

# **“Paying Attention to Difference – The Spiritual Discipline of Curiosity”**

**Dianne M. Daniels; UUCN, March 1, 2026**

## **Prayer and Meditation – Prayer for Attention to Ourselves**

Spirit of Truth,  
We come seeking the courage to see ourselves clearly.  
Not the selves we perform for others,  
not the selves we **wish** we were,  
but the actual landscape of our hearts.  
The fears we dress up as principles,  
the exhaustion we ignore,  
the joy we rush past without naming.

Teach us to notice what stirs in us without shame or hurry.  
Help us befriend our limits as sacred boundaries,  
to track what makes us alive and what drains us dry,  
to honor our body's wisdom when it whispers.

May we grow gentle and honest in our own presence,  
learning to see ourselves as we are held:  
beloved, finite, and becoming.

**Sermon: “Paying Attention to Difference:  
The Spiritual Discipline of Curiosity”  
by Rev. Dianne M. Daniels  
Remember to SLOW DOWN**

Good morning, friends. I am honored to be with you again today, beginning a new month in the presence of people who are open to hearing about curiosity, and how paying attention to difference can amplify our spiritual and real human power.

There is a difference between noticing and paying attention.

We notice things all the time. We notice the weather.  
We notice who agrees with us.  
We notice what confirms what we already believe.

But paying attention?  
Paying attention requires **intention**.

And when it comes to living in a pluralistic world —to living well and authentically among differences — paying attention becomes a spiritual discipline.

Today I also want to talk about curiosity.

Not casual curiosity.  
Not gossipy curiosity.  
Not “tell me more so I can evaluate you” curiosity.

But spiritual curiosity. And real-life, applicable curiosity.

Because curiosity — when rooted in love — is what allows difference to become strength rather than division.

## **Two Kinds of Curiosity**

Let me define curiosity in two ways.

### **1. Spiritual Curiosity**

Spiritual curiosity is the willingness to explore the sacred — within yourself and within others — without fear.

It is the openness that says:  
What is unfolding here?  
What is Spirit teaching me?  
What might I not yet understand?

In one of the affirmations I used to help me write this sermon, the writer says:

“I let go of my expectations and judgments. I allow myself to be curious and hopeful. I open to my innermost self and realize how much I have in common with others.”

I am a spiritual being - that is spiritual curiosity.

It is not anxious.

It is not defensive.

It is not trying to win.

Spiritual curiosity trusts that truth is expansive.

It trusts that your soul is strong enough to encounter difference without collapsing.

It trusts that love is not threatened by complexity.

Spiritual curiosity is a posture.

## **2. Real-Life, Applicable Curiosity**

The second definition is more practical.

Real-life curiosity is the habit of asking one more question before forming a conclusion.

It is the discipline of saying:

Help me understand.

Tell me what shaped that view.

What experiences brought you here?

Real-life curiosity is active listening and the refusal to reduce people to categories. And in a world of headlines and hot takes, this kind of curiosity is radical.

Because most of our culture rewards speed, not depth.

- Curiosity slows us down.
- Curiosity creates space.
- Curiosity invites dialogue rather than debate.

And that matters in a pluralistic faith like ours.

## **Difference Makes Us Greater**

- Pluralism is not tolerance.
- Tolerance is passive.
- Pluralism is engagement.

Difference is not a flaw in the human system. It is a feature. Think about the natural world. Biodiversity strengthens ecosystems. Monocultures collapse under stress.

The same is true spiritually.

When we engage difference with curiosity:

Our thinking sharpens.

Our compassion expands.

Our humility deepens.

One of the guides on spiritual wellness inspired me with:

“Be accepting of the viewpoints of others... Instead of forcing your beliefs on others, focus on gaining a deeper understanding.”

That is not weakness, but spiritual maturity.

Difference, approached with curiosity, makes us stronger.

## **When Curiosity Is Lost**

But let's be honest. Curiosity can be trained out of us.

Especially if we were shaped by rigid or fundamentalist frameworks.

In some religious environments, questioning is seen as a form of doubt. And doubt is seen as danger. And danger is seen as disobedience.

So curiosity gets shut down, discouraged.

But Unitarian Universalism does something radical.

We affirm the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

We don't punish curiosity, we cultivate it.  
Because spiritual growth requires inquiry.  
Spiritual growth requires paying attention.

## **Reframing Spiritual Gifts**

Now I want to pivot to something that may feel tender for some of you: spiritual gifts. Many of us were taught a very narrow understanding of spiritual gifts.

We were told:

- Spiritual gifts come only in certain forms.
- They're granted in specific theological ways,
- And, they belong inside specific doctrinal boundaries.

In the traditional Christian framing, spiritual gifts are described as God-given abilities like leadership, mercy, teaching, generosity, hospitality, wisdom, and encouragement.

There is value there. But in our UU context, we can expand the lens.

Spiritual gifts are **not** supernatural badges. They are the sacred capacities within you that strengthen community.

Your gift might be:

- The ability to listen deeply.
- The courage to speak the truth.
- The steadiness to organize.
- The compassion to advocate.
- The creativity to imagine new possibilities.

One truth from the documents I examined says:

“It’s unlikely that you will have all the spiritual gifts, but you will have at least one.”

In our framing, I would say:

You absolutely have spiritual capacity.

Your very being carries something necessary.

And paying attention to differences helps us discover our gifts.

