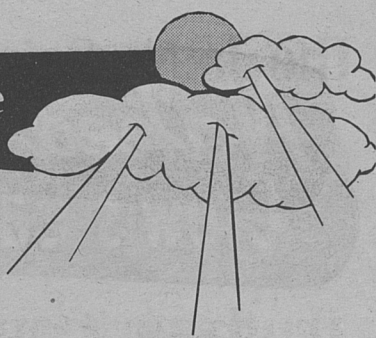


the Spiritual Essence

By The Rev. Jane Dwinell



Ever since humans formed into groups, there has been religion. People came together for survival, but they also came together to wonder about the world around them – what caused rain and drought, the phases of the moon, and babies to be born. People – in community, caring for children, finding food, fighting off threats to their survival – wondered about the things that went on around them. This was the first spiritual experience.

tions. And, mostly, there is no one there to share in the holy moments – the big ones like birth, death, coming of age, and the honoring of long-term relationships. But also in the less recognized ones – losing or getting a job, feeling lost or depressed, bearing the pain of separation or divorce, buying a home, or starting a business.

During the week of April 16-21, I had the magnificent opportunity to be part of a community spiritual experi-

home away from home for stranded folks. This could not have been done by one person alone; we needed everyone – those who made soup or chili, those who scrubbed out old coffee pots and filled them full, those who patiently answered the phone, gave directions over and over, and who made people feel welcomed. It truly was a community – of both the local people, and the people who were just passing through. For many years I practiced

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Over time, the ideas about these things were organized into stories, and the stories were told, and told, and told. Sometimes, in the retelling, the stories changed, and grew and developed. People gathered together to find comfort in the stories, and in the company of one another. Unfortunately, this spiritual experience, in many cases, became complicated by rules, and rites, and hierarchies as the major world religions came together in formation.

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While many people feel they have gained a close relationship with God through daily scripture reading and prayer, or have a grounding experience with Buddhist meditation or Wiccan ritual, the deepest spiritual experience is often found in community. Alone, one can ponder the mysteries, and deepen one's connection with the divine, but ... then what? There is no one else to bounce ideas off of, to have theological conversations with, no one to challenge assumptions and interpreta-

ence as my congregation opened its doors and its heart to activists and protestors who were headed to Quebec City during the Free Trade Area of the Americas meeting. In little, sleepy Derby Line this past week, we turned into media central as people waited to see what would happen. Would thousands of protestors be turned back, frustrated, and take their anger out on Derby Line? Or would people move through the area peacefully, understanding the needs of a small town?

There was peace, plenty of soup, and a bunch of frustrated people who were unable to get across for myriad reasons, and they all found themselves in the basement of the First Universalist Parish where they were met with a smiling face, a cup of coffee, and a spread of great food. Church members and friends offered a listening ear, and a welcoming smile. We answered questions. We showed them to the bathroom. We found them housing. We called the press. We gave them space for a quick nap or a game of chess. This was spiritual community at its best.

I don't think that all the volunteers knew they were on a religious mission, but feeding and housing strangers is one of the oldest duties of the faithful. We were there not only to provide for people's basic needs, but also to bring peace to a frightened town, and create a

my faith alone. I found much joy and connection in nature, and in my practice. But finding a spiritual community filled in the missing link. I urge all of you to consider what your religious community is, whether you have yet joined or not. There is so much out there to touch our souls, and how much better it is if we have others to share the joy – and the sorrow – with. There is a spiritual community out there, waiting for you, your ideas, your concerns, your energy, and your life.

The Rev. Jane Dwinell serves the First Universalist Parish, a Unitarian Universalist congregation, in Derby Line, VT. She lives with her partner, Sky, and their two children, Dana and Sayer, on the shores of beautiful Lake Memphremagog.

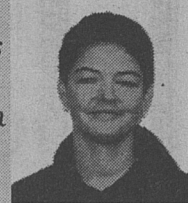
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