

# Wake, Now My Senses

by Rev. Sean Parker Dennison, Interim Minister

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This is one of those sermons that has been on my mind for awhile. That happens a lot when the sermon I need to preach is also the sermon I need to hear. These last few weeks...or months...maybe this whole year has been unsettled and unsettling. There were the attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., the war on terrorism and now the occupation of Palestinian homes and cities by the Israelis. These things have broken my heart, worried me, and shaken what I thought were firm foundations of safety, peace, and liberty in my life.

Then there are the changes closer to home. This time of searching in the congregation: searching for a new minister, but more importantly for a new future, a new way of doing things that will lead this congregation out of a time of difficulty and into a time of renewal and growth. It is hard work coming to terms with the truth that our time together is almost over. And, of course, my own search for my next congregation with all the joy, anxiety, excitement and hard work that goes into that process. This year has been full of joys and sorrows and hard work and hopefulness. And though all of it has been good, good work, it has been exhausting.

One of the things we were taught in seminary was the absolute and irrefutable need for what was called "self-care." Again and again, we were asked about our daily spiritual practice, our ability to relax, restore, and renew our spirits—whatever it is that refills our depleted stores of energy and hope in our often over-full lives and schedules. My teachers prodded, encouraged, demanded, pushed—in short, did everything they could think of to get me to learn this lesson. They suggested all sorts of ways to accomplish it: daily prayer and meditation, exercise, dance, singing lessons, journaling... but none of it took. For some reason, the very idea that I **had** to do something made it feel like work and took the refreshment right out of it. So my self-care has been hit and miss, and now—halfway through spring and in the middle of personal, church, and world transitions—I'm longing for a little renewal, and wondering how many of you out there are longing for something too.

It's easy to get caught up in a useless cycle of self-blame and self-pity. I get mad at myself for my stubborn resistance to discipline. Personal discipline must be a good thing, but I shrink in the face of regimented commitment to things—even things I enjoy and that are good for me. I like to go with the flow. My favorite spice is variety.

And yet, the reality of a minister's life—and most of your lives too, if I was to venture a guess—is that without planning, I rarely get around to self care. You know how it goes...if I don't put it on the calendar, the calendar fills up and suddenly there isn't time for that walk, or poetry class, or quiet moment alone. And though I know I need to take better care of myself, I never quite get around to it. And then, in a typical vicious cycle, when I do find a bit of free time in which I could do some self-care, I feel too tired, too worn to start.

I was talking to a friend recently about this dilemma and she asked me a good question. "Sean," she said, "Why are you convinced that taking care of yourself is going to be such rotten, painful hard work?" I was taken aback at the question. "You know," I spluttered, "...daily spiritual practice, discipline, the guilt when I don't follow through...It just doesn't sound like much fun." My friend gave me a puzzled smile. "If you don't want to do it, then it isn't the right practice. You need to look deep inside and see what feeds your soul."

A few days later I ran into a sermon by my friend and colleague, Mark Belletini. In it, he says:

*...Ministers, like everyone else in the congregation, long for times of restoration and equilibrium, times that can help bring us back to ourselves. Such times of restoration are customarily called in our tradition "our devotional life" or even, in these modern days, "our spiritual life."*

*Harry Scholefield, my great mentor, says that if we don't pay attention to our devotional life, we will "dry up and blow away like fragile autumn leaves in a gray rainstorm." I agree.*

*Now don't be alarmed by this ancient sounding word "devotional life." It has no formal, final definition. A devotional life can be many things, some sounding traditionally sacred, others sound very secular indeed. I think of daily times of silence, or weekly hours of meditation with a group. It can be sung prayers at a Taizé service or a few hours a week set aside to listen to music...without interruption. The devotional life can be, as it is for some of my friends, regular weekly dancing to the point of near-exhaustion. As for my mentor, Harry, it can be the slow memorizing of poetry until you find yourself living by heart in the same manner as one may learn by heart.*

*Some religious traditions offer props for the devotional life...prayer beads, temple bowls, incense, a small figure of Buddha or Kwan Yin or Ganesh, or Mary, the mother of Jesus.*

*But other forms of devotional life are decidedly more "secular" in appearance...a daily walk alone, a weekly supper symposium with friends, a men's group or women's book group or a couple of hours each week at the wheel, throwing a clay pot you will never even fire. All of these things can accomplish fine restorative work for the human soul, the human soul that is easily and slowly parched by the difficulties of modern life, especially in these last strange and wearisome days.*

Mark's words began to break through my wall of resistance. Somehow, the idea of having a devotional life is more appealing to me than the idea of a spiritual discipline. I began asking myself about this word: "devotion." I looked it up in a dictionary, and then a thesaurus: "Devotion: attachment, enthusiasm, loyalty, dedication, commitment, zeal." And I began asking myself, "Sean, what is it that you feel devoted to?" Suddenly, my dread turned into excitement. I'm devoted to poetry, to time with my family, to art, to reading, to work for justice in the world, to laughing long and loud and often... And there it was, just thinking about these things...renewed energy and excitement...like a long drink of water to a parched and thirsty soul. And I could feel Mark, and his mentor, Harry, and my seminary professors smile and whisper, "You're getting it!" With their encouragement, I began trying to connect a few more of the dots. I hope you'll bear with

me as I try to share with you the barest beginnings of a philosophy—or even, perhaps, a theology—of self-care.

