

UU SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

It used to be said of Unitarian Universalists that if the Holy Spirit burst into one of our gatherings like a lightning bolt, we'd either miss, ignore, or analyze it rather than experience or exult in it. Not so anymore!

While maintaining our fierce commitment to intellectual integrity and social compassion, we religious liberals are increasingly open to the presence and power of the “spirit”. And I say “hallelujah”, for we need to be an exuberant and spirited faith for our own good and the good of all those who visit our site.

Now, having said that, remember there's no definitive description of spirituality available, although plenty of religious folks have tried to package it in books and creeds, even on lampshades and bumper stickers—but it can't be done. The Spirit can be caught occasionally but never captured finally.

Hence, we Unitarian Universalists describe spirituality variously: seeing beyond walls, communion with divine mystery, an internal caress, listening to our higher or deeper consciousness, epiphanies in nature, or simply being fully awake. And don't forget the basic, literal meaning of *spiritus*: breath or wind. Consequently, we're spirited or spiritual whenever we catch our breath, when we receive surprise, graceful second winds during the course of our daily skirmishes, whatever the source of those second winds might be.

Think of every day as the time for slowly but surely catching your breath, moment by moment. In a world where we're buried with trivia and trauma, you and I covet moments, don't we, to catch our breath and renew our weary, worn beings?

Breathing is an activity destined for self-nourishment, but it also constitutes our main link with all existence. For the same air flows in and out of the lungs of all living beings.

The regular practice of conscious breathing has proven to reduce stress, blood pressure, and cholesterol levels. So why not, launch every morn by reciting some version of the mantra: “Breathing in, I calm my body and mind. Breathing out, I smile. Dwelling in the present moment, I know that this is the only moment”? Then spend the rest of the day celebrating that wisdom.

The testimony of folks who’ve meditated in the Hindu, Buddhist, and Sufi traditions, as well as Christian and Jewish mystics, is that breathing is at once ordinary *and* transcendent. To breathe deeply is a spiritual act, putting us in touch with the source of all existence. In breathing, our individual spirit partakes of the Infinite Spirit.

Having every one of the 75 trillion cells in our bodies breathing more slowly and harmoniously is decisive to a hale and hearty and holy life.

And friends, if you don’t care to use the term Spirit, fine with me, fine with us, find some other term to capture what I’ve just been describing.

So, I start this morning by saying that we can dull, even blunt, the spirit, but, as far as I’m concerned, we cannot erase it. The spirit—big **S** or small **s** spirit—is a presence and power that comes and goes in human life and refuses to be destroyed. “You can’t kill the spirit, it’s like the ocean, on and on, it waves on and on...”

Yes, I believe that an eternal spirit dwells deep within each of us. But honoring our own interior spirit is no easy trek in a culture that mass-produces external gurus. It’s

tough to remember that Krishna left a road map, Jesus left a road map, even Rand McNally left a road map, but you and I still have to travel the road ourselves.

It's like the woman who approached a Zen master to request final directions. She blurted out: "I've come, O Holy One, to learn the path. I've come to learn the path." The Zen master, silent for a moment, pointed to her with loving ferocity and said, "You are the path! You are the path!"

Yes, we need to learn how to be at home, truly at home, in our own interior castles (to use St. Teresa of Avila's phrase), to pay homage to our own, deep-down holy spirit, rather than keep handing our beings over to the keeping, however safe, of another fellow pilgrim. Now, I don't mind spiritual guides and directors, but spiritual gurus make me nervous, because they tend to swallow up our own growth. I recommend groups like the one here at UUFSD, where you're charged to shepherd your own spirit, even as you swap notes, along life's path.

Now the ways of spirituality, for a choice-making religion such as ours, are clearly manifold, as distinct as you and I. For we resist gurus peddling their special, esoteric discipline as the *only* way to inner truth and serenity. There are many disciplines; the routes are plural. As the Hindu scriptures read: "Truth is one; the wise call it by many names."

Unitarian Universalist minister, Vern Curry, phrased it similarly:

As the words we use differ, the paths we follow differ. Think of these differences this way. We each begin, as it were, on the rim of a wheel. Traveling by the spoke nearest our discipline of preference, we move toward a common center or hub. As we approach the hub, each spoke is nearer to another. And differences, large at first, at the rim, diminish as we approach the center.

Or as I like to put it: different spokes for different folks!

The devotional practices used to bring about a spiritual state are as diverse as gazing quietly at a candle flame; the mental repetition of a sound (mantra); following one's own breathing; keeping a journal; sauntering; praying; concentrating on the imagined sound of rainfall; composing erotic poetry; chanting out loud a ritual word or phrase; practicing tai chi or yoga; passively witnessing the flow of thoughts through one's mind; whirling in dance like the Sufis; reading sentiments from sacred literature and letting the meanings sift into one's heart.

On and on run the possibilities. As Unitarian Universalists we consider the holy to dwell, potentially, in every activity and moment of human existence. If your practice is regular, disciplined, and nourishing...if it ushers you into right relationship with life and opens your heart to its blessed mysteries, then your practice surely qualifies. Simply quit trying to compare yourself with Mother Theresa or Jeremiah.

Think of our UU crone, Billie Layton, from Kansas, who, although bed-bound due to a terrible fall, continues to express concern for her world by writing letters to legislators and educators to shape public policy. Billie writes of issues ranging from domestic violence to marriage equality. Billie refuses to let her condition "disable" her from being a caring and engaged citizen of her world. Letter-writing is Billie's main, but not only, spiritual discipline. She also prays.

Or as another spirited friend, hobbled with Parkinson's disease puts it: "Yes, I have Parkinson's, but it doesn't have me!"

