Welcome to the Franciscan Spirituality Center in La Crosse, Wisconsin's “What is Spirituality?” podcast. Your host, Steve Spilde, is the associate director at the center. His guests talk about the revolving understanding of God, prayer, healing and wholeness. So, tell me, who is Steve Spilde? I am married to wife Jeanette, father to a daughter, Sophia, and I grew up in a farm in North Dakota. After doing a couple different things, I ended up being a Lutheran pastor for a while, about 15 years, and then my wife and I adopted Sophia from China, got home from China and quickly discovered that she had some developmental delays. She has a diagnosis of autism, and we had to rearrange our lives to take care of her. So, I stayed home with her for a period of time as a stay-at-home dad, coordinating all of her various therapies, and I had to step away from parish ministry. During that time at home with my daughter, I learned a lot about myself. We ended up moving to La Crosse because of my wife's job and found my way to the spirituality center. I became a spiritual director and found my life's calling in that. I really enjoy meeting with people, hearing the story of their lives, and that's what I get to do and that is who I am. So when you spent that time at home with your daughter and you had all that time to think about things and you did some soul-searching and you found out who you were, did you like who you were? Probably not at first. I’m becoming to like who I am. I’m coming to like that person, but it’s been a journey. What did you find out most about yourself that you didn't know? My daughter. I thought that time at home was about teaching my daughter and helping her to become a good person, healthy person, a person who could function well when she grew up. The joke of it is I think she's taught me a lot more than I've ever taught her. So much of that time with her at home was really learning to accept her because when we first got the diagnosis and I was first at home with her as a father, we were doing lots of therapy and lots of different education, trying to help her overcome her autism. I think inside of me the goals was trying to stop her being autistic. But she can't do that, and so over time I started to realize that wow my daughter is fine. She's a really cool person. The challenge was I need to learn to accept her and learn what works for her. And the irony is I needed to learn those lessons for myself, so she really taught that to me. I’d spent my life up to that always trying to fit in with what other people said that I should be, who I was supposed to be, trying to hide my shortcomings and maybe exaggerate my gifts, and she really taught me some important lessons about self-acceptance. I think I like myself a lot better than I used to because I realize that hey the person I have to live with all the time is Steve, and if other people don't like that, that's their problem. I had to learn that to get along with her and she continues to teach that back to myself. What drew you to work for the Franciscan Spirituality Center. So, when I first left, technically they call that a leave from call so I was a pastor I had to take a break from that. So I went on leave from call and I thought that was going to be short time, just a year or two. I thought we’d do a lot of therapy was Sophia we would heal her of autism and off we would go. It sounds kind of silly and naïve to say that now, but I think honestly that's what I believed. So, I thought you being at home with her would be kind of a short-term thing, but I have a lot of time. The part that I missed most about being a pastor in the parish was meeting with people one-on-one. People would say, Pastor, I need to talk. I'm having trouble on my marriage or I’m having trouble with my kids. I don't like my job or whatever and they would schedule the appointment and we would sit and talk and I would listen to them and then at the end of that meeting, I would offer suggestions I would know, kinda try to be of help and that always felt really good to me and that's the piece they really missed about being in the parish and so I kinda thought that's what spiritual directors did and when I start thinking about wow maybe I could use this time to do training to become a spiritual director. Maybe that's something I could do once I go back into the parish. Once I started doing the training, got to know that the spirituality center and discovered that there was maybe a spot for me to get involved there after I graduated from the spiritual direction preparation program. I joined the staff as a spiritual director and that's where I’ve been for the last seven to eight years.

