

Reading:

...In most religious traditions faith is not about belief but about practice. Religion is not about accepting 20 improbable propositions before breakfast, but about doing things that change you. It is a moral esthetic, an ethical alchemy. Yet, if you behave in a certain way you will be transformed. The myths and laws of religion are not true because they conform to some metaphysical, scientific or historical reality, but because they are life-enhancing, they tell you how human nature functions. But, you will not discover these truths unless you apply these myths and doctrines to your own life, and put them into practice. The myths of the hero, for example, were not meant to give us information about Prometheus or Achilles, or for that matter, about Jesus or the Buddha. Their purpose is to compel us to act in such a way that we bring out our own heroic potential. I have discovered that the religious question is not about discovering the truth or the meaning of life but about living as intensely as possible in the here and now. The idea is not to latch onto some super-human personality to discover how to get to heaven but to discover how to be fully human....God or Nirvana is not some optional extra tapped onto human nature. Men and women have the potential for the divine and are not complete until they realize it in themselves. A passing Brahman priest once asked the Buddha whether he was God, a spirit or an angel. None of these the Buddha replied. I am awake. By activating a capacity that lay dormant in undeveloped men and women he seemed to belong to a new species. In the past my own practice of religion had diminished me. Whereas true faith I now believe should make you more human than before.

Karen Armstrong, "The Spiral Staircase"

“Spiritual Practice 101” by Rev. Bill Graves October 2013

Good afternoon! It’s good to be here. I am rediscovering the Fauntleroy Ferry after having crossed over the Mukilteo Ferry from my home on Whidbey Island.

I am grateful to Susan Dearth and her persistence in asking me to come here. I had many conflicts while I was serving Tacoma full time. But now I am able and delighted to do what I can to support this effort in extension of our Unitarian Universalist faith here on the Peninsula.

This afternoon, and when I return on Saturday morning in two weeks, I will at Susan’s request be talking about probably the slipperiest yet most persistent topics possible, Unitarian Universalist spirituality.

When it comes forth to UU spirituality, questions come forth much faster than answers. Does it involve something greater than yourself? Can you come by it naturally, or do you have to work at it? Is a spiritual person different from a person who is simply kind, wise and reflective? Or is it the same thing? Or, do we even have to use the word?

I reflected during the past week on the title of my talks to you: “Spiritual Practice 101 and 102.” I reflected a little embarrassed, actually, about how presumptuous those titles sound. It sounds like I will be declaring quite definitively what spirituality is and how to get some. You would be best advised to be very cautious about anyone who purports to make such a claims.

There are not many certitudes about spirituality except that it surely will surely flummox those who want to reify it; to include it among things we can weigh or measure; to try to nail its essence to a tree anymore than you could do that with music or art or poetry. Yet,

let me say that over the years I have noticed some people who just seem “spiritual” and to most others around them. They just do. I notice. I think many of you notice. What is it?

What is it about them? Here are a couple of observations about what I have noticed about such people. I hope they help your own reflection. First, the people that I sensed had spirituality seemed anchored, or grounded. In other words they seemed to have an inner life to connect to, draw upon, sustain them and offer meaning.

Secondly, I’d say they had perspective about what really matters. They could get out of themselves a little, and aren’t so quick to get ruffled, irritated---unless there is a principle or religious value at stake—and then they take action.

Third, they have a love for others and life in general that just seems to radiate. They’re good eggs—it feels good to be in their presence.

Having sketched for you an ideal destination let us cautiously, or boldly if you prefer, go back to our reading from Karen Armstrong. Karen Armstrong is not a theologian I encountered at Theology School I attended, Seattle University. I suspect she is too popular, perhaps too progressive and insufficiently opaque for that. I first learned about her from UU lay persons. Three summers ago I heard her in person at our UU General Assembly in 2011. The reading I offered you from her book, Spiral Staircase, resonated deeply with me: “Religion is not about accepting 20 improbable propositions before breakfast, but about doing things that change you.... In the past my own practice of religion had

diminished me. Whereas true faith I now believe should make you more human than before.”

I’ve spent, and maybe some of you have spent much of your lives trying to come to terms with the existential cry of what do I have left after I could no longer recite with integrity words like: “I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,... he ascended into heaven, ...” etc.

