

“Practice Makes Perfect (?)”

The Rev. Laura Horton-Ludwig, Minister
First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton
January 10, 2010

Adrienne Rich reminds us, we don't get to practice being alive
the way we can practice for a softball game
or a piano recital.

We just get thrown right into the thick of life.
As the poet says, from the moment we're born,

we take on
everything at once...¹

as if someone plunked us down on the piano bench,
with an orchestra playing all around us,
and we're supposed to be the soloist in the concerto,
but we don't even know what the music's supposed to sound like
and we've never touched a keyboard in our life.

So we have to figure it out, right in the middle of everything.
Life comes at us from the moment we're born—
sensations, feelings, emotions, thoughts, events, circumstances—
all this stuff swirling around us and inside of us,
and we have to learn how to make sense of it all,
while we're right there in the soup!

Some of us end up muddling around for a long time
before we start to figure it all out.
If we're lucky, we find teachers and models and practices to help.
In fact, one function of any religious institution
is helping people to find spiritual practices that work for them.
In a thriving religious tradition,

¹ Adrienne Rich, “Transcendental Etude.”

lots of people have thriving spiritual practices
that really help and support them.
That's the norm rather than the exception.

I'm reminded of a conversation I once had
with a Jewish woman from Eastern Europe.
She had a beautiful accent which I have to imitate
so the story makes sense.
She was telling me about traditional Jewish spiritual practices
like keeping kosher and not doing any work on the Sabbath,
and she began to explain to me, in this beautiful accent,
that "All these things that we do come from Genesis in the Bible,
when God created order out of cows."

"Ah," I said.

I was trying to sound very wise and knowing,
but actually I had no idea what she was talking about!
"Order out of cows?" I said, blundering right along.
"That sounds very Hindu—they believe the cow is sacred.
Hmm, I wonder if this is in some strand of midrash
I'm not familiar with?"

"No, no, chaos!" she said. "Order out of chaos!"

Oh!!

Oops!

We had a good laugh together over that.
But her message stayed with me:
the spiritual practices that she observed, from her tradition,
helped her create a sense of order
in this world that can feel very chaotic.
This insight was tremendously attractive to me.
So many of us today are buffeted by competing demands
that often feel very chaotic—
from our jobs;

from advertisers whose livelihood depends on
making us feel inadequate in all sorts of ways;
demands from our families and friends,
no matter how much we love them;
and even, dare I say, demands from our church.
which depends so much on the energy we bring to it.
We *need*, we *crave* tools in our lives to help us see what is important,
to make choices about how to live,
to cultivate inner calm and peace.

And what I call a spiritual practice
is anything that can help us with these challenges,
any regular habit or behavior or ritual that we do
because it sustains us in our inner life
and helps us lead good lives in the world.

That word *spiritual* is always a tricky one,
so let me tell you what I mean by it.
To me, spirituality is everything about our connection
to the sacred, the holy, the infinite—
what I think of as the great big thing, the great big mystery
which has somehow given us this life,
which sustains us at every moment,
and which will one day receive us back when it is our time to die.
I think spirituality is about how we are a part of that great big thing,
something much bigger than ourselves,
which, our ancestors have testified to us, is worthy of our trust.
You don't have to put a name to it.
You don't have to believe in a God to be spiritual,
though many people can and do and are.
Everyone is spiritual, no matter what they believe or don't believe,
just by virtue of being alive here in this world where,
as Barbara Pescan put it so beautifully in our chalice lighting words,

we live

and weep
and ask
and laugh
and answer.

To me, that's spirituality. All of it.
Spirituality is the connection we feel
to the mystery behind our very lives.
I believe that connection is literally true.
My own belief is that we are all part of that one great mystery,
all of us infinitely loved and cherished,
all of us with the potential to draw on tremendous strength
and energy and wisdom.
I believe that is a fact.
Yet, somehow, it's also part of our nature to get distracted.
We get caught up in patterns of thought and action
that are destructive to ourselves and others.
We forget that other beings are just as precious as we are,
just as much a part of the sacred whole.
There are a few people, just a very few,
who seem to be specially gifted
with this way of understanding the world.
It's always with them.
But, for most of us,
to be able to live in a manner that is gracious and loving and just,
we need help. We need to *practice*.

