

From Tim Haley

Amid all the noise in our lives,
we take this moment to sit in silence --
 to give thanks for another day;
 to give thanks for all those in our lives
 who have brought us warmth and love;
 to give thanks for the gift of life.
We know we are on our pilgrimage here but a brief moment in time.

Let us open ourselves, here, now,
to the process of becoming more whole --
 of living more fully;
 of giving and forgiving more freely;
 of understanding more completely
 the meaning of our lives here on this earth.

The Words We Choose Topic by Andee DeRouen

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

Words have no owners, so when we hear Christians co-opt words like faith, reverence, spirit and grace we should not relinquish the ownership of those words that will mean as much to any of us.

The term, "spirituality" (or "the human spirit") has always been about the very essence of what it means to be human. Clearly, what it means to be human -- and thereby "spiritual"-- in different cultures and historical periods depends upon the world view prevailing at the time.

If we look at the synonyms of spirit – boldness, character, energy, essence, force, life, outlook, vitality – to name a few, we see myriad possibilities to use this word for ourselves. The word doesn't have to be tied to "holy" or "Christian" but can define our attitude for the day or even for our entire lives. We can be spirited, draw upon our spirit, and admire the spirit in others.

If our Christian friends want to tell you about the Holy Spirit or the spirit of God, you can respond with your belief in the spirit of nature, the spirit of humanity or the spirit of this fellowship.

One of the qualities a Boy Scout is supposed to embrace is reverence. We can easily infer they want this to refer to your belief in God and the principles of Christianity as those ideas frequently come up in scouting. Yet reverence just means a "deep respect for" or to esteem.

We can respect the planet, people, and even ourselves. Reverence can take place in nature as we behold tall trees or the ocean. We needn't feel like reverence is a straight line to God, but rather an attitude towards things, people and ideas we treat with honor and awe. If someone asks if you are reverent, don't flinch with the thought that you are being asked about your belief in God, but know that you can answer a resounding "YES" while thinking of your reverence for nature, our fellowship and those you love.

Faith – often used in phrases like “faith in God” or “my faith sustains me.” Yet at its root faith means to have confidence or trust in a person or thing. So those in UU fellowships can use the word faith to describe their trust in the leaders of their group or in themselves.

I hear my Christian friends use the word faith almost like a shield against any arguments disputing their beliefs. Mark Twain, in his story “The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg,” uses the story of a town that prides itself in its uprightness and honesty to show that their ideals only exist in a homogenous vacuum where no temptation exists. Once the stranger puts temptation to greed and dishonesty in the town’s path, they succumb.

Sometimes I feel the same can be thought of the “faith” exhibited by my Christian friends. Much like political talking points that hammer home an idea regardless of factual accuracy, Christians, in the face of a lack of understanding of another viewpoint, or even in the face of facts that oppose their dogma, will clothe themselves in their idea of faith.

I have faith in the basic decency of humanity. I’m sustained by my faith in the love of my family and that science explains why the sun will come up each morning. I don’t need the airy “faith” in an invisible being to help me be a person who makes good decisions and acts with kindness toward others.

A word that gets lots of play in Christianity is grace. They say grace before dinner and they live in God’s grace. It’s a supernatural granting of God’s love and sanctification. Can we humanists, we who live as Unitarian Universalists, find our own grace?

Among its many definitions, grace is identified as the quality or state of being considerate or thoughtful. I like that definition, along with the quality of moving effortlessly. People can show grace in a crisis or lack social graces. In either condition, we put the grace in the person, not God. So again, can we find grace for ourselves?

I think so. Think of a ballet dance moving through the air and the grace we think of when we see their movements. We can also mentally and philosophically move with grace. We can exhibit kindness and thoughtfulness toward others, leaving ourselves and them in a state of grace. We can strive to see grace in our lives and add grace to our lives. Much like the idea of spirit, grace is the embodiment of it.

Finally, at this time of year, we often hear our Christian friends bemoan the commercialism of Christmas and talk about the reason for the season. Yet, as we know from Jeff’s talk about the true meaning of Christmas and other historical evidence, the reason we celebrate at this time are the traditions of the winter solstice. The date the Christians chose for their celebration of the birth of Jesus coincided with the Roman year-end celebrations.

The annual solar feast, Natalis Invicti, a celebration that pre-dated Christmas, fell on December 25th, making the choice of that date a natural upon which for the Christians to overlay their holiday. The birth of a religion’s leader makes sense on a holiday already devoted to the birth of the sun. It’s about beginnings and potential. But we can choose how to interpret what the reason for this season is. The birth of Jesus is the Christians reason, while I choose to see it as the sparkling, light-filled celebration of winter renewal as we march towards longer days. A time to spend with family and friends, celebrating the year we’ve just had.

Words have power. Words should work for you. Don’t let someone else force a particular definition on you for a word that could have great meaning for you. Words like faith, reverence, spirit and grace can elevate you if you make them yours instead of relinquishing them to more fundamental people. Let yourself find the beauty in these words and find a way to use them to fulfill, rather than diminish.

Let us have faith in our fellowship, find the spirit and grace in ourselves and have reverence for the seven principles.