There are many wonderful persons, who find enormous sustenance in grounding their faith in the Apostles Creed. I have simply come to the conclusion that I must have been born with gene 54b684, the “I just can’t” gene. Instead, I got gene 54b685 which I guess is the UU gene. The UU gene longs for a spirituality related to our everyday lives; living as fully and abundantly as possible. Its about living in a way that is satisfying to our spirits, to our deepest selves, to our souls, without having to make a leap of faith that we just can’t make.

An old friend of mine once referred to a New Age Spirituality class as “Advanced Ooey Goey.”

But, joking aside, what I want to ask you to consider is a spirituality that doesn’t require a leap of faith, or a supernatural presence; doesn’t require you to “accept 20 improbable propositions before breakfast.”

Here are several definitions of “spirituality” that say the same things in slightly different ways. I’m going to turn to Rebecca Parker first, the Dean of Starr King, one of two Unitarian Universalist theology schools. If I’m looking for a liberal religious outlook or a quote, Rebecca and one of her four books is one of the places I will look first. Anyway, to Parker, spirituality is concerned with moving from a place of existential

isolation toward communion with the greater whole. She says communion with the greater whole is living with “soul.” Living with soul is to “live deeply rooted in knowing and feeling that we are connected to one another and to the earth, that our life is held in embrace of something larger than ourselves—a wisdom, a presence, a grace whose beatitude is accessible to us.”

Another way of describing the spiritual life that I have taken to heart and gotten lots of mileage out of is by Quaker social activist, Parker Palmer. Palmer says that the heart of the spiritual quest “is to know the rapture of being alive and to allow that knowledge to transform us into celebrants, advocates, defenders of life wherever we find it.”

Celebrants, advocates, defenders of life! That’s us, here, every Sunday morn, I hope. The kind of spirituality we’re talking about here doesn’t say that you must have faith in God or accept any theological doctrine. These definitions simply say that spirituality is about engagement with something beyond our own ego. It’s about connecting to the greater whole—or perhaps I should use the language of our UU Principles and Purposes where we refer to the greater whole as “the interdependent web of all existence.” When we go there we are apt to know the rapture of being alive.

There is a huge and hurting world out there in need of help. If we can get our own acts together, perhaps we have something to offer them. They can come here, and be with this congregations, and they don’t need to leave either their brain or their pain outside the door.

The good news is that a free and responsible spiritual practice calls like a beacon, calling us back to the rapture of life, making us more fully

human. You could even call it a big erotic energy, the light that says someone is home inside; a/k/a the human spirit, soul, the inner child.

OK, so say you decide that this notion of spirituality sounds interesting and you want to consider it. What's next? I have set out for your consideration 5 dimensions of spirituality and spiritual growth. They are diagrammed in the graphic on the wall: Compassion surrounded by Attentiveness, Gratitude, Acceptance and Commitment. Note that Compassion is at the heart and each of the dimensions is connected by lines. That is because each of the outer dimensions can be seen as different forms of the heart which is compassion and all the dimensions are related in the sense that you can't have any one fully in isolation from the others.

This Sunday for Spiritual Practice 101, I'm going to delve a little more deeply into Compassion and Gratitude. In two weeks, for Spiritual Practice 102, we'll focus on Attentiveness, Acceptance and Commitment. At the end of my comments upon each of my five elements of spirituality I'm going to suggest a very simple prayer related to the particular dimension.

Remember what we are talking about here is a "practice". That's implies something of a discipline, a regularity. Just as a gymnast does, you develop new capacities when you practice. That requires for most of us some pause in our lives to tune into the world of the present and tune out concerns of the past and "to do's" of the future. I'm using the word "prayer" to describe one such practice because the word works for me, although a lot of other words might be substituted.

I would define prayer with Thomas Merton—as a quiet listening of the heart or, more simply, attention. Prayer is probably the most pervasive spiritual practice there is. It certainly doesn't have to include affirming a belief in a controlling agency out there.

