

What We Might Mean When We Say, "I'm Spiritual But Not Religious"

a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on September 27, 2026

based on Psalm 19: 1-6 and Colossians 3:2, Phil 2:1-7

In my 2nd term of seminary I took a class on Christian mysticism from a man named Jim Liguri through the Franciscan School of Theology in Berkeley, California. Among other things we read Evelyn Underhill's famous book called *Mysticism. A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (1911)

I learned that mysticism was a living thing, not an historical throwback; not just a relic of the middle ages.

Here's a definition: *a doctrine of an immediate spiritual intuition of truths believed to transcend ordinary understanding, or of a direct, intimate union of the soul with God through contemplation or ecstasy.*

Religion is about theology. It's brain work. Theology is entirely rational. Mysticism is about encountering the spiritual, the mysterious, and finding it to be real.

Here are 3 quotes from Underhill.

"If God were small enough to be understood [by rational minds, God] would not be big enough to be worshipped." (It has in it a huge element of mystery)

"Mysticism is the art of union with Reality." It's the real deal.

"For a lack of attention, a thousand forms of loveliness elude us every day."
(Beauty is an argument for, and a manifestation of, the sacred)

One spring day in the afternoon I dropped by my teacher's apartment in Berkeley. His door was wide open and before I entered I heard Pachelbel's famous Canon in D for the very first time. Jim said he played it every afternoon after coming home from teaching. "I just let it wash me," he said.

I had a question for this man. I asked him about death – what happens when we die? I was 24.

He countered with birth – “Where do we come from?” “What about our birth?” “It’s a giant mystery! I hadn’t thought of this before.

Remember when your children were born? How they came into the world with their personality fully formed? Not in the least a “blank slate”? It’s all there. I was asking the wrong question !! Christian Spirituality is about the mysteries. We are often asking the wrong questions.

Jim embodied the mysteries for us. Five years later he died while jogging. He was 38.

Years later I came across Ram Dass’s most beloved quote:

“Life consists of this: We are just walking each other home.”

If that is the only truth you ever digest, it would be enough. If we can live according to what that calls up in us every day, we will be mature spiritually.

Dealing with our death is a huge part of our spirituality.

Evangelical Christianity begins with the reality of death, as well, and answers it by saying, “Receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and savior and you never have to think about it again. You’re in. One and done.”

That is one understanding of “salvation.” It’s very simple, very straightforward. But that way does **not** lead to spiritual growth or spiritual depth.

No, in fact, if that’s all you have -- a ticket to heaven, then your “salvation” will be a locked door, blocking you from further spiritual growth. I mean, why knock yourself out? If that’s all you think the God part of life amounts to.

Brian McLaren, a former evangelical has said ...

I noticed... that people who spend a lot of time in church often seemed to be some of the meanest, more arrogant, and most judgmental people that I met.

I noticed the same being true of me at times as well.... It seemed that Christianity has become for many people an evacuation plan (how to get your soul out of earth into heaven) rather than a transformation plan (how to help God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven).

These words of mine this morning are meant to be a meditation.

Here's something from Rev. William Sloan Coffin: "Before every birth and after every death there is still God. The abyss of God's love is deeper than the abyss of death."

So, how then are we to live in this middle space?

One verse from Paul's letter to the Colossians can be a help here:" "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you have already died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God." Colossians 3:2

The author says, don't let your worries about death hijack your life. This is not worth your worry. Besides, there's nothing we need to do about it. Why? Because our spirits are tucked away in the loving care of the one who created us.

It is a comfort to imagine that our little lives are hidden with Christ in God -- because Jesus proved by his expansive love to the last minute of his earthly life that we would want to be with him in death. I mean, who else?

The writer of Colossians says, He is trustable.

So let God find us there with the one who, Paul says, "emptied himself." The one who jettisoned his ego in the extreme.

Why can we trust him? Maybe because he died to himself before he died on the cross.

The spiritual teacher, Ananda Coomaraswamy who died in 1947 is remembered to have said, "I pray that death will **not** come and find me still unannihilated."

In other words, "That person dies happy if, at life's end, there is no one left to die ..." If the ego has disappeared before death caught up to him or her.

Which makes death gentler and *not* entirely unwelcome.

I mean, look, the things that drive our egos – what do they really amount to?

I once had dinner with the poet, Carl Dennis, who'd recently won a Pulitzer Prize for a collection of his poems. A journalist recognized him and came by our table and she asked him this: "Mr. Dennis, what is it like to win a Pulitzer Prize?"

He looked right at me and he said, "It lasted about a week."

Our eventual death can offer us a form of meditation. Let me explain.

Those of us who are seniors or in late middle age (those of us in the second half of life) carry around a secret. We are often thinking about those we have been attached to in our lives who have already died and are on the other side (like my friend and teacher, Jim Ligouri).

At some point, if we live long enough, we will realize we have more friends on the other side than we have here. I mean, look, we still relate to them. We remember the world we shared with them; a world that is passing away.

Yes, and sometimes we take solace in knowing we won't be here when there are few, if any, reminders of that world. You know what I mean. I'm talking about the world *before* Al, for instance. Right?

Of course, the healthiest among us keep making new younger friends all the time; friends who keep us connected to the earth.