It became clear to me upon reflection that most of the things on my list of "things to which I am devoted" are related, in some way to the arts. Poetry, visual art, literature, theatre...all of them have at one time or another accomplished that task of refreshing my soul or spirit. (An aside here—I know the words "soul" and "spirit" are problematic for some. I don't use them to mean some part of me that will live on into eternity. I use them to mean the part of me that is drawn to the task of making sense of things, to looking for meaning in life, to interpreting life rather than just experiencing it. I use these words to remind me to attend to the needs I have that are more than just physical. I use "spirit" and "soul" when I'm talking about the mysterious part of me that feels devotion, creates meaning, learns deeper lessons that I cannot always fully explain. I use them as metaphors...)

The things that I've found to refresh this mysterious and yet vital part of myself are often related to art. There is something about art that reconnects me to life, to beauty, to myself. There is something about the arts that call me out of my busy, ordinary self and into this part of me that I call "soul." In some ways, art and religion have the same purpose: to draw our attention to some part of life, let it linger there, and then attempt to express what it is we noticed. This is what I try to do each Sunday, as we gather: to draw attention to some part of life and let it awaken our senses, our reason, our compassion, our conscience.

There is something wonderful that happens, when we take the time to focus our sustained attention on something. I have seen it happen again and again. When we pay close attention to something, we begin to notice its beauty. We even begin to develop new ways of looking at things to evoke that beauty. Think for a moment of the work of Georgia O'Keefe, one of our most beloved American artists. She taught us all a new way of looking at flowers that revealed a whole new layer of beauty. And in the process of seeing in a new way and experiencing a flower's beauty in a new way, we are touched, we catch our breath, something in us is stirred, and our parched souls feel a trickle of renewal.

Thomas Moore, in his book *Care of the Soul: Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life* puts it this way:

*Art, broadly speaking, is that which invites us into contemplation—a rare commodity in modern life. In that moment of contemplation, art intensifies the presence of the world. We see it more vividly and more deeply. The emptiness that many people complain dominates their lives comes in part from a failure to let the world in, to perceive it and engage it fully. Naturally, we'll feel empty if everything we do slides past without sticking. As we have seen, art arrests attention, an important service to the soul.*

Perhaps the real message of art and religion is "PAY ATTENTION!"

There is beauty in the world that will astound you and suffering that will break your heart. Good art and good religion force us to notice both of these things. There is beauty in the world that will overwhelm you, call to you, ask you to rise to amazing heights in

response. There is suffering as well, and both art and religion ask you respond, to recognize your connection to both beauty and suffering, and to act.

Jerome Witkin, a Unitarian Universalist artist from Syracuse, NY writes:

More and more I am aware of the importance of the figure. The times are too desperate to have an art that avoids life and world problems. I want (my art) to be quiet, more profound in its silence, a religious experience, conveying the spiritual, the vision, the rapture. What I have attempted to do here, and what contemporary figurative (art) is all about, is how to be true to how people live; to take ordinary life and paint it extraordinarily well. I've ended (my series of drawings) with an edge of doubt, but I think doubt makes (them) better. If the artist were certain, he or she wouldn't make art. Maybe this (piece I am painting) can cause some doubt about the use of religion to take people away from real life. The purpose of art (after all) is restorative. The artist must admit to his or her nakedness. It's "come as you are." Otherwise, there wouldn't be the searching, the desire to know something beyond oneself.

I like Jerome Witkin's view of art. It is my hope that good religion—good Sunday services—can do some of the same work Mr. Witkin strives to do: to face real life, with all its problems; to be quiet, conveying vision and rapture; to be true to how people live; to be content to leave an edge of doubt; to be restorative; to search and know something beyond oneself. This is what I am devoted to.

Mark Belletini closes his sermon by saying, *"...Anything that helps you to see the world clearly and nakedly, to respond to the world with the fullness of your being, to struggle to understand all things accurately in their interdependence, is devotion, as basic a need as food and water."*

May we become devoted to paying attention, to seeing the world clearly, to understand fully our interdependence, and to respond to both the suffering and the beauty with our whole being. May we be renewed and restored by our devotion to seeing and responding to our lives.

Amen, Ashé, and Blessed be.

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