



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

## On a Scale of 1 to 10 . . . Spiritual Assessment

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We are in the middle of the holiday season. Jewish High Holidays, Diwali, Thanksgiving, winter solstice, Christmas, the New Year. You may be still working through leftover turkey or tofurkey, and anxiously planning how to get everyone that perfect gift. Pause for a moment and take a deep breath....

There is a deeper rhythm to this time of year, and in the midst of so much business, there is an even greater need to attend to our spiritual sides. We are entering December and winter, months of rain and cold, as cold as Los Angeles can get, and also a traditional time for reflection on the past year, and for making resolutions for a new year. This season can be double-sided—joy, gratitude, peace on earth, but also loneliness, family conflict, and the suffering on earth so clear to see.

In the midst of all this chaos, we may lose sight of what is really important. As one poet wrote in the reading this morning, “I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I pretend I don’t see it. I fall in again.” We all need clarity of vision and insight in order to avoid falling into the holes and unhealthy patterns of our lives. So I want to suggest a spiritual practice that could help you to pause and take a look at where you are on your spiritual quest. This practice is called spiritual assessment and it helps us to see where we are stuck, where we are in pain, and where we are in harmony.

As a chaplain, I am in the business of making spiritual assessments of patients. Part of this term, spiritual assessment, comes from our effort as chaplains to make our work take on a more clinical, quantitative, data-friendly aspect. In response to those detractors who think that all chaplains do is make a friendly visit, hold a person’s hand, and read a prayer, we want to show that we can contribute important clinical information about a person to the rest of the team. We assess, through asking questions and listening, the relative health and strength of a person’s spirituality, spiritual resources and spiritual stressors.

In the same way that a nurse may assess a patient’s pain, or a doctor measure the functioning of a patient’s kidney, we chaplains evaluate spirituality, and think it is just as vital as physical health. This allows us to discover where a person might be experiencing a lack of support, or spiritual crisis, and to come up with a plan for providing them support, whether it is through continued listening, prayer, ritual, or theological reflection. This can enhance a person’s overall well-being.

Of course, spiritual assessment in practice is not as easy as one, two or four questions. In conversations with patients, I often take a rather meandering road through their lives. We touch on the patient’s community resources, his supportive church or her lack of attendance at synagogue. I listen to stories about a patient’s family, how much joy her grandchildren bring her, how much pain the death of his mother still causes. Sometimes, but not often, we take up the challenging question of God or the divine. One person feels close to God, knows that God loves him or her. Another wonders how there could be a God in a world where there is so much suffering. This type of assessment balances what is helping, healing, and whole for a patient, with what is unhelpful, broken or in crisis.

We don’t have to wait until we are hospitalized to do spiritual assessment. Instead, we can use this practice to better understand ourselves at anytime.

Any one type of spiritual assessment may not capture for you, everything that is happening in your life, where you have come from, or where you are going. However, spiritual assessment is not a spiritual autobiography. Rather, it acts more like a sustained check-in, a snapshot, a mindful break in the headlong rush of the day or the week, to consider your spiritual self.

Spiritual assessment is a tool. It is a set of questions, or maybe just one question, which allows you to inquire about your own spiritual life, your areas of spiritual strength, your areas of spiritual challenge or even crisis. As a tool, I imagine spiritual assessment taking its place in your virtual toolbox, which may

include other practices of spiritual inquiry, such as journaling, meditation, or prayer. In fact, spiritual assessment may lead to prayer, or journaling may include your own spiritual assessment.

Spiritual assessment is just a modern clinical term for something religious people have been doing for centuries. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, St Ignatius of Loyola developed the spiritual exercises, which laid out specific scriptural readings, prayers, and reflection exercises designed to help a person discover the love of God and his or her part in God's work on earth. One of the spiritual exercises was called the examen, a prayerful reflection, performed twice a day. Today the examen is used by Jesuits and many other Christians.

This is a modernized version of the five-step Daily Examen that St. Ignatius practiced.

*1 First, gratitude, and a recognition of God or the divine presence in that very moment.*

*2. A request that God or holiness be with you in that moment.*

*3. A reflection over the day.*

*4. Asking the divine for forgiveness and expressing gratitude.*

*5. A request for the future, that a sense of holiness remain close.*

The third point of the examen, is a particular type of spiritual assessment. As you reflect over the day, you look for the times and points when you felt most connected to the divine, the spiritual inside yourself and the world. Then you look for the times when you felt most disconnected, or rejected the spiritual inside yourself.

