

**9-30-18**

**What's Spirit & Why Practice?**

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A friend, who served a very large church, shared that each time one of their worship associates extinguished the chalice at the end of service, he merely said “Remember - We’re all going to die.” He was a Buddhist monk – and meditating on death is a regular practice for many Buddhists – but my friend said it always set her aback. While it’s true, we all are going to die –having just finished an uplifting, inspiring service, she felt it kicked the wind out of her sails to have this reminder completely out of context.

But it is funny. And while it feels a little harsh it is a good reminder to help us pay attention to the here and now. Especially since our whole society conspires to distract us from this undeniable fact of life. It tells us: Exercise – eat healthy - take lots of vitamins – see your doctor regularly – and keep busy. Keep really, really busy.

In doing so it becomes very easy to forget that none of us know exactly when we will hit our expiration date. We only have a limited number of breaths, of heartbeats, of cups of coffee. The life we are living right now will come to an end – and if we’re lucky – we will have enjoyed it. We will have appreciated most of those breaths – noticed the sunrises, paid attention to the times spent with loved ones. We will have lived full and rich lives – like our UU ancestor Henry David Thoreau who said “I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life.” ... Well, maybe not the Spartan-like but you get the picture. We want to be present to life during our short sojourn on planet earth.

It’s the topic today because I know how easy it is for me to get so busy doing life stuff that I forget to be aware of living. Have you ever gotten something you really love to eat – maybe a big bowl of ice cream. You’ve saved up the calories and you give yourself permission to really enjoy this treat. But, as you begin eating, something catches your attention. Maybe something on TV – or an article you’ve been meaning to read. Whatever it is, suddenly you’ve hit the bottom of you bowl and your spoon is clinking on empty plate. You’ve eaten the ice cream. It’s gone. But you missed the entire experience. All those calories, consumed – very little enjoyment. I hate when I do that.

I want to be more like Parker, our dog. She loves these chicken flavored treats called Nubbins. Often, if we’re in the kitchen, she’ll sit staring intently at us and then glancing up at the treat cupboard – you know – up there. And when we get out one of these treasured delicacies, she’ll happily run through her entire repertoire of tricks – all in a row – just to get her Nubbin. But even when she gets it, the joy doesn’t stop. She runs around the house looking for the perfect place to enjoy it.

She runs upstairs. She comes back downstairs. If for some reason the cat is blocking her path to the steps, she’ll even cry a bit because she can’t have the full experience. Eventually, she tosses it up on the couch, rolls around on it, pushes it around with her nose and finally, finally – settles in and happily crunches down the fully appreciated treat. We have bags of them in the cupboard. It gives us as much joy to watch her enjoy her treat as it does her to get it. Wouldn’t it be great if we could appreciate life like that? I mean, people would think we are crazy – but – wouldn’t it be worth it to know such satisfaction and joy?

Spiritual leaders for eons have been teaching ways to slow down, to shut off the non-stop commentary in our heads, the criticisms, the regrets, the comparisons, the judging. All those things which obscure the

goodness right in front of us. Psychologists tell us that living in the moment can help us find the happiness that humans are always chasing after.

Our reading this morning described the way we develop a sense of separation as we grow up – how children know themselves as fully immersed in reality. Kids are fully present – not judging themselves or feeling isolated from the world around them. But as we grow, we develop our ego self – our self outside of the world around us. This is healthy in many ways. It helps us take responsibility for our actions. It allows us to be a self that can be in relationship with other people. Many good things flow from a strong sense of self.

But – there’s always a but – the shadow side of knowing ourselves as separate is forgetting our connection to the whole of life. Forgetting that we belong here. We are not only enough - but are the perfect ‘us’ in this moment.

It is what the Adam & Eve story was trying to get at on a metaphorical level. When humans stepped into consciousness, when we saw ourselves as “other” than nature, we lost that deep sense of communion and rightness in this reality. It’s not a sin in that we are doing anything wrong – but it is a very real consciousness that has consequences in the world. When we believe ourselves to be outside of nature, we are free to exploit it, to ignore the suffering of fellow beings, to destroy, at will, for our own comfort or misguided understanding of what is important.

Developing an ego allowed us to explore the world and understand it in a whole new way – but it also gave us permission to destroy our environment by not realizing that we are of the earth and it is us. So, while our ego – our sense of ourselves as separate autonomous individuals – is good, it is not enough.

Humans, as a whole, have swung way too far into idolizing the ego self, forgetting that we are inseparable from the fabric of reality around us. But this forgetting is painful. It leaves us with a hole in our psyches that we are constantly trying to fill. We fill it with food. By reaching for power. By acquiring. By doing any number of good things to excess in an attempt to fill that deep sense of not enough-ness. But it’s like we’re standing in a river, dying of thirst. Everything we need is already here. All we really need to do is to remember – to pay attention to the beauty, the connectedness, the fullness of creation in which we live and breathe and have our being.

And how do we do that, you ask? Oh yeah – it’s spiritual practices Sunday. When we pause our worried minds, we are able to realize this moment, this very moment in front of us, is always full of possibility. When we can spend time outside – or even watching out a window – we slow down to the rhythm of the natural world and remember our place in it.

Since I’ve begun a Qi Gong practice this spring, I stand facing my front yard as I practice – and I’ve been amazed at what I see by simply looking out there for a half an hour each day. My yard is teeming with activity that I never noticed before as I ran out to jump into the car. There can be up to a half dozen squirrels running up and down the trees, picking things out of the grass, chasing each other around the yard. Birds, rabbits, an occasional coyote or deer. It’s a jungle out there. I never knew – or would have guessed.

