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Earlier this year I took training to become a Hospice Volunteer. During that instruction I was told that when a person is on the verge of dying they will often want to do a review of their life.

Now I am not sure what the Religious Services Committee knows, but they have asked me to do a life review this morning. I am wondering if the inference is that it is time to change my status from hospice volunteer to hospice patient.

Be that as it may, I have been asked this morning to share with you the winding path of my life's spiritual journey - not because it is any different or better than anyone else's, but rather just the opposite. As human beings we all have similar spiritual experiences, thoughts and feelings. Our differences occur when we seek to channel those common experiences, thoughts and feelings into various forms of expression.

This common spirituality that we share asks basic questions: what is the meaning of life, by what criteria should we live our life, how can we be happy, how do we deal with death?

Elizabeth Lesser writes that when she begins a spiritual retreat she always asks the participants why they have attended. Their answers reveal just how much of the human experience we bring with us on the spiritual path. Here are a few from the list: "I need peace and quiet." "I am yearning for connection." "I want to find my inner voice." "I have lost a member of my family." "How do I link the spiritual path to my everyday life?" "I no longer know what I believe in." "The wounds of my childhood are

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haunting me.” “My fear of death is ever-present.” “My relationships don’t seem to work out.” “I have an addiction.” “I am always angry.” “I have nostalgia for something I cannot name.”

Spirituality is nothing more than a brave search for the truth about existence - a search for peace of mind and peace of heart.

Over time most people do develop a consistent rationale for answering these questions. To this set of beliefs is added rituals and activities through which spirituality can express itself both personally and collectively. This is called religion. George Bernard Shaw wrote, “There is only one religion, though there are a hundred versions of it.”

This distinction between spirituality and religion is the essence of my story.

As a young boy I had many of the questions. Since my parents had faithfully taken me to church, to Sunday School and Vacation Church School for as far back as I can remember - I came to think of the Christian church as the place where these questions could be answered. To me the church was wonderful. It laid out my life’s path before me, gave me a compass and a map and catered to all my spiritual yearnings. As a boy I thought that my path was to take an active part in this marvelous institution and when I grew up to become a minister. When I was in the seventh grade the pastor of our little neighborhood Methodist church in Omaha gave me a New Testament in which she wrote “April 25, 1948 - To Gary D. Keast, as a candidate, potential, for the ministry: may you ‘increase in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man’ through the years ahead.” . . . I was off and running.

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Soon after this incident my family moved their membership to a large Presbyterian Church. Even though my commitment to the church remained strong through-out my high school years, my relationship with the idea of becoming a pastor was an on-again/off-again one.

During my first year at a small Presbyterian college, I was required to take a new testament class and an old testament class. Unlike my Sunday School teachers, this instructor laid out the writings with all their frills and flaws. This was quite a jolt to my spoon-fed faith. I had a hard time sorting all of this out. I remember driving out to an isolated spot alone and trying to find some direction in this confusion. I finally decided that it really didn't matter if Christianity wasn't 100% pure or not. I needed, and I felt the world needed religion that emphasized loving-kindness. Since at that time I didn't know of any other religions that did, I knew that Christianity was suppose to - (didn't Jesus say that the greatest commandment was to love God and your neighbor). So the commitment was made to remain in the status quo.

My on again/off again romance with the pastorate was renewed. My home pastor gave me a bible (apparently being older I could handle more than just a New Testament) in which he wrote: "January 22, 1956 - Dear Gary, God's blessing on you in your ministry!"

Then fate intervened. My college room-mate was the son of

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a Presbyterian minister and was preparing to be a Presbyterian minister. On this particular occasion he had promised to conduct a service at a local nursing home but something had come up and he asked if I would fill in for him. I reluctantly said yes and made preparation. Now I knew nothing about how to construct a sermon, but as a college student I was well versed in rational thinking and I had taken a class in debate. So I started my sermon with a rhetorical question "Is there a heaven?" An elderly man sitting to my right said loudly, "Ha, he doesn't even know if there's a heaven." Well, I proceeded to make what I thought was a pretty good case for the existence of heaven. When I finished, the gentleman to my right got up and prayed for me. I took this incident as a sign and omen that I should do something else. So I became a teacher.

