

Spiritual Practice 102

(Nov. 2013 for Peninsula UU) by Rev. Bill Graves

Reading:

My reading is actually a story told by Rebecca Parker, the President of our UU Starr King School for the Ministry.

At the end of World War II, Lyle Grunkenmeir came home to Iowa. His mother and sister waited for his return. The day he came home—the only veteran to return alive to that town—everyone came out to meet him. As the train pulled into the station, the band played and the mayor was there to shake his hand.

But as his sister later said, the man who climbed off the train was not the lively, cheerful boy who had left for war. He was a ghost. He didn't seem to recognize anyone, not his mother, sister, or friends. In response to the crowd's rousing welcome, he stared mutely. Blank.

His family took him home to the farm, where he sat in the old rocking chair in the parlor. He did not speak or move and would barely eat. He continued in this state for days that spilled into weeks that flowed into months. No one in this town knew about posttraumatic shock; they only knew that Lyle's soul was lost somewhere.

Lyle's sister, Maxine, decided to stay by him. Whenever she could, she would come and sit with him, and she would talk. She'd tell about the church potluck; who was there, what they ate, what each young woman wore. She'd tell him about the conversation she'd overheard at the store in town, and how high the crops had grown. She told him how the wind that day had blown the clean laundry into the tomatoes. When she ran out of things to say, she would just sit with him, snapping beans, mending socks. And he sat there, silent, like a stone. Rocking.

One night, while Maxine was knitting quietly beside him, Lyle's eyes filled with tears. The tears spilled over and ran down his frozen face. Maxine went to her brother and put her arms around him. Held in his sister's embrace, he began to cry full force, great sobs of anguish bursting from deep inside him.

Then he began to talk, and he would not stop. He talked of the cold, the fear, the noise, the death of each of his buddies, the long marches, and then the human beings in the camps, the mass graves, the smell. He talked all night until the dawn light began to creep across the fields. Maxine listened to everything Lyle had to say. Then she went into the kitchen, and

she cooked him breakfast. They ate together, and then Lyle went out and did the morning chores.

Presentation:

I offered you the story of Lyle Grunkenmeir because I felt it is useful to illustrate some of the things I talked about two weeks ago in my talk titled “Spiritual Practice 101. It offers a bit of review. It’s also a good segue for going further into the subject this morning in Spiritual Practice 102.

If you recall from my prior talk, the spirituality we are holding up is not primarily about belief but about practice. Again, one of my favorite definitions of “the spiritual quest” is by Parker Palmer. It’s “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.”

Lyle Grunkenmeir’s story shows us what its like to know no rapture of being alive, to be spiritually dead. It’s to live without soul, to be numb—not fully awake to life, or taking part in it in a soulful way. Lyle Grunkenmeir is at an extreme but I’ll bet many of us are not total strangers to some form of loss of soul, of living in a cloud of numbness. We may struggle with a sense of being rejected or excluded. Or, we may bear a profound grief that leaves us numb to feeling. Or, we may live our lives in one form or another of the proverbial couch potato downing a succession of six packs. Or, we may fill our days with to-do lists in part because we are frightened by a sense of emptiness that we’d rather not confront.

It is in times such as these that we might find moments of spiritual renewal to be useful. Spiritual renewal and its provision is what I assume is the reason for being of this congregation. You find here, hopefully, connections to other souls and the greater whole, connections that transcend precious egos. These, in turn, reconnect us to our power to make a difference in the world. Basically what they do is restore us to the music of life... the music of life. I restore you and you restore me. And when individuals or congregations catch it somehow their life becomes palpable, compelling, and they grow.

Also, two weeks past, I introduced you to my humble effort at being a systematic theologian. My 5 dimensions of spirituality and spiritual growth are again diagrammed in the graphic included with your order of service: Compassion surrounded by Attentiveness, Gratitude, Acceptance and

Commitment. I asked you to note that Compassion is at the heart and each of the outer 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.

And, my last time here we got into Compassion and Gratitude a little deeper leaving the remaining three dimensions for this week.

For our review of Compassion or Love I hold up Maxine Grunkenmeir as personifying that dimension. One human being so loves that she stays with another human being until the numbed person is able to speak of silenced experiences. She restores his soul by being with him and by witnessing and being present to the depth of pain without running away. I'll bet you know members of this Peninsula congregation doing amazing impersonations of Maxine. Can anybody think of a Maxine impersonator or two?

Now I want to shift to a new field and talk about the dimension of Attentiveness. Notice its right up there at the top of my diagram. When, like poor Lyle Grunkenmeir we are numb, not fully awake to life, to feeling, we may be anesthetized to those who are suffering and we may completely miss what is breathtakingly beautiful. Here is a maxim for you, I don't know the author: "One who fails to savor the world has no capacity to save it."

One of my heroes of my younger years was Sen. Frank Church of Idaho. He was one of those Northwest prophets that prophetically stood up and proclaimed how morally wrong our nation's venture in Viet Nam was. He also was the father of the late Forrest Church the celebrated minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City. Anyway, Forrest tells of how his father on his own death bed composed the words to be engraved on his tombstone. He wanted to boil down the most important thing he had learned into one message for future generations and centuries to ponder and it is this:

I never knew of anyone who felt self-important in the morning after spending the night in the open on an Idaho mountainside under a star-studded summer sky. Don't forget to spend some time in nature, where you can bear witness to the wonder of God.