So, what does the word “spirituality” mean to you, Steve? Spirituality: In an earlier stage in my life, I would've said that religion and spirituality are synonymous and if they're not synonymous, then the spirituality is wrong or even dangerous. But now I understand religion to be a subset of spirituality. Spirituality is about connection and wholeness. Spirituality, in my mind, is the connection between ourselves and forces bigger than ourselves. The connection between ourselves and what we understand as God or spirit or the universe. Spirituality is about our connection between our ourselves and nature. It is about the connection between ourselves and the people around us. We are not isolated in this world. We are part of a whole that's bigger than ourselves. “We” is bigger than “me.” Spirituality is about wholeness within ourselves, connecting the various parts of ourselves: our mind, body and our spirit, our emotions. When we bring all those together, that's an important part of spirituality. You mentioned the word isolation when you just answered that and nowadays we’re all kind of in isolation and our self-imposed isolation with the pandemic that's out there and we’re supposed to shelter in place and all that. How has the time of pandemic changed your understanding, or maybe helped your understanding of spirituality and how people deal with being alone and things like that? I think my time at home as a father with an autistic child really prepared me for the pandemic because I was at home with my daughter starting at about 18 months, and my daughter didn't really start speaking until she was 4. It wasn't clear that she would ever speak, so there was a lot of silence and isolation during that two- to three-year period, early on, and so I had to do a lot of that work of just getting to know myself, living with myself in silence. I think that's what a lot of people are going through right now during the pandemic. So many people have just been so busy with day-to-day life. They just haven't had time to look at the deeper questions like: Who am I? What do I want? What am I doing? Is this what I want to be doing? They haven't had time to listen to their emotions, they’ve oftentimes not listened to their bodies; they’ve ignored their bodies. Pretty much all the things that we've neglected really come up during this time of silence and isolation, and so that’s some of the struggles that people are having. And that's really what spirituality seeks to do, is to address that, to bring all that isolation into connection. Like the connection between people. People who are living together, whatever issues that have been there between them, is pretty hard to ignore right now because people are spending so much time with each other and there’s really no place to hide. They have to work it out. I think that's a part of spirituality as well, working out things that are broken, things that need healing. Do you think we’ll get back to a non-broken society? Our society's been broken your whole life, my whole life, all of our time in society as a whole has been fragmented and broken the entire time, but do you think that once we all get back together, do you think we’ll also be sitting around the fireplace singing “Kumbaya”? I hope that things will change and they will change for the better. I don't think it's going to be an overnight fix, but I also believe that many times in life, once we see something, we can't un-see it. Once we notice something you know we can't un-see that and so you know for example if people were ignoring their bodies and really letting themselves go to pot. And really, during this time start to say you know what I got take better care of myself. They start the exercise, they start to, first, it's kind of painful, whatever. But once they start to recognize, you know actually do feel better when I've paid attention to my body, that sort of thing I think that'll it's gonna be hard to un-see that on the other side. Likewise, if they this time repair some relationships, I think those relationships will stay repaired on the other side. The whole idea that we need each other is one of the things that has really encouraged me about this time is way has brought the world together what's happening in Italy really matters to what's happening here. What happened in China really matters to what here; in that regard, we’re all on the same team. I think I hope on the other side of this, we really do see each other differently. Are religion and spirituality. The same thing Steve. I think that religion is the way we practice spirituality or another way of putting that religion is how we as a group back to spiritualized and agreed-upon way that as a group we practice spirituality spirituality is kind of a personal thing, how I connect with God, how I connect with nature. Religion is basically a group of people kind of agree on certain ways that they practice to spirituality certain beliefs that they hold in common. My own understanding. It's a subset. So is it different or weird to be working for a Catholic institution as a Lutheran pastor. No, couple of reasons why. First of all, as Lutherans, going back to the beginning. Luther never sought to create a new church; he just saw some things in the Catholic Church that needed to reform. He always understood himself as a Catholic just kind of saying hey these things need to be reformed. In the decades and centuries that followed Luther a lot of the things that he saw as needing reform were reformed so I like Luther have always seen myself is valuing the church and the history of the church. The other piece of that is that I really see myself as working for the sisters, Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration and they are these wonderful women were so committed to their beliefs. They really do put their beliefs into practice. They really do believe in following Christ, serving the poor, making a difference in the world. To