Prayer (according to one of my esteemed colleagues, Rev. Richard Davis of Corvallis) “is about opening the windows of your being so that more life giving light can shine in on you, so that you can discover a connection to the greater whole that you had not known before.” Again, sneaking back in is that concept of connecting to the greater whole.

So now let's look at Compassion as a spiritual dimension. Compassion, or that companion word, “love” is inseparable from my concept of spirituality because, more than anything else spirituality is about “relationship.” You might say that spirituality is what is going on in the interstices between relationships to self, others and life..

There are a lot of differences between the world's major religions. Some believe in no God, some in one, some in three, some in many. But every one teaches the Golden Rule. My favorite Golden Rule story belongs to Hillel, the great Pharisee, who was an older contemporary of Jesus. And it said that a pagan came to Hillel one day and promised to convert to Judaism on condition that Hillel could recite the whole of Jewish teaching while he stood on one leg. And Hillel stood on one leg and said that which is hateful to you do not to your fellow man. That is the Torah, and everything else is only commentary. Go and study it.

Compassion is at the heart of my spirituality diagram because it is the ultimate test of any religion or spiritual practice. Whatever your beliefs, whatever your “ism”, it is good only if it leads you to practical

compassion and connection to self, others and life. That is the line between good and bad religion with the power to hold the world or to rip it apart.

So, the first lesson I am offering in Spiritual Practice 101 is simply find a quiet space first thing in the morning or during the day and ask yourself: “How can I live more compassionately today? How can I spread a little more kindness today?”

In a few moments we will sing one of our favorite hymns: *Spirit of Life, come unto me. Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.*

There is a huge and hurting world out there in need of help. If we can get our own acts together, perhaps we have something to offer them. They can come here to Peninsula UU and they don't need to leave either their brain or their pain outside the door.

Now let's move to the spiritual dimension of Gratitude. This is not necessarily the most logical order for presenting these dimensions but it works because it is so inextricably linked with compassion; it's hard to see myself relating to others out of one but not the other.

Most of us like our occasional, decadent indulgences. Eat, drink and be merry; nothing too wrong with that if in moderation! What our consumer culture advertises will make us happiest, really won't. Most of you are here in part because you know that more stuff or sensual pleasure, won't do the trick. So what will? How about more gratitude for what we already have?

Several years ago I read about a NYU study that demonstrated that subjects who were tasked to focus on what they were glad about in their lives tended to immediately move out of psychologically depressed

states but those who focused on “I wish I were...” (someone or somewhere else) got dramatically worse.

Think about it: Anytime you say “Thank you” you are acknowledging your dependence upon some gift of life—food, air, water, sunshine, art, beauty. Most of them were given to you freely. None of us are isolated beings. All of us are reliant upon the mercy and generosity of others, Mother Earth, fate, and that which is just mystery. The simple “Thank You” prayer reminds us of our dependence and our connection to the greater whole that is the ground of our being. And always, if it is genuine, it is an expression of love.

Scrape away all the smoke and chaff and what we are doing mostly, or should be doing mostly, in these worship services is gratitude—to be here, alive, with each other, with beauty or music and word. Perhaps the most important jobs each of you can do is make sure everyone who gives to this fellowship is properly thanked.

In a wonderful little prayer book I have, Brother David Steindl-Rast says: “If the only prayer you ever say is ‘thank you’, that is enough.”

So for our spiritual practice another question for the day to ponder might be: “What am I most grateful for in my life today?”

Here are suggestions from the words I opened this service with:

For the sun and dawn

Which we did not create;

For the moon and evening

Which we did not make;

For food which we plant

But cannot grow;

For friends and loved ones

We have not earned and cannot buy;

For this gathered company

Which welcomes us as we are,

From wherever we have come;...

We lift up our hearts in thanks this day.

Compassion, and gratitude and the other spokes on my attempt to diagram the components of spirituality, all are sourced in the Great Truth, our 7th UU Principle: All is connected.

When you are grounded in spirit, you feel held in love and are grateful for that and can't help but extend it out to others.

We need spiritual practice to remember who we are. We need to do this in a religious community so we have allies in our great cause of mending our world.

That's why I want to be part of a church like this one and why I am willing to cross over on two ferries to get here.

Closing Words: #131 Love Will Guide Us

