

The Column | Religious? Spiritual? What's it all about?



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I did not know the family. All I knew was there were school-age children and the father had been recently diagnosed with cancer. Responding to a request from the Caring Committee at Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills, I prepared a hearty dinner.

I signed up for what felt like the hottest day of the year, and by the time I finished cooking and packing the food, my back was throbbing, my brow was sweating and my spirit was drained.

But when I delivered the meal, the wife lit up. The beef stew, she said, was “real comfort food, which we need,” and she looked forward to the apricot cobbler, made with the last fruits from our tree. “What a gift!” she said. When I apologized for its high cholesterol content, she said, “That’s the least of our concerns now.”

Returning home, I hugged my husband and burst into tears.

The following day, I received this email:

“Given our situation, I often find myself spinning through the cycle of emotions, shock, anger, denial, pleading and acceptance. The big surprise to me is the intensity of another feeling: gratitude.

“The other day was a particularly difficult one. Early in the morning, I felt I was completely done with the day and by evening, my husband and I were on the kitchen floor weeping ... and then you arrived to brighten our spirits and fill our bellies with delicious ‘comfort food’ made with love.

“Thank you, with our sincerest gratitude.”

I cried again, and replied with the following:

“Your note means so much to me. I was exhausted ... We had spent [two days] caring for a 2-year-old grandson [and yesterday I cooked] for several different occasions. But the look on your faces re-energized me, and I returned home feeling good. When you thanked me for the gift made with love, it gave me a new perspective, and I want to thank you.”

As I thought about why we do what we do — visit the sick, comfort the mourners, rejoice with bride and groom, welcome a newborn — I was reminded of what it means to be part of a religious community.

I have friends who often say, “I’m spiritual, but not religious.” As I see it, you can be spiritual alone, you can meditate, and you can sit on a rock and contemplate the eternal, but you have no obligations. Being religious has a spiritual component, but it carries obligations to other people.

“It isn’t a question of ‘If it feels good do it,’ ” an Orthodox rabbi once told me. “There are rules.”

But while Jews have some distinctive laws, we have others that we share. In preparation for a Beth Am retreat, Rabbi Sarah Weissman sent participants an essay by Anne Lamott about her son: “Why I Make Sam Go to Church.” The focus is that church means being part of a community, turning away from self-obsession to reach out to those in need and accepting the helping hand when it’s extended. The people

in faith communities, Lamott writes, “follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.”

Lamott adds a quote from a Jewish Theological Seminary statement: “A human life is like a single letter of the alphabet. It can be meaningless. Or it can be a part of a great meaning.”

I shared Lamott’s piece with fellow participants in Building Bridges — An Interfaith Dialogue, involving members of Beth Am and All Saints Episcopal Church in Palo Alto. What we discovered is that while there are significant faith differences, different ways to interpret Scripture, these differences are not as great as what we share: We accept the Golden Rule as the gold standard. We try to live our lives according to the Ten Commandments. And above all, beyond our dues and our pledges, and beyond our obligations to our God, we have obligations to others. We give of ourselves, even if it isn’t always convenient, and that involves the greater community, not just our own families or congregations.

The charge in Micah 6:8, “... to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God,” isn’t just a Jewish obligation.

While some take on the big picture (campaigning for women’s rights, racial equality, an end to oppression), others think small (bringing a casserole to a family in need). To repeat a cliché, it’s all good.

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