Attentiveness makes us capable of experiencing awe and reverence. Awe moves us towards gratitude for the source of our awe. Gratitude moves us to an ethic of obligation to nurture and protect the subject of our attentiveness and reverence. Maybe you can start to see a sort of progression on my little spiritual dimensions graphic. These are profoundly religious sentiments. And, they are all expressions of love at the heart.

But, perhaps the starting point is attentiveness. The Buddha calls attentiveness being mindful. Mindfulness is awareness; the presence of mindfulness means the presence of life. As Thich Nhat Hanh puts it: “Mindfulness frees us of forgetfulness and dispersion and makes it possible to live fully each minute of life.”

What I’m really talking about is mostly pausing to smell the roses. Buddhism often uses attention to breathing as a tool to focus the scattered mind, the monkey mind. The goal of it all, I sense, is to sense your connection with the all, not your separation.

One of my favorite Mary Oliver poems begins this way: “My work is loving the world...which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished...which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredients are here.”

If you were here two weeks ago you know that I offer with each of my spiritual dimensions with a suggested spiritual practice. The practice I want to offer to go with attentiveness also invokes the dimension of gratitude. It was suggested to me by the Unitarian, ee cummings and his famous poem that starts:

I thank you god for most this amazing Day: Or, you could say: I thank you life for most this amazing Day: And then you fill in the blanks depending upon what it is you are being attentive to; what astonishes you. It might help to take a walk outdoor as you do this. ee cummings filled the blanks in as follows:

*for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
And a blue true dream of sky; and for
Everything which is natural which is infinite
Which is yes*

The full poem is #504 in your gray hymnals.

Let’s move right along now to the fourth spiritual dimension: Acceptance, probably the most difficult one for me. This involves acceptance of ourselves as we are without the frantic need to prove to our neighbors how good and worthy we are. And, its acceptance of life as it is

and in the face of frustration, loss and despair reminding ourselves that its still good despite all the stuff that happens.

And its acceptance of others who they are not who we would like them to be. I once heard of a marriage counselor who prescribes for his clients that they look at themselves squarely in the mirror every morning and recite aloud: “Remember, you’re not such a fabulous catch either.”

I think the ministry of Rabbi Jesus was mostly about acceptance that flowed out of compassion from the heart. Towards others, he tells us we must forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven times. Towards ourselves he demands we accept that we are OK, are loved, and that we stop living a self-absorbed life of comparing ourselves to our neighbors.

Here is a story about self-acceptance by Brother Stendl-Rast:

Once there was a rabbi who prayed: 'Lord, make me like Abraham! Gladly, I would walk in your presence, but first, please make me like Abraham!' At this, a voice comes from heaven, saying: 'Look, I've already got one Abraham and that's enough!'

So, the Rabbi ponders this and comes to this conclusion: 'There already exists one of each of my admired models. The one being called here and now is no one else but me. No one but me has ever walked on earth with exactly the same background, the same talents, the same shortcomings. Walk before Me, God says, and I will show you that I can lead even as unlikely a candidate as you toward goodness. I can accept this offer only if I have the courage to accept myself. And that means accepting myself as a given reality—as given material to work with, as very much in need of change, maybe, but in any case given. In this way to accept myself as given is in itself a form of gratefulness.

The courage to accept myself? Is there any greater or more important form of courage?

So here is my prayer or meditation of the day for this spiritual dimension. You will see it's derived from the famous serenity prayer:

“Spirit of Life and Love, what is it I need to accept about life, others in my life, myself? Help me to have the wisdom to know those things that I cannot change and the courage to accept them and love them as they are.”

At long last, we have arrived at the last spiritual dimension flowing out of our compassion, and that is Commitment. All of us hunger to have meaning in our lives. We want to believe we did something worthwhile with our lives. The simple way we find meaning is to commit ourselves to worthwhile goals and stay faithful to those commitments. And, usually, most meaningful goals involve causes outside of ourselves....”the greater whole”, as I keep repeating.

And commitment inextricably grows out of the other spiritual dimensions. To review: They involve the ability to live in relationships with compassion; the ability to pay attention with awe and reverence to what is truly good and beautiful; the ability to acknowledge gratitude for the gifts we have been given; the ability to accept whatever those gifts are with integrity.

A feeling of obligation and commitment lays claim to us when we reflect on these things and sense our duty to the larger life we share. These spiritual practices, these daily prayers, are disciplines that remind us of commitments we have made and show us the path to walk. Here is a very basic example of being faithful to a commitment: When I say “I love you, Mom, Frances, Laura, Cory” I am reminding myself that I am first and foremost, a son, and husband and father.

Our spiritual practice or discipline for the day: How about just asking yourself in the morning: “What commitments do I want to honor today?” Maybe it will just be to say “I love you” to someone.

