

**“The Spirit of Life in the Land of Cubicles”**

**Rev. Bob Janis-Dillon**

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**The First Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hunterdon County**

The businesswoman is at a meeting at the corporate offices, and things are not going smoothly. She is surrounded by 15 country managers who have flown in from across the globe to discuss her ideas. Things were going ok until one person made a critical comment, and then a second person chimed in. As if on cue, the rest of the group joined in, resembling a pack of business piranhas, everyone leaping in to attack any perceived weakness in the plans that were before them.

The businesswoman feels attacked. Who wouldn't, in that situation? She feels in herself the urge to flee, to run right out that boardroom, get in her car and go somewhere, anywhere. Or she could flee while staying in the room, accepting every critical comment as a reason for her to feel bad about herself. She also feels the urge to fight back, to defend herself letting them know *exactly* what she thinks of their criticisms and where they can *take* those criticisms if they have a problem with her.

But she doesn't do either of these things. Instead, she does something remarkable: she reacts from a spiritually grounded place. Aware of her feelings, aware of who she is, she makes a conscious choice, and when the meeting ends she walks *right up* to the two managers who started all the criticism, who were attacking her throughout the meeting, and she thanks them for the input, and then she asks them to say more. And she actually *listens*. But not from a place of self-doubt – she knows who she is, her self-worth is not tied to a few comments made in a boardroom, but she is eager to learn how to be *excellent* at what she does. So this spiritually grounded executive is completely present in a moment that may help her grow, as a businesswoman and as a spiritual person.

This is a true story, by the way – as you may have guessed the woman in question is Paulien van der Lugt, who supplied our reading today. I had the pleasure with talking with Paulien briefly about her work. I always greatly enjoy hearing about what people do when they *aren't* in church – believe it or not, I am aware there is a wider world out there, beyond ‘do we have enough milestone candles and is the sound system working, beyond who can we sign up to fill that social action committee, even beyond who is making the coffee for coffee hour. This congregation does an amazing variety of work in our individual lives. We are teachers in many different environments, therapists and social workers. We are makers of fine furniture, marketing managers, civil servants, professional housecleaners, automotive industry professions, artists, librarians, engineers, scientists, farmers. I'm just scratching the surface here – and I haven't even mentioned all the work this congregation does out in the world that doesn't garner a paycheck, like raising a family or volunteering at a soup kitchen. It's almost like we're this entire village of Unitarian Universalist occupations, spread out throughout the area and quietly making the world a better place in millions of small ways.

So I invite us each to consider what spirituality at work means for us. When I say the word “spiritual”, I wonder what image comes to mind for you? It may be this old stone church, this beautiful location we are so fortunate to gather at every week. Or maybe it’s our choir singing, or the stole your minister wears. Or it could be some beautiful place out in the wilderness, a state park or the Grand Canyon. But how many of us think of the boardroom, or the classroom, or the workshop, the place where we are every day? The place where you might spend 2,000 hours a year or more, is it possible that *that* can be a spiritual place.

Certainly, as you heard, it is for Paulien. As she said in her reading after she discovered “spirituality at work” a little miracle took place – she started to become focused on being an excellent person at work, both enjoying her work and not being as bound to the emotional high and lows as she used to be. To quote from our fourth principle, she finds in her office a place where she can undergo a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, a place where she grows as a person while cultivating deep respect for others.

I know so many of you, too, have made connections between the noble principles we talk about in this place on Sundays, and your day-to-day lives. Just this week I asked George McGowan, a member of this congregation and a lawyer in an office in New York City, what spirituality at work meant to him. He recounted a time recently when he was working on a Friday – late – and he was in a room with a group of all guys. And one of the guys made a very disparaging comment about a woman’s appearance. It was the kind of locker room comment some men just haven’t grown out of. The man who said it presumably expected a room full of accomplices who would chuckle along with him, or at least not say anything. This man hadn’t counted on George. For George, as we who know him can testify, “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” is not just a nice catchphrase, and the man’s throwaway misogyny triggered something in him. He spoke up. He lectured this man – and the room full of men – for literally five minutes on how they don’t know anything about this woman and they have no right to talk about her behind her back in this way. After he spoke, he said, everyone in the room worked silently for about thirty minutes. You could hear a pin drop. George spoke from his heart, and he made a difference in the world. I can’t say for sure that whoever made the comment will never make a disparaging comment again. But I’m sure he’s going to think twice about it next time. Especially if George is nearby.

When he recounted the story to his wife Leanne, she said that must have been courageous, and George responded he just had to do it – he just had to. You see, he had done his spiritual work beforehand, figuring out for himself what it meant that everyone has dignity, and so when he was put in a moment like that one he acted from somewhere deep within himself. He had done the soul work necessary to know who he is and where he stands, and when the moment came, he was ready to react.

If we are aware of our spirituality, we not only feel better ourselves, we can make a difference in the world. No matter what our work, it has a moral component. One example of this is the story of what Paulien actually does. You know, there’s a part of my brain that when she says does pricing work for a pharmaceutical company, just kind of

sees a big office and a bunch of numbers and then  $\diamond$  switches off. It's how some people react to math equations; I figure it's far too complicated for me to understand.

And it probably is, but even so I can a glimpse of it. Paulien described for me how her whole work has a moral component to it, because of course pharmaceutical drugs can and do save lives. HIV drugs are one of the things she prices. The company faces a lot of pressure to make these drugs more affordable. In fact, the company does give some drugs away for free in underdeveloped countries, and at a reduced rate in developing countries. But even so the company is under a great deal of global pressure to make the drugs cheaper or give more of them away. Now, it's easy to say life-saving drugs should be free, but the truth is if you did this you simply wouldn't have life-saving drugs. It takes a lot of money to develop these drugs and to test them; thousands of scientists and other employees are involved. So there are compromises that need to be made, so that the company can be successful and can continue to survive and make a difference in the world, but also provide these drugs to those who need it.

It's a tricky business. As amazing as Paulien is, and I have no doubt she's excellent at what she does, she can't come up with a magic formula to make these drugs free while paying the people who make them. Life isn't that easy. However, doesn't it make you appreciative to know that one of the people making those important decisions is someone who is in touch with her spirituality, someone who every day does her best to act with integrity, someone who has resolved to not be overly swayed by surface things by title and position, but simply tries to appreciate the moment and give her professional best? Isn't it a good feeling knowing that working in the midst of a giant, influential company is a Unitarian Universalist who is humble, gracious, and also aware that the way she treats other people has an impact on the world?

I am so glad we have good people from this congregation in powerful positions. And by "powerful positions" I'm not just talking about executives in multi-national corporations. I'm talking about the teacher making a difference in a child's life. I'm talking about the workman who not only fixes up a house but by the way they conduct themselves, reminds a client of what truth, goodness and beauty are all about. I'm talking about someone who's willing to change the course of conversation, to speak up when no-one else will. Or someone who just simply is aware that life is to be appreciated and those we can make the world better one step at a time. All of those little, significant acts make up what the spirit of life is all about.

AMEN