And think of our UU brother from Racine, Wisconsin, Tony Larsen, who chooses a life of "voluntary simplicity" by doing without as many material items as possible, taking from life only what he truly feels he needs. Tony drives an old car, wears clothes

from second-hand shops, eats simply, and keeps a plain home. Because of his modest lifestyle, Tony's able to give almost half of his income away to institutions that serve his Unitarian Universalist dream of a world with less suffering and want.

The key for any of us is to choose, then embody, a spiritual discipline that brings us greater love of self *and* caring for neighbor and earth. But whatever spiritual path we may choose as Unitarian Universalists, one common quality is required: sweat. In short, every discipline requires utmost discipline; you can't just nibble and float, you need to focus and, yes, sometimes, grind. "Grace is proportionate to exertion" (Sathya Sai Baba).

The greatest spiritual fallacy of our era is that enduring enlightenment can be purchased for a price or garnered with minimal effort. The reality is that while at first a spiritual practice may bring mild highs or some relief from stress, there will come a time, as in the development of any skill, when there'll be a plateau. And we get bored or discouraged; perhaps, we even drop out.

So, I'm inviting you to be a spiritual plodder rather than an enthusiast. The old saw is accurate: "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." Or more precisely remain going. If you loathe times of dryness and staleness, then you ought to stay totally away from any spiritual practice, because they're filled, all of them, with deserts. The spiritual path is not for softies with meager staying power.

Therefore, whatever spiritual discipline you decide to pursue, I urge you to avoid crash programs and to mistrust the promise of quick results and ecstatic pleasures. Instead, your goal should be to stay with a sensible, integrated, and self-tailored process of spiritual centering for as long as it fits. And you will be surprised, and yes, frustrated,

and yes, surprised. But you know what? Spiritual muscles do grow, tone, and become more trim and limber. But not overnight, not overnight.

And now let me focus the rest of the sermon on my own primary spiritual activities: singing and chanting. Fast walking, writing, playing tennis and the guitar, and now performing magic are also nourishing spiritual endeavors for me, but no activity fills my spirit quite like music-making.

For me, singing certainly qualifies as a central spiritual practice in my life. For me singing's neither an art nor a science in any conventional or sophisticated sense, but more a spirited venture that evokes merriment and meaning from the known *and* mysterious recesses of my being. Singing invariably bathes me in radiance, then *inspirits* me to deliver mercy and love, throughout my days.

Whether you sing in an organized Fellowship choir, perform instrumentally in a community orchestra, or shyly limn melodies in a private corner of your house, if music-making lifts your spirit, it qualifies as a bona fide spiritual discipline. Your sense of rhythm, melody, or harmony may be limited, and the sounds that emanate from your throat may not always be euphonious, yet singing still stirs your inner being. If so, you're blessed, because you're aroused by an oft-ignored, under-valued spiritual activity right inside the temple of your own body. Hallelujah!

One's larynx comes with birth. Every one of us, you see, possesses our own encased instrument, to be employed at beck and call. And the human voice box isn't cumbersome to lug about like a saxophone or doesn't have to be borrowed like a friend's piano. Singing is physically accessible and financially real reasonable.

Eminently portable, we can sing wherever we live, move, and have our beings: whether running or gathered around a campfire, in the shower, during a sermon or social justice rally. No location is off-bounds to warble forth ones soul.

I possess a sacred corner at home where I regularly hole up to sing every genre of music from spirituals to country western, pop to semi-classical melodies, sometimes *a cappella*, other times accompanied by my guitar. And when I'm alone, more often than not, I find myself humming, whistling, chanting, and singing softly or loudly, slowly or swiftly.

In my view, an authentic robust spiritual discipline should furnish sufficient nutrients for all the regions of the Self: body, spirit, mind, soul, heart, and conscience. And singing does just that. As Paul says in the New Testament: "I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the mind also." That's certainly the balance I seek in choosing tunes that rouse my spirit and stretch my mind as well. But that's not all. Singing is an endeavor that fully engages one's body. As folk-singer Holly Near writes in her autobiography, *Fire in the Rain, Singer in the Storm*:

If I were to point at my voice, I wouldn't be pointing at my throat but rather at my eyes and cheeks and lips and jaw and shoulders and chest and arms and trunk and thighs and feet. This morning I sang a note, and I could hear my heartbeat in the note.

When we sing, not only do our vocal chords vibrate, but so do some of our bones. It's an in-body, full-body experience. And singing surely rouses the shadow sides of my soul—my rage, my fear, and my anguish, when I risk vocalizing not merely through my teeth but from the expansive reaches of my belly. And singing definitely sparks the

growth of one's conscience, for there's never been a social protest movement that hasn't been drenched in singing. Building justice is irrevocably linked with sharing joy.

Finally, singing for me is quintessentially related to my heart-growth. My bravery, my passionate commitments, my deepest love—all that enables me to remain a heartened voice in a bleak, oft-heartless world—is energized through singing.

To top it off, singing has equipped me with a life-mission when I retire from parish ministry. In addition to spending time with family, writing, playing tennis, performing magic, and travel, upon “graduation from formal work”, I envision myself entering public schools and nursing homes and singing songs from every corner and era to our children and elders, to bring balm both to weary souls and our beleaguered world.

And, as I often say, when I come to die, if I'm lucky enough, after I utter some good-byes and shed tears with my beloveds, I'd like to be alone, and as my voice is willing, sing some sort of thank you to God for a blessed journey beyond my imagining. I hardly know what special melody or medley I'll choose to sing, since there's so much music crowding my soul.

All I know is this: I beam at the prospect of being able to go out singing.

Tom Owen-Towle
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