought it was worth us considering as well.

While I don't know that Lillian Daniel has "the answer" for what Unitarian Universalism needs to fully bloom in the coming years and decades, I do think that she has wisdom to share. So, for our Spoken Meditation, I would like to invite you to hear an excerpt of her blog post that went viral. Afterward, there will be about a minute of silence in which you are invited to continue reflecting on her words. As you listen, be attentive to any parts of this reading that resonate with you, either positively or negatively. What parts strike you as true, and which parts would you want to push back against? And what insights might there be for us here at UUCF?

Be forewarned that Daniel is a United Church of Christ minister, so she uses the word God quite a few times in her 374 word post. So feel free to mentally translate that to "Spirit of Life" or "Interdependent Web of All Existence" if that language is more meaningful to you. But with no further ado, in her post titled "[Spiritual But Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me,](#)" Lillian Daniel writes:

On airplanes, I dread the conversation with the person who finds out I am a minister and wants to use the flight time to explain to me that he is "spiritual but not religious." Such a person will always share this as if it is some kind of daring insight, unique to him, bold in its rebellion against the religious status quo.

Next thing you know, he's telling me that he finds God in the sunsets. These people always find God in the sunsets..... Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn't interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.

Thank you for sharing, spiritual-but-not-religious sunset person. You are now comfortably in the norm for self-centered American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating. Can I switch seats now and sit next to someone who has

been shaped by a mighty cloud of witnesses instead? Can I spend my time talking to someone brave enough to encounter God in a real human community? Because when this flight gets choppy, that's who I want by my side, holding my hand, saying a prayer and simply putting up with me, just like we try to do in church.

You can't make this stuff up. There are limits to self-made religion.

You may recall that the subtitle to this online rant is “Please Stop Boring Me.” In her book Daniel elaborates that:

When I meet a teacher, I don't feel the need to tell him that I always hated math. When I meet a chef, I don't need to tell her that I can't cook. When I meet a clown, I don't need [to] tell him that I think clowns are all scary.... But everybody loves to tell a minister what's wrong with the church, and it's usually some church that bears no relation to the one I am proud to serve. (3)

One [reviewer](#) of her book continued in this vein about ministers like Daniel, who have become exasperated with yet one more person describing themselves as “Spiritual But Not Religious”:

One could imagine how a doctor would feel if he heard ninety-eight people say, “I don't really go to doctors anymore. I just consult a website.” Or how a politics or history professor would feel after ninety-nine people say, “Universities are really outdated now that we have Cable News and talk radio.”

“Please stop boring me” indeed.

But more important than these sarcastic criticisms, here's my take away from Daniel's provocative post. I think her final sentence is right: **“There are limits to self-made religion.”** Lillian Daniel's blog post is snarky in its critique of the “Spiritual But Not Religious,” but underneath the snark is a prophetic call to community.

That being said, there is an important reason that the *First* Principle of Unitarian Universalism is “The inherent worth and dignity of every person.” And that *First* Source of Unitarian Universalism is “Direct experience.” **The choice to prioritize individual worth and individual experience is understandable since our religious freedom was hard won by previous generations who courageously questioned the legitimacy of entrenched religious**

**authorities, risking their freedom and sometimes their lives to do so. But what I hear Lillian Daniel trying to do is invite us to consider if we have moved too far in the other direction.<sup>2</sup>**

While she does mock people who “find God in the sunsets,” she later confesses that, of course, she too finds deep meaning and beauty in connecting to nature (6). But her frustration is that so much more is possible beyond the bounds of isolated, individualistic religious experience. **As important as firsthand religious experience is, *community* is even more often a catalyst for personal growth.** In Daniel’s words: “What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff.”

She continues, “Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.” And even though the consolidated religion of Unitarian Universalism dates back only to 1961 (although its component parts of Unitarianism and Universalism date back centuries), none of us invented Unitarian Universalism. And this congregation active and prominent affiliate groups that include Atheist/Humanist/Agnostics, UU Buddhists, UU Christians, and UU Pagans — and we’re in the initial stages of launch a group for UU Jews. As opposed to being in isolation, **how much for vital and challenging is it to work our who you are, what you believe, and what your place is in the universe amidst such a wide-ranging hubbub of worldviews.** And I’m always fascinated to see how much overlap there is between those groups and how many of you regularly attend two of more of those diverse groups because you find multiple ones of these paths to be meaningful.

But I suspect there are times when various ones of us wish that there were *more* Atheism and Humanism or *less* Christianity and Paganism — *or vice-versa*. But as Daniel says, “What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff.” Being part of a Unitarian Universalist congregation that draws explicitly on *six* different sources helps

---

<sup>2</sup> When the late sociologist of religion Robert Bellah spoke before the UU General Assembly in 1998, he challenged Unitarian Universalists to *reverse* the order of our first and seventh principles: “give up ontological individualism and affirm that human nature is fundamentally social. That would mean making ‘the interdependent web of all existence’ the first of your principles and not the last.” See, “Unitarian Universalism in Societal Perspective,” available at [http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures\\_7.htm](http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures_7.htm).

keep us honest, challenges our biases, and helps prevent the tribalistic myopia that can descend when you spend too much time around people that think the same way you do.

