

“Practice and Possibility”

Rev. Lynn Harrison
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
Online Service via Zoom
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We've all heard the joke.

A tourist rushes up, all flustered and in a hurry,
on the streets of New York City.

She stops the first person she sees and says,
"Please, help me! How do I get to Carnegie Hall?"

The older woman simply smiles and says:

"Practice, practice, practice."

Thinking of the story Norman told earlier, we might imagine that wise
woman is herself carrying an instrument case.

That perhaps she is continuing to practice,
on her own way to Carnegie Hall...or on her way
toward a state of mind that requires no Carnegie Hall at all.

I'd venture to say that's a place many of us would like to arrive at...
though we'll probably never get there, and that's okay.

That said, a commitment to spiritual growth holds out that possibility.

For many of us, that growth calls for spiritual practice in some form.

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Here's another story, also from the Zen Buddhist tradition.

It's retold by Jack Kornfield in his book *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness and Peace*.

“During a time of war, a certain general led his troops through province after province, overrunning whatever stood in his path.

The people of one town, knowing that he was coming and having heard tales of his cruelty, all fled into the mountains.

The general arrived in the empty town with his troops and sent them out to search the town.

Some of the soldiers came back and reported that only one person remained: a Zen priest.

The general strode over to the temple, walked in, pulled out his sword and said, “Don’t you know who I am? I am the one who can run you through without batting an eye.”

The Zen master looked back and calmly responded, “And I, sir, am one who can be run through without batting an eye.”

The general, hearing this, bowed and left.¹

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When it comes to spiritual practice, this might be seen as another kind of "Carnegie Hall"--

A place of release from our usual fears and concerns,
and our completely normal and human desire for comfort.

¹ Jack Kornfield, *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness and Peace* (New York: Bantam, 2002), 187.

These are Buddhist stories, and yet all of the major religions recognize the value of spiritual practice in some form...whether they be prayer to a God figure as is true for the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam...or an openness to Being itself, with no theistic understanding, as is true in Buddhism.

Every faith tradition recognizes the importance of spiritual practice--and all spiritual practices provide many of the same benefits, even when they're not tied to a specific religious faith.

Wayne Teasdale was on the board of the Parliament of World Religions, an annual interfaith event that was held in Toronto a few years ago.

In his book, "The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions," he writes:

"All spiritual practices are transformative, be they contemplative forms of prayer, meditation and sacred reading; a restful, active participation in liturgy and ritual; music and chanting; yoga and certain martial arts; hiking and even walking.

They change us within and make this inner change consistent with our actions in the world and our daily lives."²

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In Unitarian Universalism, our 3rd Principle promotes "acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations."

² Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions*, (New World Library: Novato CA, 2001), 115.

As well, the living tradition which we share draws from many sources, including "direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life."

This wonderful First Source can be seen as an invitation to personal spiritual practice and, indeed, it could be a working definition of it.

Our sources also include wisdom from the world's religions, Jewish and Christian teachings from our Judeo-Christian heritage, and spiritual teachings of Earth-centered religions.

All of these recommend regular spiritual practice in some form, whether it be personal or collective prayer, sitting in meditation, or giving thanks each day for the plants, animals, water and earth.

And yet, I think it's fair to say that many Unitarian Universalists struggle with the idea of spiritual practice.

Because our Principles don't explicitly use words such as "contemplation" or "prayer" we might wonder what place spiritual practice holds in our lives as UUs.

We might hesitate to use religious language, or to speak of our personal experience with the mystical dimension of life, or with a higher power.

We might fear not fitting in, or being judged by others.

Again, that Third Principle, along with our Sources, can offer encouragement.

Spirituality is an integral part of Unitarian Universalism, and we are fortunate, in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning, to be able to choose the spiritual practices that are most meaningful and appropriate for us.

Our UU congregations, unlike many communities, can provide encouragement to spiritual practice while also respecting and affirming our spiritual diversity.

In doing so, we might--just might!--be able to overcome the tendency toward division and conflict that afflicts so many human communities.

On the other hand, when we don't encourage spiritual practice in all its forms, we deny ourselves access to the deep wells of support that can help us prevent the kinds of harm and injustice that we want to avoid.

As Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church wrote, the wisdom of the world can be seen as a cathedral, with light shining in through many windows.³

Spiritual practice offers us those windows.

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About 20 years ago, an organization called The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society created a helpful image⁴ that shows the wide range of spiritual practices available to human beings.

It suggests that there are many possibilities for practice... and that all of them spring from the common roots of awareness, connection and communion with life.

It affirms that there are many branches of spiritual practice.

³ Forrest Church, "The Cathedral of the World" in *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1998), 81-96.

⁴ CMind. (2021). The Tree of Contemplative Practices [Illustration]. The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. <https://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree>

That's something we've no doubt already observed,
in our own lives and the lives of others.

There are creation practices including music, singing, poetry and
art-making...

Movement practices such as yoga, tai chi, dance and walking...
Stillness practices including silence and centering,
quieting the mind...

Activist practices such as justice work, vigils and marches...

Generative practices such as prayer and loving-kindness meditation...