And *practice* is a much easier word than *spirituality*
to wrap our heads around.
We all know practice is doing something regularly
that we want to get good at.

So, a *spiritual practice* is anything we do regularly, consistently,
and on purpose, to deepen our *feeling*
of loving connection to that mystery—

our understanding, our wisdom, our intuition,
our ability to live in a way that is full and rich and generous.

Now, I know with some of you
I am really preaching to the choir here.

(As it were. Hi, choir!)

Some of you, I know, already have spiritual practices in your lives
that you find to be sustaining and meaningful.

If that's you, I invite you to bear with me for a little bit
and feel yourself affirmed

while I speak to those of us

who don't have a spiritual practice right now.

It would be great if you could hold good wishes
for our whole community in your heart and mind right now,
and maybe later on you can tell me and others here
what you are doing and how it works for you.

And: for those of you who don't see yourselves
as having a spiritual practice
and are not particularly interested in having one,
I invite you to bear with me too.

I really appreciate your graciousness in listening to something
you're not sure is going to speak to you.

So: onward. The first thing I want to say about spiritual practices
is that just about anything people do can be a spiritual practice.

Lots of people think spiritual practice is only contemplative,
quiet stuff like meditation and prayer.

These are wonderful practices, but they're not going to suit everyone.

People have different personalities and different temperaments,
and something that is profoundly transformative for one person
might not work at all for their nearest neighbor.

For some of us, quiet solo practices like meditation and prayer,
or journaling, or reading, are going to feed us best.

But more extroverted-type people might do better
with group-oriented spiritual practices like singing in a choir
or being part of a conversation circle like our covenant groups...
or perhaps coming to church on Sunday—
in my view what we are all doing right now is also a spiritual practice!

Other spiritual practices are physical, like running or dancing
or swimming or martial arts.

Just about all of us can benefit

from getting more in touch with our bodies.

Our culture is still steeped in the Enlightenment idea
that our minds and bodies are separate,
and the spiritual and the material worlds are separate.

But many of us don't believe this any more.

I believe we are all a unity of mind *and* body,
and so naturally our spirituality expresses itself through our body.

The energy that flows through us,

the way we move, how we feel,

our sense of physical well-being (or not)—

these things are all part of our spirituality!

So, if physical movement

helps you touch that place of calm and joy inside you,

whether it be yoga or baseball or walking or kite-flying,

if it makes you a better person,

wiser, healthier, kinder, and more available to others,

I would call that a perfect spiritual practice for you.

Another misconception lots of people have is that spiritual practices
have to be focused on you yourself rather than others.

And some people are really not into navel-gazing.

If that is you, I want to say that being active

and engaged in the world,

looking outward and getting out there and doing stuff,

serving other people and our planet,

is also a very rich and deep spiritual practice.

Many of you here today know this very well.
For models, we look to Gandhi and Dr. King
and so many others who have made the work of social justice
the living center of their spiritual lives.
Justice work can be deeply spiritual work.

Again, *all* of these ways of practicing can help us—
mind and body, inward-focused and outward-focused.
To make things a little more concrete,
I thought it might be good for me to tell you a little
about one of my own spiritual practices
and how I think it's helping me.
For me personally,
for about seven years my primary spiritual practice
has been sitting down each morning, or most mornings anyway,
and writing in a journal.
The kind of journal I keep is not really an account of the day
and the things that happen.
It's more like an emotional dumping ground
where I can just blob out whatever's going on that I feel upset about,
or confused, or anxious, or whatever.
My number one priority is to get down on the page
everything that's not quite right,
everything that's making me uneasy.
It's an honesty practice.