work for them is a tremendous honor. The things I do now are ministry in a very powerful way and I feel like I get to do things now in a way they're much more powerful than I ever got to do in the parish. Steve Spilde is one of the spiritual directors at the Franciscan Spirituality Center and I'm working with Steve putting together these podcasts. Why did you decide to do podcasting? This is something I've wanted to do for a long time. I wanted to collect the wisdom of our retired staff at the Franciscan Spirituality Center and collect the wisdom of the retired supervisors and the spiritual direction preparation program. I wanted to record their answers to the question What is spirituality? because that is such a big word. It's an important word, and yet I don't know if anyone has a complete answer to that question. So, I really, I wanted to hear from them and get that recorded and podcasts became a great way to do that. If we could do podcasts with them and not only would I have those recordings but I could share them with everybody else. I’m going to ask you that question: What is spirituality. I would say spirituality is about connection and wholeness, about connection to things within ourselves and outside of ourselves. Specifically, things that are bigger than ourselves. God is bigger than us. Nature is bigger than us. The whole group of the human family is bigger than us. The communities we live in are bigger than us. Spirituality is about that connection to those realities. And then also spirituality is about the way we are connected within ourselves, our physical self is connected to our brains or intellectual self is also connected to our spiritual self, our emotions, mind, body, spirit, being able to get those three things in balance. I know that our conversation is going to be the first in the series of the podcasts that that we’re producing but we have recorded a few of them already. I learned a lot just by sitting and listening and being a part of those conversations, being a fly on the wall. Did you learn anything listening to the fiest speakers that we had? One of the things I really enjoyed listening to them was hearing how their understanding of spirituality has evolved throughout their lives. For many of them growing up, spirituality was about reading prayers, was about sitting in worship, was about following the rules, then as they’ve gotten older, spirituality has been about connection, connecting with the presence that we call God and finding where that shows up in their own life, connecting to their own sense of calling following that sense of who they are letting that evolved. It’s been both fun and a privilege to hear them describe that story. One of the questions that you asked that I was surprised by the answer that I heard a couple different times is, has your vision of God changed. Has yours? Yes, it has. I think my vision of God is become more graceful, before I think I had a much more harsh vision of God, a more punishing vision of God. A guy was kind of vengeful God. I laughed because I think the Christmas song Santa Claus is coming to town closely matches my understanding of God better watch out you better not cry you better not pout and tell you why, Santa Claus is Coming to Town. Yeah that's kind of my understanding of God. God is sitting up there with his clipboard, keeping track of everything and I get all of these messages that God is love, and you should come to God in prayer but yet you didn’t want to get too close that God because you didn’t want to open yourself up because I was aware of a lot of bad stuff inside. I was ashamed of, I didn’t want God to see that. Now it's much more of an understanding that God created me. God knows me better than I know myself. These parts sometimes I label as shortcomings or weaknesses, God gave them to me and there's a purpose to it. And so God can use it for good. And so the trick is to get to know myself, get to know this person that God has created and really embrace that care for that show compassion to myself because that's I think that's what God wants me to do. Tell me a little bit about your work at the Franciscan Spirituality Center. I'm a spiritual director which means I sit with people and listen to them as they try to become the person that God has created them to be. So we talk about their life. Talk about what's working and what's not, what might work. What invitations they're receiving where they sense they're being called to move. We talk about that and I encourage them, I support them. I have empathy towards them. I encourage people to move forward to move along. That’s what I do as a spiritual director and then I serve as director of the spiritual direction preparation program basically a training program for spiritual directors and we help people learn to be spiritual directors, learn to sit with others and become better listeners, better companions. Why don’t you tell me little bit about that program? Well, it’s a three-year program, people come during the three years, they meet as a group three times a year. Learn how to be better listeners, and they do some homework. They meet with the supervisor four times a year, it's all focused on being better listeners, be able to sit someone and listen. But listening is not so much a skill that we teach. Rather, we