I like this idea of connection versus disconnection. Connection, meaning encounter, relationship, being in touch and in communication with whatever form holiness or God or spirit takes for you. Perhaps you might remember a time in the day when you saw the sunset, or hugged your child, or listened to a piece of music so divine that you felt transformed. On the other hand, disconnection, meaning, rupture, forgetfulness, distance, loneliness. Those times in the day when we ignored or felt separated from the divine inside ourselves, inside others and the divinity present in the world around us. What times in the day do you feel most connected to the sacred? Most disconnected? How can we act in a way to keep that sense of holiness close to us?

Here's another possible single question spiritual assessment: the question is, "Am I at peace?" "Am I at peace?" Interpret "peace" in whatever way is meaningful for you, and find where you are in relation to that peace. You might ask yourself this question several times a day. If you find yourself at peace, rejoice in it. If you find yourself far away from peace, ask how you might bring yourself closer.

Spiritual assessment does not need to be restricted to individuals. You could work with a partner, a spiritual friend, discuss it with your family, maybe even bring it to work with you.

My current position as a chaplain in the hospital was created through a grant, for the purpose of integrating spiritual care into palliative care. I have never worked on a grant before, and the main thing I'm learning is that there is a lot of talk about goals, objectives and steps. What goals have we accomplished, what have we still to work on. Last May I went to a meeting for the grant, meaning that I and representatives from 8 other hospitals met to talk about our goals and successes. Most presentations were interesting and I received some good ideas, but the most striking was a hospital that listed a full 10 goals in their first slide. Then they said something really surprising, "After a couple months, we realized something, we were not accomplishing our goals. We failed. And we started to ask ourselves, what happened?"



At this point, my face was like 0\_0. Did they just say they failed in their goals? Aren't you supposed to say something more politically correct such as, "We have met some challenges and are still looking for areas to improve in?" But no, this hospital said, "We realized something was going wrong. And so we decided to take our own advice, we performed a spiritual assessment on ourselves." In the regular course of the grant, we are talking about doing spiritual assessments on patients, not ourselves, but this brave and mindful project group decided to take the time to reflect on themselves.

They proceeded to present their institutional spiritual assessment, how their own religious traditions gave them strength, religious practices that helped them in their professions, and their areas of distress – some transitions in personnel, personal losses, feelings of lack of support and disappointment. They shared both their hardships, and their resources for renewal. At the end of the presentation, they had reformatted their 10 goals and had a new direction for how to implement the grant at their hospital.

How often do we as institutions take time to do a spiritual assessment of ourselves? It takes a good deal of humility and risk to do an honest inquiry about our own spiritual health and to acknowledge to ourselves but also others, the places that are painful or broken. It's something I would rather like to see our national political and economic institutions do – can you see it – a major bank on the news saying, "We have completed our own spiritual assessment, and here's how we're doing in the areas of trust-worthiness, integrity, and justice." I would like a report on the spiritual health of the nation along with the State of the Union, please. And like the model I suggest for spiritual assessment, we can be healthy in some areas and have strengths and areas for hope and meaning, and we can be unhealthy in other areas, including a lack of community and neighborliness, a lack of justice and environmental responsibility, a low score in choosing violence rather than peace.

Not only is inquiring about spiritual health rare in our culture, but it takes a certain type of attitude – not of judgment, which we may typically associate with assessment. No, the purpose of spiritual assessment is not to punish. It is not a hunt for the guilty party. Even in a personal assessment – the purpose is not to beat ourselves up about how much we have failed and messed up. The purpose of spiritual assessment is to be aware, to be mindful. It must be undertaken with curiosity, with honesty and fearlessness about dark places, and also with kindness towards ourselves and others.

A side note about the process of evaluating and assessing ourselves – sometimes it is easy to focus too much on what is not working, the 5% out of 100% that needs improvement. Sometimes we allow a narrow view of assessment to become a restrictive label. We forget to be kind to ourselves. We forget that "love and light are no less practical than a coffee grinder," and that "pleasure is a thing that also needs accomplishing."

Two things are helpful at this point: One, to remember the wisdom of being content in one's self, knowing that on a deep level, you and I are whole and completely deserving of love and acceptance. Secondly, to remember, that numbers can be just numbers. In the spiritual journey, one point doesn't predict your whole outcome. I can feel deeply connected to the universe one day, and disconnected the next. There is bound to be some flux and change in our lives. It's part of being human. When I feel myself getting dragged down in assessing with great seriousness my spiritual health or lack of health, I remember the words of one of my spiritual teachers and say to myself, "I breathe in and take myself lightly." Self-care is an important goal of spiritual assessment.

