

Sermon: Spirituality; A Wellspring for Commitment and Connection
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There is an incredible amount of tumult in our world today. There are the devastating wars in the Middle East and in the Ukraine and the most recent gun violence in our own country right close to home this time in Maine, to mention just a few things. What can we do to bolster our spirits to be able to have the strength to work for peace and justice in this world? What spiritual practices can sustain us? Somewhere in the midst of everything, there must be a time for silence and a time for peace.

In her book *There is a Season*, Sister Joan Chittister says, silence is the beginning of peace but silence has become “an endangered species in our time.” She writes,

In a previous era, “Silence was a given. Men went with the flocks up a lonely mountain for weeks and had to learn to be at peace with themselves. Women worked in the kitchens of the world grinding corn and plucking chickens, deep in thought, attuned to the things around them. Children picked in the fields in long, separated rows, learning young to hear birds and wind and water, weaving their fancies from the materials of the earth. Silence was a friendly part of life, not a deprivation, not a fearsome place to be.”¹

¹ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 23.

Chittister asserts that “if we are ever going to regain peace in our own souls...we have to recover silence. Without it, the prophetic vision of a world at peace will surely die.”² This morning I would like to explore with you the art of recovering silence and cultivating spirituality because spirituality is the wellspring that sustains our social justice work, strengthens our connections to each other, and allows us to build the dream of a peaceful world.

What I mean by spirituality is a connection to the mystery of life. Some may call this God, some may call it spirit, some may call it our common humanity, or some may call it nature. Cultivating spirituality is about connecting with *whatever* it is that you hold sacred. Think of a time in your life when you have had an awareness of the presence of the sacred.

For me, one such moment occurred at our 2012 Unitarian Universalist General Assembly meeting in Phoenix. That year the General Assembly was a Justice General Assembly in support of immigration rights. We had a worship service together where we heard testimonials about the human rights abuses suffered by immigrants.

² Ibid.

Then several thousand Unitarian Universalists boarded buses for a candlelight vigil at Sheriff Joseph Arpaio's Tent City Jail where prisoners threatened with deportation were crowded together on wooden platforms in the 110-degree heat.

As we pulled into the Tent City area that night, bright lights glared in the darkness and it was difficult to see. We could make out rows of police lining the road and a crowd of counterdemonstrators waiving their fists and shouting. On our bus one voice started singing softly and others joined in, "When I breathe in, I'll breathe in peace. When I breathe out, I'll breathe out love." There in the hot dark Arizona night, a spiritual presence greater than any one of us sustained us for this public witness.

To experience such moments amid all the turmoil and oppression in this world we need to find a time for silence and a time for peace. Especially in these days when the horrors of war are emblazoned on our minds, we need to renew our spirits. Spirituality provides the essential grounding necessary for work for social justice and peace. In this day and age many of us seem to have lost touch with the discipline of spiritual practice that has sustained those who have worked for justice throughout history.

We tend to think there is some big divide between practicing spirituality on the one hand and social activism on the other. But there does not need to be an either/or between spirituality and social activism. The two are actually interdependent. Cultivating spirituality through silence does not in any way mean that we remain silent on the important issues of our time. Theologian Leonora Tubbs Tisdale advocates “a spirituality for activism... a spirituality that can undergird, empower, and sustain us in our prophetic witness in the world.”³ There is a time for silence and a time for peace in order to more fully engage with the world.

In addition to sustaining us for social justice work, greater attention to spirituality can also help improve our connections to each other within our congregations. Practicing spirituality is something that we can share and do together. Unitarian Universalism can sometimes be viewed as a cold, sterile religion. It seems to me that our faith needs to be more than simply the embodiment of freedom, reason, and tolerance.

Spirituality is a critical dimension that is sometimes found to be missing from our congregations. Amidst intellectualism, can we consider the premise that what is *not* rational is *not* necessarily irrational?⁴

³ Ibid., 22.

⁴ Robert L. Hill, *The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry: Saving the World Ten at a Time* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2003), 5.

Spirituality adds a warmth and depth to our interactions and our worship services that can help make our congregations more welcoming. Creating bonds through spirituality can help reach out to others who may be different from us, who come from different classes, different age groups, different cultures, and different ethnic groups. In order to have broader appeal and encourage diversity, changes may be required in the way we worship. This may involve greater spirituality or having different kinds of worship services.

Greater spirituality can also promote greater depth in our relationships with each other. In the words of one minister, “Congregations that practice together stay together and grow together.”⁵ There is a time for silence and a time for peace in order to nurture community.

So, a big part of the answer to the question of the *whys* of spirituality is that it sustains us for work for justice and peace and encourages greater inclusiveness and fellowship in our congregations. In looking at the *how to's* of spirituality, the world's religions provide many variations of spiritual practices such as Buddhist meditation or Hindu mantras. Wisdom from the world's religions is one of the primary sources our Unitarian Universalist faith.

