



November 13, 2019

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

“I’ve never told this story to anyone except my children.”

I was sitting by the hospital bed of a woman who had lived a long life. Across from me sat her daughter, who gave her mother a smile.

“About ten years ago, I was in the emergency room when I almost died. Was it ten years? Fifteen? Okay. Fifteen. I remember looking down at myself from above. I could see all of the doctors and nurses around me, and hear their voices. I felt completely at peace, and I felt secure. The next thing I knew, it was hours later, and I was waking up in a hospital room.”

She looked at me to see how I would react to her story, and felt her daughter’s hand on her shoulder, encouraging. She went on, “I haven’t told people about it because it hardly seems real to me, and I don’t know if others will believe it.”

Over the years, I’ve discovered that many people have had experiences that may be described as spiritual, mystical, or even supernatural, but they are reluctant to share them with others.

Here’s a more everyday example: you might feel that your spirit is moved by the beauty of a symphony, or a stirring movie, or an stunning natural setting, and feel a sense of unity with the world, an openness and an impulse to be kind to all living things. We are likely to brush off such experiences as a trick of emotions. Instead of accepting that being moved to a sense of unity and kindness is a glimpse of reality, we write it off as a trick of consciousness.

The philosopher Charles Taylor observed that our ancestors lived in an unbounded world, in which they expected to have spiritual experiences that could not be explained by empirical observation, like the sense of peace in a near-death experience. In contrast, he wrote, we live in a bounded world. Even we who are faithful to God have an unconscious bias toward the world that is bounded, where only observable phenomena are real. Maybe we should write off our doubts about spirit experience as a trick of our consciousness?

It is good to be wary of emotional manipulation. It keeps us from sending \$100 to a televangelist for the promise of blessings from God. But it is wise to be open to spiritual experiences. These are important stories to tell.

I’ll see you in church.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Matt". The signature is stylized with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Rev. Dr. Matthew Wooster
Senior Minister