

Loving the spiritual-but-not-religious neighbors I am given

They're my students and colleagues. I want to talk with them, not about them.

by [Debra Dean Murphy](#) in the [June 5, 2019](#) issue



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Spiritual but not religious. I used to think I could deftly parse this phrase so new to the lexicon of contemporary religion and yet already so tiresome to many. I thought it failed to hold up under the weight of some basic theological and sociological critiques. I don't think these things any more.

I've inhabited enough different spaces, both personally and professionally, to know that the statement "I'm spiritual but not religious" can be uttered sheepishly or confidently. It can be met with welcome or derision. It can engender respectful debate or it can shut down conversation entirely. Those who use it as a marker of identity are not uniform in what they mean by it—not by a long shot. And not all who are puzzled or worried by it are dismissive of those who claim it.

In this season of my life, the SBNR and the nones are not just demographic slices on a pie chart or theological puzzles to solve. They are my people: they comprise a great many of my students and colleagues. And I love them.

Researchers say that SBNR is not so much a name for a staked-out territory in a post-Christian landscape as it is a form of cultural rhetoric—a way of drawing distinctions on any number of issues. Like the nones, the SBNR register deep distrust of religious institutions and the scandals that seem—even to the religious—endemic and never-ending. None of this is surprising or new.

Yet social scientists also point out that those who view religion with suspicion or even hostility can sometimes be inarticulate about what religion actually is—rejecting something unrecognizable to its practitioners—and that the spirituality some espouse as an alternative is often in fact embraced by religious folks. So it's a challenge at times to get the terms right and to name accurately what's at stake, with the SBNR particularly, whose catchy confession can seem to pit factions against each other.

But, as I said, my vocation as I see it is not primarily about pressing the finer theological points. It's about loving the neighbors I've been given. Of course, conversations often flow from trying to live out this calling, especially in the classroom. But this simply reveals the proper order of things.

It was a difficult year at my school. In the fall, a well-liked student died by suicide; in the spring, a beloved professor in my department died suddenly of a heart attack. As elsewhere, declining enrollment is a persistent challenge, and the pressures of assessment can sometimes suck the life out of teaching and learning. Our connection with the United Methodist Church has also created anxiety. What does the denomination's internal fractiousness mean for those affiliated schools that have long welcomed the full participation of LGBTQI+ students, faculty, and staff in their life together?

After the unexpected deaths, I was asked to speak out of and into our shared grief and, in the case of my deceased colleague, to plan and oversee a community-wide memorial service. It was clear that my customary repertoire for such occasions, collected and curated in other places I've lived and worked, wouldn't suffice. It isn't that the hymns of the church, the consolation of the scriptures, and the counsel of Christian sages past and present would have been met with open hostility. It's that

there wouldn't have been the needed resonance. And there might have been alienation piled on top of the sorrow.

And so when we gathered in the stately campus church on a cold February day to mourn a much-loved teacher, a trio of accomplished student musicians played jazz for the prelude. A colleague in the English department read a poem he wrote for the occasion. A choral ensemble sang a piece based on a Rumi poem. A former student read an excerpt from a text the professor assigned that stays with her still. Current students read from Martin Luther King Jr. and from David Foster Wallace's essay "Roger Federer as Religious Experience." (My colleague was an avid tennis player.) We did include a reading of 1 Corinthians 13, and the school's gospel mass choir sang a joyous anthem of praise. Gifted students also sang songs by the Beatles and Neil Young.

As I recount this experience now, I imagine raised eyebrows from theologically astute friends in far-flung places—their worry, perhaps, for my own spiritual (or is it religious?) well-being. Or are these worries my own? And what exactly do the labels "spiritual" and "religious" ultimately illuminate? What do they obfuscate?

As abstract questions, these matters hold no interest for me. I don't want to talk about the SBNR; I want to talk with them. For when tragedy bears down hard as it did this year, requiring something be said and something be done, I am drawn back to a deep conviction, rooted in a religious tradition apart from which I don't know who I am: that there is no agenda other than loving my neighbor and communicating to them when I can, however I can, their own intrinsic worth and belovedness. My colleague, whom I miss dearly, and who thought of himself as spiritual but not religious, tried to give this same gift to his family, friends, and students.

And so for him, for all those gathered, and for myself, I shared a Raymond Carver poem on that cold winter day. It begins by asking what each of us wants from this life. It answers the question—for all of us, I believe—tenderly and truthfully: "To call myself beloved, to feel myself / beloved on the earth."

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The neighbors we're given."