⁵ Ken Beldon, “The Faith of the Future Is Formational,” Minns Conference 2011, <http://minnslectures.org/2011Talks/beldonTalk.pdf>.

In addition, we have a strong tradition of spirituality within Unitarian Universalism itself that we can draw from.⁶ Looking at the 19th century forbearers of our faith we see the concept of self-culture, the idea that it is not only possible but it should be our highest obligation to grow our souls. William Ellery Channing preached that the human soul has a character of infinity in that the mind has unlimited potential.⁷ He defined self-culture as, “the care which every man owes to himself, to the unfolding and perfecting of his nature.”⁸

So how can we go back to our roots to form a Unitarian Universalist spiritual practice for today? Our nineteenth century forbearers adopted a form of meditation that grew out of an early Christian practice called *lectio divina* or divine reading of the scriptures. This involved four steps—reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. Ralph Waldo Emerson called it provocative reading, a process to encourage transformation and new ways of thinking and acting.⁹

⁶ Rev. Kathryn Ellis, “Practice, Practice, Practice: Our Heritage of Unitarian Universalist Practice,” Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration, November 14, 2010.

⁷ William Ellery Channing, “Likeness to God,” (1828), <http://www.americanunitarian.org/likeness.htm>.

⁸ William Ellery Channing, “Self-Culture,” September 1838, <http://www.americanunitarian.org/selfculture.htm>.

⁹ Galen Guengerich, Sermon, “THE PRACTICE OF FAITH” All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City, March 13, 2011.

Rev. Galen Guengerich, the Minister at All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in New York City where I was once a member, has developed a contemporary spiritual practice based on this model.¹⁰ All members of the congregation are invited to join in what he calls a “Common Meditation for All Souls.” Each week a set of daily readings is sent out by email. I would now like to guide you through a meditation based on Rev. Guengerich’s method.

The meditation text we will use for today is printed in your bulletin so you’ll need to get that out now. Let’s start by getting comfortable and taking a few deep breaths. The first step is to read the text several times including out loud. Let’s all read it out loud together.

Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature—daily to be shown matter, to come into contact with it—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The solid earth! The actual world! The common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?

—Henry David Thoreau

¹⁰ Ibid.

Now reflect on the reading. Note a word or phrase that catches your attention. Think about what it provokes in you.

Next, think of an intention. What purpose does your reading and reflection suggest for you this day. Determine an intention that you can feasibly accomplish.

Finally in contemplation, expand your awareness from intention to gratitude. Think of what you are especially grateful for this day.

End your practice with a benediction such as, “This is the day we are given; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

So how did that feel? There are many types of spiritual practices. This is just one. I would encourage you to begin or to deepen your own spiritual practice. Whatever type you choose, the key word is practice.

Swedish researcher K. Anders Ericsson in his studies of expertise in music, chess, and sports concluded that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to become an expert.¹¹ I would venture to say that spirituality is no exception. If you don’t practice it, you won’t get good at it and it won’t be available to you when you need it most. There is a time for silence and a time for peace in our daily lives.

¹¹ Ericsson KA, Krampe RTh, Tesch-Romer C. “The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance,” *Psychol Rev.* 1993;100:363– 406.

In addition to cultivating spirituality individually, spirituality can be nurtured in small groups. Many larger Unitarian Universalists congregations have small group ministries where people to examine spiritual and philosophical topics, get to know each other better, share life experiences, and have fun. The intent is to appreciate and foster the spiritual aspect of our lives. Meetings usually start with a ritual such as a chalice lighting and include a check-in where members share what is on their hearts and minds. Members minister to each other and the wider world through developing caring relationships.

I would contend that actually every group in a congregation should be designed this way. Every committee whether it has to do with facilities or finance or social justice or religious education or personnel can gain from greater spiritual grounding. Every meeting can benefit from beginning with a ritual and a check-in period of sharing.

Unitarian Universalist minister Erik Wikstrom in his book *Serving with Grace* argues that lay leadership should be a spiritual practice. I invite all of you here to consider how lay leadership can be a spiritual practice for you. Are some of you feeling burned out by your church work?

Wikstrom says, “Imagine how your work for the congregation might be transformed if you approached it primarily as your spiritual practice, and secondarily as helping the congregation fulfill its mission.”¹²

This is not to say that tasks are not important. Rather, as Wikstrom points out, “every spiritual tradition humanity has ever devised teaches the same lesson—that *how* we do what we do matters far more than *what* we do.”¹³ We are a faith tradition and not a corporation. Our goal is to embody community. So, I would urge you to pay greater attention to spiritual practices both individually and within every group in your congregation. Think about what this may mean for you.

Spirituality can help infuse efforts for social justice and congregational work with greater depth and meaning. Spirituality can create greater fellowship that will sustain our ministry to each other and to the wider world. Let us find a time for silence and a time for peace. Then as Unitarian Universalists we can go out and change the world.

May it be so and blessed be.

¹² Erik Walker Wikstrom, *Serving with Grace: Lay Leadership As a Spiritual Practice*, (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2010), 150.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 154.

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