I need that because I grew up all nicey-nicey
and pretending that everything was fine even when it wasn't.
For many years I was a master of self-deception.
I would ignore things that bothered me.
I would put on a happy face for everyone, myself most of all.
And some years ago I decided I didn't want to do that any more.
So, journaling became for me a tool to get honest
about what was real in my own mind and heart.
I've gotten so that I know when I'm lying to myself on the page.

I can feel it in my gut when I'm leaving something out.
This has been a necessary task for me.

For other people the spiritual tasks will be a little different.
But we all wrestle with thoughts and feelings
that are uncomfortable for us—
parts of ourselves we don't much like,
parts of ourselves we judge and reject.
At times we all feel painfully aware of our shortcomings,
our failures—missed opportunities,
times we acted less well than we might have.
We all wrestle with problems in our families and in our world
that we don't know how to solve.
We're all in the same boat here.
So whatever spiritual practice we choose,
it has to be able to help us work through the hard and painful things
in our own hearts and in the world around us.
Spiritual practice is not just a sunshiny cheerful kind of thing.
It takes us as deep as we can go and then pushes us to go deeper,
again and again.

In my own practice of journaling, I very often find
that when I write down the bad and uncomfortable stuff,
I can figure out what to do about it.
For me, just being honest and saying what is happening
leads, way more often than not, to some kind of insight
about what I might do differently,
or maybe just reframe in my mind to *see* the problem differently.
I'd say one good test of a spiritual practice
is whether it does indeed help you work through the tough problems.

But let me warn you, don't think every day of practice
is going to be easy or blissful or fun or satisfying.
Sometimes it's a real slog
and you don't feel like you're getting anywhere.

That's OK. Everybody has days like that.

And sometimes my practice is just learning to sit with the stuff which is *not* resolved and I *don't* know what to do about.

This is one of my big challenges—
just sitting with stuff that isn't ready to be resolved—
and my journaling practice helps me stay with it.
This is not always fun.

Yet there is a difference between flailing around
with that unsolved stuff, all stressed and anxious,
and *naming* it with calmness and peace inside
and choosing to live into it as gracefully as you can.
So, again, a good test of a spiritual practice
is whether it helps you deal with all those things in your life
and in our world, things that matter
but aren't going to be resolved right now,
things we just can't fix right now.
Can we stay with the ambiguity and the uncertainty?
Can we be OK with what is unresolved?

I don't mean just giving up and passively accepting whatever is,
but being patient, doing what we can, and letting the rest go?
I'm thinking about people who are looking for a job right now,
or people who are working on some issue with a family member,
or a friend, that isn't going to be resolved right away.
I have someone in my life that I'm worried about right now
because they're dealing with an addiction.
I know I can't fix it, but still I want to support them as best I can.
And I rely on my spiritual practice to support *me*
and help me stay loving and realistic
and keep reaching out in the ways I can.

It's not always easy.
Spiritual practice doesn't make us perfect, of course,

but it really can help us.
If you've been feeling unfocused, scattered, or overwhelmed by life,
for whatever reason,
I urge you to explore some spiritual practices
as a gift to yourself and everyone around you.
My advice is to pick one that sparks your interest.
and calls to you in some way.
Promise yourself to give it a serious try
for at least a couple of months, and then do it!

Scott Alexander, the author of today's second reading, says,
you have to "refuse to allow yourself not to do it."²
There are a million excuses not to practice.
Just put them all aside and find the time.
Find the courage.
Strategically suspend your disbelief about what's going to happen.
Give it a chance.
And, after a serious try, if you find this practice isn't working for you,
try another.
Stick with it, and don't give up too soon.
It won't always be easy.
But when life is hardest, then we are most in need
of the calm that comes from staying faithful to a practice
that abundantly sustains us.

My way may not be your way,
but I promise that there is a way for you.
In closing—I invite you, I challenge you, to go forth and practice!

Amen.

² Scott W. Alexander, "Exercise," in Scott W. Alexander, ed., *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life* (Boston: Skinner House, 1999), p. 134.