Ritual and cyclical practices: ceremonies and rituals based on religious
traditions, or Indigenous practices such as vision quests and sweatlodges...

and finally, relational practices such as deep listening,
storytelling and journaling.

After listing all of these, I invite us to simply gaze at the tree
as a balanced and beautiful whole, recognizing how each of these spiritual
practices are connected as one...and rooted in communion, connection,
and awareness.

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You'll notice that we've experienced several of these spiritual practices
already in today's worship service.

For example storytelling, silence, contemplative poetry, ritual.

Some of you might also be realizing that you've been engaged in spiritual
practice without even knowing it!

The main thing to notice is that all of them are worthwhile--

all are worthy and good--and in my view all are essential to the living Tree of Life or Interdependent Web of which we all are a part.

Different practices appeal to different people, depending on our personality type, our circumstances, even our stage of life...and a practice that might fit for you at one time may not be appropriate for another.

But what's important, it seems to me, is that each of us nurture our personal connection with the source...

With the "Ground of Being" as Paul Tillich put it, which is all about awareness, communion and connection.

That we nurture within ourselves...within our physical bodies... the awareness of being deeply intertwined with Life... indeed, being a beloved and essential part of it.

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You'll notice that the Tree of Contemplative Practice does not include thinking...even though that's something we humans, and perhaps especially Unitarians, love to do.

Instead we're called to something "beyond knowing" as the poet Mary Oliver puts it...and to enter that state through our senses.

You'll notice the emphasis on embodied experience: breathing...centering...deep listening...dancing...

So many ways of nurturing a humble and loving relationship with life which naturally extends into a life of kindness and service, in whatever form that may take for us.

When we feel deeply and fully connected to life--
held in the unconditional embrace that is echoed in our Universalist
heritage and in our First Principle,
that affirms the inherent worth of each of us--

We can more often, and more consistently,
extend that embrace to others...

Keeping all people in the circle of love...
and refraining from our impulse to "other" others,
and to reject or condemn them.

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The Reverend Dr. Thandeka, the highly-respected Black UU theologian,
describes spiritual practice as "sacred time."

Emphasizing the embodied, physical aspect of spiritual practice,
she writes:

"Sacred time is the opposite of fleeting time.

Fleeting time is the kind of time in which we are distracted,
racing around and trying to catch up as we fall further behind;

It's working at the computer while a friend talks to us on the phone.

By contrast, sacred time is noticing a shift of tone
in a person's voice and asking what's wrong;

It's full presence, paying attention in the moment.

It's what happens in covenant groups [or other forms of small group
ministry] when we discover how to stay present to life again."

(I love that phrase, "when we discover how to stay present to life again.")

She goes on:

"Sacred time is biological time,
the time our bodies take to act or think or feel.

When we pay attention to biological time,
we focus on the science and the art of spiritual practice."⁵

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Earlier I quoted Wayne Teasdale as saying, "Spiritual practices change us [from] within and make this inner change consistent with our actions in the world and our daily lives."

I don't know for sure whether commitment to spiritual practice automatically leads to a life of greater service or contribution--

But I believe that it does hold out that possibility,
in a way that perhaps nothing else can.

I believe it can stretch us, to become people who can
"be run through by life" while still responding with love and kindness...

I believe it encourages us to be people who do not need to
"get to the Carnegie Hall" of fame or wealth or prestige or constant
comfort.

I believe it invites us toward the possibility of letting go...
of releasing that which no longer serves...
which may for some of us may include the need to be right,
or the need to win an argument.

⁵ Thandeka, "Healing Community," in UU World, Jan/Feb 2005
<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/small-group-ministry-creates-sacred-time>

It might encourage, instead, the ability to stay fully present,
even in times of conflict or discomfort,
to keep our hearts open in ways that generate more love
instead of more division.

Spiritual practice holds the possibility that we might grow into a fuller
embrace of life: a deeper "feeling with" all others.

"Feeling with" is the meaning of the word "compassion."

Spiritual practice invites into the deep loving acceptance
promised by our First Principle...

And it offers us the possibility,
moment by moment and breath by breath,

To extend that love to all others,

In the circles we find ourselves,
In the challenges we face...
and in the brief time that we have.

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Many of you know that singing and songwriting are
among my spiritual practices...

and that I often experience them as a form of prayer.

Sometimes when a song arrives,
it's actually written as a prayer, as this one was.

I hope that it might reveal, in some small way,
the connection between spiritual practice and right action.

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Song: "Help Me Do the Next Right Thing"

Lynn Harrison (SOCAN, 2021)

Help me, won't you help me do the next right thing
Help me put my fingers on the next bright string.
Every day my list grows long with songs to sing.
Help me do the next right thing.

Help me put some pieces back into their place.
I've been looking for the ones that I misplaced.
But when I quiet down my mind and slow my pace
I can put some pieces back in place.

What if everyone could do the next right thing?
Like the creatures in the blue and on the wing.
What a change might come around, what brand new spring?
Help me do the next right thing.

When I do the thing that brings me close to you
I can find the theme and I can follow through.
It's an old familiar song, it's nothing new.
The best thing is still being here with you

Help me, won't you help me do the next right thing.
Help me know what step to take, what gift to bring.
It might seem like nothing, but it's everything.
Help me do the next right thing.