I'd like to walk through a particular spiritual assessment, which has been included in your order of service. Yes, now is the time to take it out, although I'm sure some of you have read it through a dozen times already. This particular assessment caught my eye because it is organized in a different way from a typical strength and distress assessment. The creators thought of four areas of spirituality: meaning, forgiveness, relatedness and hope.

Let's spend a minute in silence practicing this spiritual assessment. If you feel so moved, and have a pen and want to actually write down some of your personal answers, feel free. Your answers are for yourself –

we will not be sharing them as a congregation, and you have no obligation to share them with me. You may find that you want to share them with someone, but that is up to you. Remember, this is a tool, not a test. You are not being asked to turn this in, it is not being graded.

You may find that one particular theme or section catches your eye, and spend the entire time reflecting on just that one question. That's fine, save the rest for another time. Notice how you feel when you look at the numbers and the questions – what arises in you? Let's take a moment in silence to assess our spiritual health.

(1-2 minutes)

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What was that like? For some of you it may have been easy to reflect, for others it may have been very difficult. Something it's important to remember when asking yourself these types of reflective questions – pay attention when you feel a strong feeling, an attraction or a resistance. If there was one word or question which was exciting, which you wanted to spend more time on – perhaps that is an area for celebration, for growth, for further investigation. If there was one word or question which you avoided, which seemed a little scary – perhaps that is also an area for further investigation, a source of hurt in need of healing, a fear which needs confronting. Notice where your attention and energy goes in the assessment, there is a probably a rich area for exploration awaiting you.

I suggest that you take this assessment home, maybe put it on the fridge, above your desk, someplace visible where it will remind you to pause and reflect over your day.

A couple of months ago, I was caught in one of the most serious conflicts I've ever had with a friend. We knew each other since college, we lived as roommates together, we knew each other's quirks and strengths and dreams. We started fighting over seemingly small things, it progressed to hurtful accusations, tears, and frozen silences. During this time, there was one day when I was at work in the hospital. All morning I was mentally occupied with thinking about my most recent interactions with my friend, you know, when a conversation plays like a broken record in your head? I was sitting at my desk and looked up at this spiritual assessment. Relatedness, it said. Level of forgiveness, it said.

For some reason, when I first discovered and became enamored with this particular spiritual assessment, I was most drawn to the themes of meaning, and hope. I would look at the assessment and think about the sources of meaning in my life, and feeling pretty content with myself, just skim over the middle part of the assessment. I thought, I know that relationships are important to me, and there is little that I feel the need to forgive or be forgiven for.

However, on this particular day, embroiled in a deeply painful and stressful situation with one of my best friends, for the first time I rated myself at a "5." I feel a strong sense of un-forgiveness towards myself and another. I feel seriously alienated from someone who is important to me. As I went through this mental exercise, a part of me rebelled. No, I thought, it is too devastating to be a "5," I can't really be doing this poorly. But another part of me, a more authentic voice, said, yes, this is how I feel today. I feel deeply unreconciled to someone who is important in my life, and I don't know how to forgive her or myself.

The process of doing the spiritual assessment for myself was important in acknowledging and putting a name to what I felt. It was a relief to be able to say to myself that there was something upsetting going on in my life, that there was a good reason for feeling distracted at work, for feeling angry, confused, and sad. And once I said it to myself, I began to be able to say it to other people. I told other friends and family about my crisis, and they offered me their support. I took a look at the questions in the assessment, began to explore more of my feelings in a deeper way. I was reassured too, because despite being a "5" in some areas, I felt like a "1" in others. There was a sense of hope and meaning in my situation, and I could see that the way out was through reconciliation and forgiveness.

Whether or not you decide to use a formal set of questions as a spiritual assessment, I believe that each of us has reason to need a frame of reference for our own spiritual life. Whether it is to see that we have fallen in this hole in the street before and to think about how to get unstuck, or whether it is to see that we need to take care of ourselves with love and sunlight. May each one of us inquire with mindfulness and compassion into where we are on our spiritual journey. And may this be a community in which we can learn and grow with one another, listen to one another and encourage each other to be more whole, more in touch with the sacred, and more at peace.

Amen and blessed be.