Because sometimes someone else sees what we cannot.

## **Loving Your Spiritual Self**

Curiosity must also turn inward. We cannot engage with differences well if we are disconnected from ourselves.

Consider this encouragement: “Filling your spirit with genuine joy is a must if you love yourself.”

## **Loving Your Spiritual Self**

Loving your spiritual self means:

Making space for reflection.

Disconnecting from constant noise.

Immersing yourself in nature.

Allowing beauty and joy to refill you.

That is not indulgence. That is maintenance.

When we are spiritually nourished:

We are less reactive.

We are less defensive.

We are more spacious.

Curiosity thrives in a well-nourished soul.

## **Spiritual Needs vs. Material Wants**

We live in a culture that prioritizes material wants.

More productivity.

More accumulation.

More consumption.

But spiritual needs can sometimes take precedence over material wants.

Spiritual needs include:

- Meaning
- Belonging
- Purpose
- Integrity
- Connection

One guide reminds us that developing spiritual wellness involves identifying what you believe and allowing those beliefs to give you inner strength.

That inner strength is not purchased. It is cultivated.

When we neglect spiritual needs, imbalance follows.

When we attend to spiritual needs:

We respond more honestly.

We stand by our values.

We live with fulfillment.

That is spiritual balance.

## **Steps Toward Spiritual Wellness**

Spiritual growth is not accidental. It requires devotion.

The “Successful Road to Spiritual Wellness” reminds us that this journey takes effort and introspection.

It suggests:

Time alone for meditation.

Making value-guided decisions.

Accepting the viewpoints of others.

That last one is crucial.

Acceptance does not mean agreement. It means recognition.

Recognition that your experience is not universal.

Recognition that others are shaped by different histories.

Recognition that Spirit may be speaking through voices unlike your own.

That is pluralism in practice.

## **Curiosity Sustains Balance**

Here is where it all connects. Curiosity is not just intellectual.

It is balancing.

When we are spiritually curious:

We question our purpose.

We explore our commitments.

We test our limits.

We stay connected to who we are on the inside.

Curiosity helps us avoid stagnation.  
Curiosity keeps faith alive.  
Curiosity invites growth.

And growth is devotion in action.

## **Devoted to Spiritual Growth**

Devotion is not rigidity.  
Devotion is consistency.

You devote yourself to:  
Showing up. Reflecting.  
Learning. Adjusting. Loving.

Spiritual growth asks:  
What defines me?  
What is my purpose?  
What am I committed to?

These are not one-time questions. They are lifelong companions.  
And when we ask them with curiosity rather than fear, something shifts.

We stop defending who we were.  
And we begin exploring who we are becoming.

## **Difference as Gift**

Let me return to difference. Difference is uncomfortable.

It stretches identity.  
It challenges assumptions.

But when met with curiosity, difference becomes a gift.

Your congregation is not meant to be a monoculture.

It is meant to be a mosaic.

Each gift — leadership, mercy, service, wisdom, encouragement —  
strengthens the whole.

Each story deepens the tapestry.

Each perspective refines our understanding.

When we pay attention to difference:

We discover our blind spots.

We expand our empathy.

We strengthen our spiritual muscle.

Pluralism is not chaos.

Pluralism is harmony without uniformity.

## **Fulfillment on the Journey**

Spiritual fulfillment is not found in eliminating differences.

It is found in engaging it.

It is found in loving your spiritual self.

It is found in nurturing your soul.

It is found in participating in something larger than yourself

And it is found when spiritual needs are honored above material wants.

When you define your own spiritual journey — within the spaciousness  
of this tradition — you find balance.

When you use your gifts — expansively defined — you strengthen com-  
munity.

When you practice curiosity — spiritually and practically — you make  
pluralism real.

## **So What Does This Mean for Us?**

It means: Be curious about your own becoming.  
Be curious about the stories in this room.  
Be curious about the gifts you carry.  
Be curious about the discomfort difference sometimes creates.

Curiosity is not weakness. It is courage expressed gently.  
Curiosity is not indecision. It is disciplined openness.  
Curiosity is not relativism. It is respect in motion.

## **Closing: Breaking the chains**

If regret is a chain, then forgiveness is not a sentimental feeling—it is a decision to stop dragging the past behind you.

- You do not have to carry yesterday into tomorrow.
- You do not have to bring last year's harshest self-judgment into a new year.
- You do not have to stay locked in a moment you would not choose again.

Let regret teach you—then let it go. And when the world is loud with negativity, when headlines feel designed to wear us down, let your life answer back—not with despair, but with steady commitment:

- I will keep loving.
- I will keep showing up.
- I will keep choosing justice.
- I will keep beginning again.

Because you are **not** your worst moment, your most tired season, the story that regret tells.

You are a person still becoming. And you are not becoming alone.

Amen, and blessed be.

## **Closing Blessing –**

May you leave this place lighter than you arrived.  
May you release the regrets that no longer teach you  
and carry forward only the wisdom they revealed.

May the turning of the season remind you  
That rest is not failure,  
That reflection is not retreat,  
And that letting go is an act of courage.

May you trust your strength —  
Not the loud, brittle kind,  
But the quiet strength that endures,  
Adapts and returns again and again to what matters most.

Go in peace, not burdened by what has been,  
But grounded in who you are becoming.

Amen, Ase, and Blessed Be.