help people discover what's blocking them from being a good listener. What I mean by that is, if we are sitting with people and listening to the stories that matter, oftentimes we’re listening to people talk about their emotions, what makes them scared, what makes them worried. People are willing to tell us those stories if will give them space to share. But if I'm not at peace with my own issues of grief and I'm talking to you, Bob, and you start to talk about the loss of parent and how that made you feel, I'm to get really uncomfortable in that conversation, and I'm going to change the subject or you’re going to sense my discomfort and you are going to shut down and you’re going to talk about something else. But if grief is the most important thing that you need to share, I need to be able to sit with you in that. I need to be at least comfortable enough in my own grief so that I can listen to you talk about your grief. So over the course of three years, we work with people as they practice listening to others and we really pay attention to what's coming up for them. Where is the resistance. Where are the unfinished issues that need to be dealt with, that's a lot of work we do in the spiritual direction program so we give people opportunities to practice. We do small group sharing, we teach spiritual tools that support people in this work. That's kind of a brief overview of the program. What are your thoughts when somebody says I'm not religious but I’m spiritual? I think that a lot of people have that label. Nowadays that's becoming a big label growing day by day. Oftentimes, what people then offered as religion perhaps wasn't helpful to them. A lot of times what religion offers are like for example the way I was taught religion growing up was say these prayers, read these sermons. These are a set of beliefs that you have to believe. All that was very much in my head, it was very intellectual. It was very head based. I've come to discover that my own spirituality has a big component of connection to my body, going for walks is important to me, being in nature really connects me to God, you know, if I do my best praying while I'm walking that doesn't fit well with being in church. I remember being a kid, it was you know, sit there, be quiet, be still, that was really hard for me and so a lot of times I think you know my resistance as kid to being in church, church wasn't the problem. It was how I had to be while I was in church. Is that funny that you became a minister after having those thoughts? Yeah, I think it kind of is and I think for a long time there was a lot of ambivalence about being a minister. There was part of me I think that had this real spiritual hunger, that felt a real draw and connection to serving as a minister but then there's the other part of me that that felt uncomfortable being in church, that felt uncomfortable being so still and you know well behaved. There was some resistance to that. That’s one of things I enjoy now about being a spiritual director, helping people figure out what will help them feel a deeper connection to God, what prayer styles might work best for them and that might be, say, art. That is not a way that works well for me but I know a lot of people their best praying is done while they are being creative or making something or drawing or something writing something that's really connects them inside and makes them feel closer to God's presence. In your words, what is a prayer? Prayer is connecting to God. That's another thing that shifted for me growing up, my understanding of religion, praying was us speaking to God, saying prayers, prayers that were given to us, say these words. God, give me a puppy. Make my grandma well. God, this is my laundry list of all the things I need; I just want you to know about it. Praying was very much me speaking to God. One of the things I’ve really learned from the sisters; they practice a contemplative form of prayer. So what that means is prayer as listening, they will often sit in silence and listen for God to speak to them, paying attention so oftentimes God speaks to us through our emotions, sometimes through our thoughts, sometimes through the voice of other people, sometimes through nature just sitting in silence and creating space to hear God speaking to us. What can we expect, Steve, for the episodes in the following months? What people can expect is some of the wisest people in this community, sisters, and people have been spending a long time learning how they best connect to God in hearing their stories. What's worked for them. What doesn't work for them. Times when they struggled, they found healing. They overcame the struggle, people been walking this journey for a long time. Hearing their story of what they've learned along the way. Steve, what do you hope to learn from the podcast? One is I hope to learn that I am not alone. I often struggle. I often wonder what it's all about. My expectation is I will hear these people that I respect very much who are very wise to talk about their own struggle. Talk about lessons they learned and I hope and expect that I will resonate with that. Wow. That's true in my life as well. I hope to find out that yes, even when I struggle, I'm still connected. There are still good people out there who could relate to that.