Unitarian Universalists have adopted the poet Mary Oliver as our unofficial UU poet laureate – even though she’s not a UU. Her poetry describes a life which has been spent paying attention - seeing nature in ways that opens up the depth and connectedness of the world. “[Spirit](#) likes to dress up like this: 10 fingers, 10 toes, shoulders and all the rest...”

But some folks – maybe even some in this room – are saying “wait, wait, wait a minute missy” (quietly under their breath) “I don’t believe in anything supernatural.” I had a dear friend at another church I attended who said; “spirits are ghosts – and I don’t believe in ghosts!”

I don’t believe in anything supernatural either – but I do believe that the natural world is more mysterious, complicated, and connected than science used to tell us. The more we know, the more we know what we don’t know. I also believe that words can get in our way if we let them – and most important truths in life are found in metaphor anyway.

The online etymology dictionary says spirit is:

"animating or vital principle in man and animals," ... directly from Latin spiritus "(respiration, and of the wind), breath; ...hence "inspiration; breath of life," hence "life;"<sup>i</sup>

Spirit: the animating principle – that which signifies life instead of dead matter. It is that connection we share with all living things – everything made up of the dust of the stars – and animated with the breath of life. There may be ghosts – I’m not willing to weigh in on that here – but what can’t be denied is that the one element we share during our time here is that energy exchange that we call breath.

Now - we can be alive – or we can live. What we bring to it makes all the difference. On our screens today, we see ample proof that Shakespeare’s Macbeth got it right – life does indeed seem “a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.” But if we look through the lens of spirit, we see many hurting, swollen egos, blindly pursuing power without any understanding of their connection to the whole of life. There’s a sociological saying; “hurt people hurt people” and it’s never been more evident. So much angst, so much lashing out, so many ways the world is being damaged by human beings inability to remember that they are connected to the whole of life. It’s frightening, overwhelming, disheartening, if you allow yourself to be drawn into the reality we see played out in the news.

But it’s not the deepest truth. The deeper reality is that we all share in that breath of life – we are all enlivened by spirit. Our folks in Washington need a Buddhist reminding them at the end of each legislative session that “we’re all going to die” - that this life is temporary and precious and interconnected.

Maybe they won’t remember. But we can. Which is where practice comes in. Spirit is that which connects all living beings – and practices are those things which help us to remember that life-affirming truth. When we remember, then we can act from that place and help to lessen the “sound and fury” so prevalent in the world. Spiritual practices come in many different varieties, developed throughout the centuries by people who figured this *ego, distraction, separation, illusion* thing out and wanted to help others to be present and engaged during this incredibly short span of life.

How many people here have regular spiritual practices? How many feel guilty that they should be doing spiritual practices more regularly? I heard a teacher say that a Buddhist is someone who constantly feels guilty that they aren’t meditating enough. I think sometimes we make it too hard for ourselves. And many practitioners out there don’t help. We’re told there’s a “right” way to do many of these things, which just ante’s up the feeling of not enough-ness rather than smoothing the way for remembering connection and wholeness. The point is to remember who we are, so we can live that reality. So, what works for you, whatever that is, is the best spiritual practice.

Over the years I've tried dozens of different things with varying results. I've prayed. I've done different kinds of chanting. I've said the rosary. I've done yoga. I've done sitting, walking, guided, music & reclining meditation. I've done drumming... I'm sure the list could go on and on. Recently, I began a Qi Gong meditation, which has mostly stuck because it's part of the Spiritual Warriors program that I'm in. I am responsible to other people, so I've kept at it. I'm getting a lot out of it and have to admit that my life is fuller, more peaceful and more energized since I've taken it up. And I'll share that I was introduced to Qi Gong about 15 years ago and thought it was the silliest thing I'd ever seen. (Demonstrate a bit) Now, at a different age, with a different perspective, I appreciate what it offers me.

Today, at 2 pm, we're offering an introduction to a spiritual practice that I've never tried before called yoga nidra. Deepti Suri, founder of [Yoga Habitat](#) says:

The Deep Relaxation method, also called Yoga Nidra, is a powerful technique to reduce an individual's physical and emotional stress;... you will be trained to sleep with 'full awareness' for a short duration. ...[and] guided to use this awareness of your mind to relax.

Some folks here have recommended this practice to me so I'm excited to see how it works. Everyone is invited & if too many people come, we'll move over to Joshi Chapel so don't use worry about overcrowding as your excuse not to come! Bring a mat or blanket – or both – so you'll be comfortable. There is no physical movement, so the hardest thing will be getting up off the floor! Over the next few months, we'll be offering different spiritual practice introductions each month – so if this doesn't call to you maybe something else will. You might want to try all of them and see which fits your particular and unique incarnational needs.

Last week at Gerry Shipton's memorial, we heard the words of William Yeats advising us to not to fear death, but to welcome its lessons. He wrote: "Death informs life. ... it is only because we conceive of life that we know we must taste it lingeringly, try every flavor and nuance, drink in experience while we can. ..." He ends by saying "for you lie in nature like a heartbeat."

Each of us exists within the beating heart of nature – the breath of life. So – let's pay attention and act from that place of deep knowing. Missing the experience of a delicious bowl of ice cream because we're distracted is one thing, but missing wonder, awe & connection is something else entirely.

Don't get to the end of your life and finding yourself clinking your spoon on an empty bowl. However you find your way, whatever your practice, know that you are deeply connected to an awesome and limited-time experience. Find a way to remember that today - and every day – **Amen & Blessed Be.**

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.etymonline.com/word/spirit>