

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES
A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Rogue Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
April 13, 2014

Chalice Lighting

Today's chalice lighting is a "pagan" practice, harking back to pre-Christian and other earth-centered religions, like Native American. Most of us do not come from or practice these traditions, so we are grateful to those who created this way of invoking Mystery, of paying attention to where we are, settling ourselves, becoming aware of our bodies and spirits, in this community and in the larger world we live in.

Please rise as you are able. Please face the east. Take a deep, cleansing breath.

Spirit of the east, spirit of air, may we feel your lightness in our bodies and souls; may we feel the renewing energy of the dawn. We thank you for allowing us to rise above and see from a broad perspective. May all who are in need feel your healing.

Turn right a quarter turn to face the south.

Spirit of the south, spirit of fire, may we feel your inspiration in our bodies and souls; may we feel the worthy risk and the hope of your blazing presence. We thank you for passion and warmth and challenge. May all who are in need feel your healing.

Turn to face west.

Spirit of the west, spirit of water, may we move fluidly through the deep and the shallow, knowing we may go freely, smoothly and with grace. We thank you for flowing through all beings and through the world. May all who are in need feel your healing.

Turn to face north.

Spirit of the north, spirit of earth, may we walk in confidence, knowing we are supported by your solid and nurturing presence. We thank you for grounding us firmly, for centering our bodies and spirits. May all who are in need feel your healing.

Facing east once more, let us hold our hands up.

Spirit of all, flow down, among, within and through us. We humbly offer our lives and our visions to your service, knowing you are greater than we are.

We light our chalice to the interdependence of all elements, to the inspiration nature brings when we are mindful of its gifts, of all it bestows upon us, we who are connected here today.

Sermon

[Take a deep breath. Move so that you are close to the edge of your chair. Sit up straight, with your feet flat on the floor. Feel your seat on the seat. Feel your feet in contact with the floor, just a little air above Mother Earth, solid and firm. Take another deep breath, feeling yourself fully where you are. Place your right hand on the surface behind your right hip. Now, inhale and on your exhale, gently turn your upper body to the right, keeping your hips facing forward, and your chin facing forward. As you inhale, straighten your spine. Take a couple of breaths. Now, on an exhale, twist a little farther. If it is completely comfortable, turn your head to look over your right shoulder. Without forcing, stay in this pose for a couple of breaths. Now, inhale and gently turn back, facing front. [Repeat, on left side.]

That was a simple yoga twist, a pose that has benefits under all circumstances. But like most things, the benefits are far greater when we are mindful, when we are simply focusing on what we are doing. Yoga—and tai chi, walking meditation, chi gong and other physical practices—are good for us kinesthetic types, who like movement. They are not sports—although they make our bodies more fit—they are physical spiritual practices, where we pay conscious attention.

If we have spiritual practices of some sort—including mindfulness, in life and in our practice—our lives are enriched. We simply do better during the unavoidable joys and sorrows, triumphs and tragedies, loves and disappointments, that being human always brings.

Andrew Newberg, the man who wrote a book called *The Spiritual Brain: Science and Religious Experience*, tells us that the brain is wired for spirituality. His definition of a spiritual practice is one that enhances the meaning of what we hold to be sacred and helps us to be our best selves.

Last March through June, I served a brief “mini interim” ministry to a congregation in another state. This congregation had had really, really serious difficulties, in nearly every area of church life you can think of. There was deeply divided opinion about the then-minister. There was an

incredibly contentious ending of a music director's term. Religious education made a paradigm shift in its approach, resulting in the unwilling end of the Director of Religious Education's tenure. There was an enormous amount of sides-taking, and much buzz behind the scenes, resulting in, basically, wars and rumors of wars. Some people essentially buckled under the strain and their worst selves emerged: mean-spirited, sneaky, difficult. Lots and lots of people of good heart and spirit and mind put out absolutely amazing amounts of energy to try and bring harmony to the group, but there were too many "side" of too many issues.

I was hired to settle things down a little, speak truth to everyone about what I saw, and encourage individuals and the whole congregation back into the beginnings of more traditionally churchlike behavior. [Parenthetically: things were better when I left; they have a great new minister, and things seem to be going well.]

