

Spiritual Spam

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Free lo-carb shakes! Use government grants to start a business or buy a home! Become a CSI. Advance your career with a nursing degree. Is your colon weighing you down? Keep your colon healthy with ColonZen! \$500 gift card for Converse Chuck Taylor Shoes. Modify your mortgage payments.

Yes, these were actual subjects of a few the many junk e-mail messages I received last week. Not all of them, of course, as I get several hundred such messages, known as “spam,” every day. And, to be fair, a lot of them are a bit racier than these—I thought it wise to leave those out.

Of course, my email program, like the ones that many of you use, has a special feature, called a “spam filter” for those messages, and all of the ones I read to you wound up in a special folder designed just for such garbage.

Why doesn't it just delete them? Well, you see, my e-mail program makes mistakes sometimes. Hidden in the midst of that special spam folder were both an important update from the Interfaith Alliance and a message from my home heating oil cooperative. I had to dig those out of the electronic garbage can in order to read them.

No filter is perfect, I suppose, but this one saves me incredible amounts of time and energy, so I'm glad it's there.

Furthermore, the more it gets used, the better it gets. Since I told it that those two messages were actually real, it adjusted so that messages from the Interfaith Alliance won't get labeled junk anymore.

Sometimes, especially when I get an announcement of the latest and greatest way to achieve spiritual enlightenment, I wish there was a spiritual spam filter—some way to block the junk messages from ever reaching me.

Some way to discern what's worth listening to, and what needs to be sent directly to the trash.

Unfortunately, developing a spiritual spam filter takes a lot of work. We can't tell just by looking at a bestselling book whether it's worth our time.

And Unitarian Universalists are uniquely in need of a spiritual spam filter. We don't have a central source of authority to tell us what's good and what's bad. We don't have a definitive Scripture, or even a common theology from which to judge things; we don't have a pope to decree the right and wrong ways of looking at the world, or a council meeting in a secret chamber that tells us what we need to believe.

Our religion demands of us the hard work of sorting through all kinds of messages.

And so, when I see a book like *The Secret* flying off the shelves by the millions, a little message gets sent through my brain that tells me that a lot of people are investing in junk theology.

They might as well send their bank account numbers to that Nigerian businessman who just needs a place to store his millions of dollars for a few days.

Now, I don't mean to pick on *The Secret*. It was the flavor of the month last year or the year before, but it's pretty much gone away. I think that despite its chart-topping sales numbers, a lot of people put it in their spiritual junk folder after some reflection.

But to call it "pernicious drivel," as Slate magazine columnist Emily Yaffe did, is just to scratch the surface of how bad it is.

What is my justification for saying something like that? Allow me to share the four criteria that go into my personal spiritual spam filter.

First, I believe that any spiritual teaching must make sense. It must square with my experience of the world.

Experience, of course, comes in many forms, and what makes "sense" to me might make none to you.

For example, I do believe in the first tenet of *The Secret*, that declaring our intentions to the universe actually changes something. To me, this is the basis of prayer, and though I don't believe that some guy in the sky is answering those prayers personally, I do believe that we are connected to each other and to all things in ways that we don't comprehend.

But that's about where *The Secret* stops making sense to me. I can't believe that the universe needs us to pretend that something is already the case in order to respond to our intentions. I can't believe that the syntax or grammar of our intentions actually matters. And I can't believe that just by declaring something to be so, we make it happen. Life takes a whole lot more work than that.

Second, a spiritual pathway must have as its goal the increasing of goodness in the world. Goodness comes in many forms: happiness, knowledge, peace, justice, harmony.

I will put out there that my bias is that goodness and material wealth, however, don't go hand in hand. If a spiritual teaching is meant to make us rich, it's probably as big a scam as the *Make Money from Your Home* and *\$500 gift certificate waiting for you* e-mails I get in that junk folder every day. It's possible that your values are different from mine, though.

Third, any spiritual teaching worth paying attention to seeks to build relationships between and among beings. Between people, with the other beings of Earth, or even with something you might choose to call God—it doesn't matter. But relationships need to be strengthened by spiritual teachings.

