

It matters how we define 'spiritual'



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When I was managing cooperative houses with independent seniors, conflicts would now and then arise around beliefs. Though the homes were owned by an ecumenical nonprofit, residents were people of faith as well as nonbelievers, all sharing a house, meals and chores.

One resident spoke about his faith so often at the evening meal that a few others became uncomfortable. Another resident came to me, upset that I "allowed" this to go on. I suggested discussing the concern with the other person, but that just made her more agitated. She felt that I was supporting "more religion" in the household.

Though some in the house knew I had been a minister, most didn't know I was now a secular person. I explained to this angry resident that I was a nonbeliever myself, reminding her that respectfulness was key to peace in a cooperative household. I encouraged her to calmly communicate her discomfort



Chris Highland titled this photo of Peaks of Otter, along the Blue Ridge Parkway, "Peak Experience." COURTESY OF CHRIS HIGHLAND

and seek compromise and resolution.

This incident illustrates how easily expressions of belief or unbelief can disrupt a home, a family, a community. Words matter, feelings matter, and it's important to ask, what's the matter?

Psychologist Abraham Maslow introduced his book "Religions, Values and Peak Experiences" (1964) with a description of his strong reaction to a "patriotic women's organization." This group was upset with the Supreme Court's 1962 decision on prayer in public schools. They felt the ruling was "an-

ti-religious" and claimed they were defending "spiritual values." Maslow disagreed, but then stepped back to think.

"It dawned on me that I, too, was in favor of spiritual values." His insights were based on research and investigation but he had reacted "in an automatic way," not realizing he was accepting their definitions.

"I had allowed [them] to capture a good word and put their peculiar meaning to it, just as they had taken the fine word 'patriotic' [for their own use] ... I had let them redefine these words and had then accepted their definitions."

He goes on to assert, "Now I want to take them back. I want to demonstrate that spiritual values have naturalistic meaning, that they are not the exclusive possession of organized [religion], that they do not need supernatural concepts to validate them."

Maslow, famous for his "hierarchy" of basic human needs, was identifying a central issue for believers and nonbelievers: Who determines and defines the Big Words that really matter — terms that either unite or divide us?

Definitions matter.

Maslow felt that values can be taught and practiced not only by religious traditions but by secular people

as well.

Take the word "spiritual," for instance. The way this is understood depends on how one defines a few other words, like "spirit," "divine," "sacred" or the Big One, "God." And maybe these highly charged terms are also determined by how people think of their world, their relationship with the world, their family, community.

Some think of "God" as a strict parent who loves but watches, ready to punish if we disappoint. Some see "God" as their own, someone who is always on their side. Others imagine the divine as all love and goodness; all the bad things in the world are due to poor decisions or simply beyond knowing.

Yet others feel that "spirituality" is not about religion at all, and god-language isn't so important — it's about a daily awareness of "something greater."

As a secular person, I would say the "something greater" is nature, without any personality to relate to or worry about, but that's my opinion.

What if we "took back" these words that have been as slippery as wet noodles? What if we decided there are too many definitions and the words them-

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