Daniel clarifies in her book that at the root of her frustration is those in the “Spiritual But Not Religious” set, who think their rejection of religion in favor of personal spirituality makes them radical — whereas in the twenty-first century West, doubt and individualism doesn’t make you radical, it just makes you a standard-fare, middle-of-the-road Protestant (4), which actually was radical back in the sixteenth-century.

That being said, I do have an upcoming sermon planning for early 2014 titled “Atheism for Lent: The Spiritual Practice of Doubt” in which I will reflect on potential insights for today from Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche. But those “Masters of Suspicion” practiced a more radical form of doubt than simply questioning religious authority figures. And for this morning I would like to invite you to consider that **being “Spiritual *And* Religious” is a more radical and more needed than being “Spiritual But Not Religious.”**

When I was in seminary and we would occasionally sleep in and skip a Sunday morning service, we would sometimes joke that we had attended “The Church of the Holy Comforter” or “The Church of *The New York Times*.” Along these lines Wendell Berry famously published a book titled [\*A Timbered Choir\*](#) of poems inspired by long Sunday morning walks through the woods that he had taken instead of attending a religious service. And there have been times in my life when I needed to sleep in, go running, read *The New York Times*, or enjoy a leisurely brunch at the end of a long week instead of going to a religious service.

**But in our increasingly individualized world of computer screens and smart phones, the most radical choice may not be individualized doubt, but choosing the hard work of being in community.** To return briefly to Lillian Daniel’s sarcastic tone, she has said in an [interview](#) that,

Any idiot can find God alone in the sunset. It takes a certain maturity to find God in the person sitting next to you who not only voted for the wrong political party but has a baby who is crying while you’re trying to listen to the sermon.

Community is where the religious rubber meets the road. People challenge us, ask

hard questions, disagree, need things from us, require our forgiveness. It's where we get to practice all the things we preach.

What is radical today is the move from dependence on our birth community *through* the struggle of individuation and independence *to* a mature freely chosen interdependence that often only authentically comes on the far side of independence. **In our time, that third step of moving from independence to interdependence is the radical part.** As the late UU minister Forrest Church [summarized](#), “In developmental theory, the progression goes as follows: dependence, independence, interdependence.”<sup>3</sup>

And to reflect some on how being both spiritual and religious relates to this move toward interdependence, the word religion comes from adding the Latin prefix *re-* (meaning “again”) to the root *ligare* (meaning “bind or connect”). So the etymological root of the word religion means to “bind together again” or “to re-connect.” But if you are transitioning from the dependent stage of your life to an independent stage, then religion — especially the wrong kind of religion — can feel like a constricting attempt to bind you back into a role of dependence that you are doing your best to escape. From that place of longing for freedom and independence, you may find yourself declaring authentically that you are “spiritual, but not religious,” at least not religious in this earlier, dependent sense. Because being “*religious* but not spiritual” — blindly supporting institutionalized religion — is arguably far worse than being “spiritual, but not religious.”

**But if you stay too long in that middle stage of “spiritual, but not religious,” your self-made spirituality can devolve into an unhealthy narcissism of entitlement and self-involvement.** Even more importantly, a prolonged fixation on independence can block you from being involved with the hard work of building community. **And it not isolated, independent individuals, but communities of people working together across diverse differences who most often transform this world for the better.** Along these lines, many people think of Buddhism as religion of isolated individuals meditating alone on their cushions. But the focus of our UU Buddhist Fellowship this morning was precisely on the point that a mature Buddhism

---

<sup>3</sup> “*In developmental theory*” — Forrest Church, [The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology](#), 134. In general, I highly recommend the entire book, but in regard to this sermon, especially the essay from which the quote is drawn, “Emerson’s Shadow,” pages 132-139.

also has at its core the practice *sangha*, which is the Sanskrit word for a community of Buddhist practitioners.

And regarding the form of community we are attempting to build in this congregation, late last year when I was working with our Communications Team to design a 45-second YouTube ad for UUCF, the first part of the 45-second script was:

Have you ever heard someone say, “I’m spiritual, but not religious?” Here at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, we are an inclusive, open-minded community, where you can be both spiritual *and* religious. We draw wisdom from *all* the world’s religions *and* from the best of modern science. We don’t pretend to have all the answers, but **we invite you to join us in living the questions.**

I pitched the ad from that angle because surveys keep being released with increasing numbers of people identifying their religion as “None” or “spiritual, but not religious.”<sup>4</sup> But in our individualistic age, community really matters. And I believe that Unitarian Universalism offers a way of choosing a mature interdependence on the other side of independence — of being spiritual *and* religious.

And I think it is significant that [surveys](#) also show that overall membership in the Unitarian Universalist Association has increased by 1.9% a time when many major American denominations have seen shocking drops in membership:

the Presbyterian Church USA, was down 27.3% from 2004–2012, the United Church of Christ (down 25.8%), the Episcopal Church (down 19.6%), the Evangelical Lutheran Church (down 17.9%), and the American Baptist Church USA (down 13.5%).