Any way of the spirit that declares that there's something wrong with other people—whether it's *The Secret*, fundamentalist Islam, or Calvinist Christianity—is automatically rejected by my spiritual spam filter, more quickly if the basis for that declaration is the arbitrary division of humanity into privileged and non-privileged classes. Saved vs. damned, enlightened vs. holders of "negative energy," practitioners vs. infidels—it's all the same load of garbage to me.

Finally, a good spiritual pathway needs to connect you to something greater than yourself. That need not, of course, be a supreme being of any sort. It can be the community of humanity, the creative power within us, the life force pulsing through all of nature, or the infinite expanse of the universe.

How do *you* filter spiritual insight?

The spiritual spam filter can be deployed in everyday living as well as to judge the worthiness of spiritual teachings.

Each day, we are bombarded with information at a dizzying rate. If we let it all in, we quickly overload—we are unable to comprehend it all. Thus, we must apply our filters to other information we get as well.

Does that information make sense? Is it meant to increase goodness or knowledge? Is it helping us to build relationships with others? Does it connect us with something beyond ourselves?

It's hard to be constantly asking those questions. That's where spiritual practice comes into the picture.

Different people have different practices that help them make these decisions. Meditation, contemplative prayer, reasoned discussion and debate, and regular spiritual practices of all sorts (from walking in the woods to pausing with a cup of hot tea each morning)—they all can work for you as ways to access your own spiritual spam filter.

We each need to spend some time developing our filters, and honing the ways in which we use them in our day-to-day interactions with others.

My friend and colleague the Rev. Margie Allen studies the teachings of Marshall Rosenberg about non-violent communication as a way to sharpen her own spiritual spam filter—though she might not call it that.

Some of you know these teachings well—the Committee on Ministry led a course on the subject two years ago, and some of you have taken workshops since.

As Margie recently preached in a sermon entitled “Not Yet Fully Wise,”

To be “non-violent,” in this context, has to do, not with fists or other weapons, but with the critical, judgmental and competitive ranking and dividing chatter about ourselves and others with which our heads, on our worst days are filled. His process helps us to observe that chatter, to discern in its noise what we and our partner are feeling, and needing, and to respond in such a way that “life” (as he says) “is made more wonderful” for both of us, instead of less.. (Allen, with quotes from Marshall Rosenberg, Nonviolent Communication)

Rosenberg's philosophy easily meets all of the four criteria I have for spiritual pathways worthy of a second look.

It makes sense: Every person has needs. Every person has feelings. If we communicate from the basis of truly seeking to understand the needs and feelings of others, and truly seeking to convey to others our own needs and feelings, we are connecting using a universal language.

It is designed specifically to increase the amount of good in our world, and to add to relationships.

Practitioners of non-violent communication engage in this way of looking at the world because they are

committed to peace, to living in harmony with others, and to deeper, better relationships between and among people.

Finally, in looking outward from ourselves, we are connected with something greater than we are. Non-violent communications asks us to consider the needs and feelings of others in how we communicate, to make as a priority our connection with another person. To me, this satisfies the fourth requirement of a spiritual pathway.

But it's not the only spiritual pathway of worth out there. It's not the only way to approach relationships with others.

Free Viagra—act fast. I've found you a new job. Earn your degree for life experience! Work out of your home and make \$5000 a week. Dear Brother/Sister in Christ.

Somewhere in the midst of all of the spam in our world, there are good and worthy spiritual practices, good and worthy spiritual pathways to be followed.

One of the most beautiful things about being a Unitarian Universalist is that we each bring our own to the table here, and we can each learn from one another.

Perhaps if we combine the collective wisdom of our spiritual spam filters, we will get a robust and vigorous one—one that works more easily because it has more data to explore.

So what methods do you employ to filter the information you get every day? What are your secrets to creating deeper and fuller relationships with others? What are the practices you engage in to help you sift through the clutter of everyday life? How do you connect with something greater than yourselves? I hope we can share these things with one another.

Blessed be.

Works Cited/Consulted

Allen, Margie. "Not Yet Fully Wise," a sermon delivered at the Metro NY UUMA Northern Cluster gathering, January 13, 2009.

Yoffe, Emily. "I've Got *The Secret*," *Slate Magazine on-line*, <http://www.slate.com/id/2165746/>