Now, it is also true that our grandchildren (if we have them) do this for us in a special way.

When they are small, they don't know our secret connections with the world that is passing away. And that is fine because they have a firm grasp on our ankles and are holding us down.

It's as though those in the next world are pulling us toward them while our grandchildren and others we are connected to here, are pulling us down.

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That, my friends, is a healthy tension.

Let me go back to my friend, Jim -- who so gently let me know I was asking the wrong question about my death --

His pointing out for me the mystery of my birth was a Wake Up call.

Now, the Bible is all about this. The Bible has two messages I hear repeated over and over: Wake Up and Grow Up. Those implicit messages are important parts of the Bible's deep text.

Wake Up Psalm 19

The heavens are telling the glory of God;

and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork.

Day to day pours forth speech,

and night to night declares knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words;

their voice is not heard;

yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

.... if you have the eyes to see and the ears to really hear, that is.

And here is something crucial that Jesus says in an early collection of his sayings that predates the gospels --- It's from *The Coptic Gospel of Thomas*:

"Pay no attention to those who say, 'Look here or look there for Christ to coming.' No, the kingdom of God is spread out over the earth, only people do not see it."

Many (or maybe even most) Christians today are looking for Jesus to come in the clouds, or they may have the image of Jesus "Secretay of War" Pete Hegseth has that comes from the book of Revelation where Jesus is on his way to earth, riding a white horse, carrying a sword for battle.

No, Jesus in the gospel verse I just read said that God is already filling this earth minute by minute with God's loving presence.

The naturalist, John Muir, once observed, "Most people are on the world, not in it -- most have no conscious sympathy or relationship to anything about them -- undiffused, separate, and rigidly alone, [they are] like marbles of polished stone, touching but separate."

They don't understand the wake-up call in the Psalm we read. To such people, Jesus once said, "Behold the lilies."

We are so bound to the earth by our egos, so intent on ownership, on holding on to "what is mine" or "what I want to be acquire" - we miss the beauty that is everywhere and free.

But if we hear the call and wake up, then we might find that waking up might lead quite naturally to the second oft repeated Biblical message -- Grow Up.

Fr. Richard Rohr (Franciscan) wrote a book called, *Falling Upward*. In it he speaks of the two halves of life. The second half of life is about growing up -- letting go of what feeds the ego.

This has to do with how we define ourselves. Who am I?

It asks, "Is your sense of self connected with what you own, or what you do for a living, or your expectation for what you will eventually accomplish?" All those questions are about our ego.

Fr. Richard Rohr says "When you get your 'Who am I?' question right; that is to say, when you get all of your questions about who you are, separate from your ego, then your, 'What should I do with my life?' questions tend to take care of themselves"

To be transformed in a way in which we can find real peace involves letting go of our egos. Now, I know this is hard work.

We tend to love the past more than the present or the future.

We often have a phony inflated idea of the past. We are often terrified of the future and spend our present trying to stop the future God intends for us from coming. We hate change.

You know, the women's movement was the biggest change moment in our lifetime and I'm convinced that most of the chaos and struggle going on today in the world can be tied to it – is a reaction against it. That's what all this misogyny coming from the top of our government is about.

The human ego prefers anything, just about anything to change.
To the ego, change equals death.

The ego is that part of you that loves the status quo – even when it's not working. It attaches to past and present and fears the future."

Transformation is often more about unlearning than learning, which is why the religious traditions calls it "conversion" or "repentance."

You know, when the ego loses, when it diminishes, what happens? Two things happen ...

- 1) We find we are little, even tiny. And 2) we find we are connected to everyone and everything else on the planet.

The bad news for our ego is that we are little.

The good news is that we find, quite naturally, that we are deeply connected to everyone on earth and everyone who ever lived on earth.

The Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, woke up to his connection to everyone while at Gethsemene Abbey on an errand for the monastery in downtown Louisville, Kentucky in the 1950s. Here is what he said about that epiphany.

"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers."

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That, friends, was a mystical experience. And we all have them, you know, once in a while.

The Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh once said, "We are on this earth in order to wake up from the illusion of our own separateness."

What does that look like? When we wake up to that fact?

We come to realize that "We are all just walking each other home."

One more thought. This ties it with the where I began with that question about our death.

I have never known anyone as afraid of death as my mother. She had a hard life. She was diagnosed a Borderline Personality – the upshot of which made her unable to sustain a relationship with anyone. She was very attractive, and a really fun person to be with, but she couldn't maintain a friendship. Not one.

As a result, when her time came she chose to die alone. I don't claim to understand why. I doubt that she knew why either, but it was what she chose.

Now, one final bit of wisdom from Ram Dass that helps me with this conundrum.

Ram Dass had a similar relationship with his mother. He said, "I had many opinions about my mother. But then, when I met my guru, Maharaji, and we began to get acquainted he said this to me. He said "Your mother is a very high being."

Ram Dass then said to the translator who was helping the two communicate, "I don't understand. My mother is dead."

Maharaji understood his English and interrupted and repeated, "Your mother IS a very high being."

And Ram Dass said, "Suddenly I got it: He was focused on my mother as a soul. I had been focusing on her as an ego. And when I found my own soulness, I found hers too." Amen