The better news would be if the UUA was seeing a sharper increase, but I’ll take a relatively steady flatline over a decline any day. My hope is that the numbers of Unitarian Universalists are

---

<sup>4</sup> “A Pew Research Center survey in 2012 found that the number of people who are not affiliated with a religion had increased 5 percent since 2007. That same survey found 18 percent of Americans identified themselves as spiritual but not religious, while 59 percent identified as both, and just 5 percent said they were religious but not spiritual.”

For more, a free webinar is available on “Growth 110: Growth 110: Living in a Spiritual But Not Religious World” at <http://www.cerguua.org/moodle/>.

staying steady because we represent a place where you don't have to choose between religion and science or between being spiritual or religious. We're a place where you can also be a secular humanist, although I know there are some self-identified "[Religious Humanists](#)" in this congregation as well. Either way, we're all in this together.

Now I would be remiss this morning if I did not mention a paradigm-shifting, historic example of the power of being spiritual *and* religious. This Wednesday, August 28 is the [50th Anniversary](#) of the 1963 March on Washington. And **the Civil Rights Movement in this country is a strong example of the power of beloved community: the transformative community that can be found at the intersection of prophetic spirituality and diverse community.**

Looking back at the history of our congregation, which formed in 1961, Dottye Ewing, reminded me last week that a few members of this congregation attended the original March on Washington in 1963, along with some members of the local NAACP, who periodically attended our services. This congregation has a long history of being a place where you can be both spiritual *and* religious, where you are challenged to practice about both loving-kindness toward individuals as well as social justice. As Cornel West has [said](#), "**Justice is what love looks like in public.**"<sup>5</sup>

But seeking *interdependence* on the other side of independence, being spiritual *and* religious, and seeking both love *and* justice is rarely easy. And as one [commentator](#) has written, we must be wary of falsely sentimentalizing the memory of Dr. King:

When Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. took the podium on August 28, 1963, the Department of Justice was watching. Fearing that someone might hijack the microphone to make inflammatory statements, the Kennedy DOJ came up with a plan to silence the speaker, just in case. In such an eventuality, an official was seated next to the sound system, holding a recording of Mahalia Jackson singing "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," which he planned to play to placate the crowd.... Relatively few people know or recall that the Kennedy

---

<sup>5</sup> The fuller quote from Cornel West is "Just as justice is what love looks like in public and tenderness is what love feels like in private, deep democratic revolution is what justice looks like in practice," available at <http://occupiedmedia.us/2011/11/a-love-supreme/>.



administration tried to get organizers to call it off; that the FBI tried to dissuade people from coming; that racist senators tried to discredit the leaders; that twice as many Americans had an unfavorable view of the march as a favorable one.... Before his death, King was well on the way to being a pariah. In 1966, twice as many Americans had an unfavorable opinion of him as a favorable one. [In 1967,] *Life* magazine branded his anti-Vietnam War speech at Riverside Church “demagogic slander” and “a script for Radio Hanoi.”<sup>6</sup>

To [quote](#) Cornel West again about his reticence about plans for the 50th Anniversary celebration for the March on Washington:

we really don't like to admit the degree to which Martin Luther King, Jr. was as much anti-war and anti-empire as he was anti-racist.... You'll hear a whole lot of talk [around the 50th anniversary] about the gutting of the Voting Rights bill. There's nothing wrong with talking about the gutting of the Voting Rights bill but that's not all of Martin, you're truncating Martin if you limit it to that.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, in his 1967 book *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* — his fourth and last book published before his assassination — Dr. King wrote about the interrelated “triple evils” of poverty, racism, and militarism.<sup>8</sup> And if we are going to continue to turn Dr. King's dream into deeds, we need each other. Isolated individuals cannot overcome those triple evils of poverty, racism, and militarism. A self-made, individualized religion of sunsets, sleeping in, and long walks won't suffice; it will barely get us started. But together, we are do more than any of us are capable of alone.

---

<sup>6</sup> *be wary of falsely sentimentalizing the memory of Dr. King* — Gary Younge, *The Nation*, “The Misremembering of ‘I Have a Dream,’” available at <http://www.thenation.com/article/175764/misremembering-i-have-dream#axzz2ctXmT4BE>.

<sup>7</sup> “*King, Jr. was as much anti-war and anti-empire as he was anti-racist*” — Cornel West from a transcript of Tavis Smiley and Cornel West, “The Oratorical Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” available at <https://soundcloud.com/smileyandwestshow/the-oratorical-legacy-of>.

<sup>8</sup> “triple evils” — *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, “Facing the Challenge of a New Age” (1957), 250.

*“Let freedom ring.”* Each of us must move through the fires of independence. *“Let freedom ring.”* But freedom and independence is not the end of the story. As Dr. King said, “the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community.”<sup>9</sup>

May it be so. I’m grateful to be on that journey with you.

---

<sup>9</sup> “the end is Beloved Community” — [\*A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.\*](#), “Facing the Challenge of a New Age” (1957), 140.