I talked to dozens of people, and attended lots and lots of meetings. Interestingly enough, I only talked with two people about their specific spiritual practices. It is a small sample. But it still seems to me no accident that all four of these people, in the face of having suffered serious hurts and life pain in the difficulties, continued to keep higher, larger things in mind. They made the effort, over and over, to both experience the "negative" feelings they have had and are having (mindfulness), not denying reality. And they also made the ongoing effort to rise above them. All four of these people could—and at some level, did—carry resentment and anger at people and groups, for mistakes those people and groups made, mistakes that caused great pain. At the very same time, they lived toward compassion, healing, forgiveness and a larger view, moving toward an ever more self-insightful and kinder life. Toward the qualities the Buddha preached: love, compassion, joy, and impartiality.

One of these people goes outside every day before dawn, and practices in the spirit of what we followers of Carl Jung call active imagination. She breathes deeply into the place and time where she is, and ascends into space. (In spirit!) There, in the blackness, the sparkles and jewels and gold and silver of space, she feels the enormity of everything, and her self dissolves, teaching her every day that our small precious-held selves are really nothing. This person also holds social action and service as one of her practices, from the daily practice of compassion to all she meets—especially those who appear marginalized or in distress—to the large practices of working to change systems.

The other person practices classic Buddhist-type meditation, 20-40 minutes a day of sitting focusing on the breath as a tool for quietening the mind. He has done this every single day for decades, and he says:

After a morning session in which I have made a consistent effort to stay with the breath (doesn't happen every time :), a feeling of peace

and relaxation comes over my body and spirit, and stays with me for the whole day or more. It becomes easy to stay in the moment during the day and let go of being a slave to thoughts. I find that I am more in touch with my instincts and inherent moral conscience. A human BEING.... I definitely try when I can during the day to be in the moment, usually by listening to my breath or just letting go of obsessing over something...

I find it interesting that he, like the spiritual space traveler, talks about the non-importance of the individual self. Two of that church's most spiritual people, speaking out in favor of a worldview that doesn't believe our precious individuality is the sacred center of the universe!

I am going to ask us to do five minutes of Buddhist-type meditation. Here's what our meditator friend says about the process:

The idea is to place... attention on every moment of the breath. The breath is just a tool to focus the mind on. And when the mind draws [us] out of the present moment, [we] can just let go and re-focus on the breath. ...this practice is just that—a practice of how to live in the moment. When the mind quiets, consciousness is the only thing that is left. And consciousness just IS, and is so simple.

Let us find ourselves comfortable in our seats, feet on the floor, spine straight without tension. We will sit in silence for five minutes—just a taste of this spiritual practice—focusing on our inbreath and outbreath, without striving and without judging ourselves. My guess is that we will not achieve enlightenment during these five minutes. Remember what our friend says: "...when the mind draws [us] out of the present moment, [we] can just let go and re-focus on the breath. ...this practice is just that..." The gong will indicate our start and our ending.

[Five minutes of silent meditation]

Whatever we consider our primary theological or spiritual path to be—with Unitarian Universalism as our over-arching, embracing home—a spiritual practice will nourish our souls and make us better people, able to go forth and help heal our communities and the world.

There is an excellent book called *Restless Souls: the Making of American Spirituality from Emerson to Oprah*. The book explores a consistent theme that runs through liberal religion for the past century and a half-plus. What this theme says is: in this busy, bustling, material country of ours, some of our most important minds and hearts have consistently said, "We must have a spiritual practice, if we are to be nourished, and go forth to work for justice."

Felix Adler is one of the founding fathers of American Humanism—long considered non-spiritual at best—and he is a direct spiritual and intellectual

forefather of 20th- and 21st-century Unitarian Universalism. He said, "...it is advisable to consecrate certain times, to...seeing one's life in all its relations...on the ground of spirituality." (145) He said that such a practice, every single day—taken from any inspirational tradition one chooses—is necessary for inward calm and to prevent collapsing in exhaustion from the pressure of working for social reform. (Note the dual themes that so often run through the writings of these spiritual forebears: nurturing the soul, which is narcissism alone; and also helping heal the world, which is ungrounded without a spiritual center.)