So for four years I taught speech and drama on the high school level. Russ and Linda Lovell were two of my students. (You may have noticed what effective public speakers they are.) During this time I also taught Sunday School and directed the youth group in the local Presbyterian Church. This reawakened my spiritual yearnings but at the same time did not satisfy them. There had to be more. So I packed up my wife and three sons and went off to seminary. I went into this phase of my life with a lot of little questions and came out with a lot of big ones.

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Finally the well wishes of former pastors in 1948 and 1956 came to fruition and I spent twenty two years as a Presbyterian pastor. The first church that I served in northeast Iowa could be characterized as a “spirit of the law” church. They loved, laughed and were a joy to serve. The second church I pastored was in Indiana and was a “letter of the law” church and the atmosphere, for me, was spiritually depressive. But it was here that I finally realized that for me, faith and beliefs were not spiritually satisfying. I needed something deeper, a more direct experience. I became attracted to the Christian mystics and their inner lives of solitude, love and wisdom. This seemed to me to be the path to peace of mind and spirit. But bringing in programs of inner spirituality did not go over well in a congregation that wanted more bible study.

I slowly began to realize that the church that I felt would answer my spiritual questions and would be my catalyst to a setting of love and tranquility was not working for me, even though it seemed to be a fulfilling path for others. Then I began to see more clearly how people fashioned their God with their own morals and values. God was an extension of the worshipper. As Voltaire said, “If God made us in his image, we have certainly returned the compliment.” Charles De Montesquieu has pointed out that “if triangles had a god, he would have three sides.”

Even the bible presents different images of God. In one incident the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are presented with the same problem - evil on the earth. The Old Testament God handles the situation by drowning everyone but a few people and animals, while the New Testament God comes up with a plan to forgive everyone who wants forgiveness. I realized that I too had created a God with all the characteristics that I longed for God to possess.

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This opened the way to two discoveries that set me on a new path. First, I learned from Gandhi of India that spirituality and religion are two different things. He is quoted as saying, “give us Jesus, but keep your Christianity.” As I reread the history of the Christian church with new eyes, I saw how religion divides people into two camps, “them and us”, which has led to a tremendous amount of bloodshed, violence and persecution. A situation still exists today because we don’t recognize that we are all interconnected.

The second discovery was Buddhism. Gandhi had great admiration for Jesus’ teachings contained in the “Sermon on the Mount.” These passages present teachings on love, compassion, forgiveness, justice and non-judgment. Then I discovered that the teachings of the Buddha were the same: love, compassion, forgiveness, justice and non-judgment. Both of these enlightened teachers spoke of the elements of basic spirituality. I realized that I had been looking in the wrong place for my answers and my experience - that what I was looking for was not out there but within me. In here was wisdom, the resources to grow love, to grow compassion, peace and happiness.

I went back and re-studied some of the subjects that I had studied in seminary, such as the historical Jesus and the development of the New Testament. But now my eyes see them through a filter of objectivity rather than a filter of faith. My reaction to them was completely different. Rather than try to rationalize or justify problems, I let them be what they were. At the same time I was reading Buddhist books and using their

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encouragement to understand myself and grow in loving-kindness and compassion with such methods as meditation and mindfulness.

The next step was to leave the Christian church. This was not easy to do after nearly 70 years. At first it was scary. After a while it became liberating as if a great weight had dropped off me and then in the third phase it was exciting. To finally find the right path for me is exhilarating. Every day is filled with new discoveries.

And what form does love take in the world? The Dahli Lama said that his religion is kindness. An Old Testament prophet said, “what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God (whoever that might be). Kindness is the way love expresses itself in the world.

Tomorrow the only thing that I can count on is that my spiritual adventure will continue to change, to grow and to evolve.

We have a tapestry hanging over our stairway that symbolizes my current spiritual journey. It is a picture of a beautiful wooded area with a path running through the middle. The path turns at the top so you can't see where it is going or any sign of a destination. But if you take your time along the path there is a lot of beauty to be enjoyed on both sides. Taking your time to immerse yourself in what lies within and around the path calms your soul and gives peace to your heart and mind.