Ralph Waldo Trine was famous in his time (1866-1958), an originator of New Thought. While he is not our forebear in quite the way Felix Adler is, he was greatly influenced by his namesake Ralph Waldo Emerson, and his thinking influenced the spiritual side of our tradition. He had a huge effect on America with his 1897 book, *In Tune With the Infinite*, which sold one and a half million copies. He said that regular spiritual practice would lead to fulfilled and empowered lives; he also said that regular spiritual practice leads to the love and compassion that cause us to lose our "small, personal, self-centered, self-seeking nature," through "the service of others." (155)

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century greats like the Dalai Lama, Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, American Buddhists Jack Kornfield or Jon Kabat Zinn, Christian Father Thomas Keating, all say the same essential thing: find a spiritual practice that resonates with your heart and soul and spirit and just do it. Every day. Seven days a week. Karen Armstrong says, in her book, *The Case For God*, "Like any skill, religion requires perseverance, hard work, and discipline."

Let us try a little practice that will be totally comfortable to some of us and a major challenge to others. It comes directly from the Christian tradition, from Russian Orthodoxy, in which monks sometimes pray this chant hundreds of times a day: "Lord, make haste to help me. Lord, make speed to save me." If you are still wounded from Christian roots and you really can't say this—or if feminist feelings rail at the patriarchal language—put "Love" in the place of "Lord." I recommend trying the original, as respectful of a deep spirituality not usually practiced by us, but I also get that "Love" might work better. *Lord, make haste to help me. Lord, make speed to save me. Lord, make haste to help me. Lord, make speed to save me. Let us repeat this under our breath for a few minutes, after the bell rings. It will ring at the end.*

Before we close with a chant from the Hindu tradition, let me just remind us of some practices that people have as their spiritual disciplines. We have mentioned physical practices, active imagination, silent meditation, chanting, daily acts of compassion, social action. Here are some other possibilities:

- Setting aside time to read from pieces that resonate with our spirit, taking the time to reflect on them. The Bible, John Muir, poets. My partner and I do this together each day.
- Finding a mantra—a word or short phrase—and chanting it to ourselves for a period of time.
- Spending quiet time in the hot tub (or regular tub), breathing, stretching, praying, reflecting.
- Praying. Our meditating RVUUFer says this: “prayer is an interesting idea. I am a realist; I would like to know and have a direct experience of something if I am going to talk or pray to it. So though I have never met a ‘God’ who is separate from my self, I can still pray to consciousness to please keep me humble. Whenever I think that I am something special I get shot down quickly.”
- Twelve-step program practice. This program is intensely spiritual when practiced with commitment, and takes us to those places of insight and ability to be better people in the world. The 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous have been my companion and guide for 32 years.
- Journaling. Write, write, write.
- Art: Paint. Draw. Sculpt. Make paper. Photograph. Batik.
- With another person, read and listen deeply, to poetry or other significant-to-you literature.

Let’s close with a mantra from the *Heart Sutra* a classic Buddhist scripture. “Gate gate para gate parasam gate bodhi svaha.” The words mean something like, “Going, going.” (gate gate) “Going beyond.” (para gate) “Gone altogether beyond.” (parasam gate) Then, the “bodhi svaha” is variously translated as, “always becoming Buddha,” or—better yet —“Awakening fulfilled!,” or—even better—“Oh, what an awakening! All hail!” Let us chant together.

What an awakening! All hail!

Closing Words

Breathing in, I calm body and mind. Breathing out, I smile. Dwelling in the present moment I know this is the only moment.

— [Thích Nhất Hạnh](#), *Being Peace*

Sources consulted

<http://www.interluderetreat.com/meditate/ppsutra.htm> Heart Sutra mantra discussion

Armstrong, Karen. *The Case For God*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009

Leigh, Eric Schmidt. *Restless Souls: the Making of American Spirituality from Emerson to Oprah*. HarperSanFrancisco: 2005.