

March 15, 2009 – Evergreen UU Fellowship – Marysville, WA

Janine Larsen, District Executive, UUA Pacific Northwest

Reading

Note from Janine: This lovely blessing came to me titled "A Prayer for Leadership," but its correct title is "For One Who Holds Power." It is included in To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings, published in 2008 (Doubleday). Sadly, John O'Donohue died unexpectedly and peacefully in January 2008, a few days after celebrating his 52nd birthday. Tributes and more on John's life and poetry may be found at his website, www.johndonohue.com.

May the gift of leadership awaken in you as a vocation,
Keep you mindful of the providence that calls you to serve.

As high over the mountains the eagle spreads its wings,
May your perspective be larger than the view from the foothills.

When the way is flat and dull in times of gray endurance,
May your imagination continue to evoke horizon.

When thirst burns in times of drought,
May you be blessed to find the wells.

May you have the wisdom to read time clearly
And know when the seeds of change will flourish.

In your heart may there be a sanctuary
For the stillness where clarity is born.

May your work be infused with passion and creativity
And have the wisdom to balance compassion and challenge.

May your soul find the graciousness
To rise above the fester of small mediocrities.
May your power never become a shell
Wherein your heart would silently atrophy.
May you welcome your own vulnerability
As the ground where healing and truth join.

May integrity of soul be your first ideal,
The source that will guide and bless your work.

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Sermon: “Spiritual Leadership for Practical People”

Good morning! I am your guest speaker, Janine Larsen, pleased to be with you this morning while your minister, the Rev. Bruce Davis, is in India. What a treat it will be for you next week to discover what he brings back to you as a result of his experiences.

It has been and continues to be my blessing and privilege to serve and support our 59 member congregations in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Alaska, as District Executive for the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations here in the Pacific Northwest since 2004.

I have met many, but not all, of you before, so let me give you a little bit of self-introduction for those who do not know me. I’m a Seattle native, and I live with my spouse in Woodinville, just a bit southeast of here. Our two kids are 22 and 19, the younger one studying jazz guitar at Central Washington University in Ellensburg and the older one studying social work at Portland State University. I am a lay leader, not an ordained Minister, and I’m a member and past-president of the Woodinville UU Church.

I’m actually a fairly new UU – the Woodinville congregation, which we joined upon moving back to the Pacific Northwest in 1997 – is my first. I had just heard about Unitarian Universalism before we moved to California and when we returned to Washington, literally the first thing I did when we got our new phone book was look to see if there was a UU church in our community. There was, and I went the very next Sunday. When I read the wallet card with the “Principles and Purposes,” I knew I’d come home.

Still, the feeling of being in church was foreign to me, not having attended regularly since grade school – and that was a Lutheran church, a pretty different routine from the Unitarian service I was experiencing now. I felt fine about the UU theology immediately, but I didn’t get the traditions

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and rituals, and I didn't understand how some of the religious terms applied. "Worship," for example – what was it we were worshipping? I was ready to enjoy "freedom from religion" and I wasn't prepared to be confronted with religious language. Could there be meaning behind such words, without dogma and someone else's definitions?

Eventually, as I came to learn more about the history and evolution of Unitarian Universalism, I also came to appreciate that I could indeed find meaning in the words of religious tradition, if I worked to develop a translator that spoke my language and reminded me to look for the underlying metaphor. "Sacred" and "holy" meant something of deep, abiding value, something worth caring about and caring for, something eternal that would continue to have meaning long after I was gone.

I've come to translate "God" most simply as "Love," but also as a powerful symbol of the universal need to find comfort, order and explanation in a very complex and often painful and frightening world that is beyond human control. Though I am not a theist, I understand that primal desire, and I hold believers in compassion and respect, even when I must sometimes take issue with interpretations of "God's Law." Usually, though, there is no threat when someone speaks of "God," so do I need to be defensive or offensive? Nope. The language just reminds me to turn up my translator and try to listen as closely as I can for the fear, the need or the joy that's most typically being expressed by the human being before me.

I have even come to rest easy with the word "Worship." It arises from roots that mean "to give shape to that which is worthy." I can allow that.

The Rev. Dr. Forrest Church tells us "Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." All of us wrestle with this fundamental truth, and each of us finds our own holds, vital victories,

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inevitable defeats, hard-won turn-arounds and ultimate surrender on the gym mat of life.

Consciously, intentionally engaging the sweetness of life – with all the challenges and mysteries of reconciling what is and will be – this is what theologians and mystics call “spiritual practice.”

It is “spiritual” because it goes beyond intellect to the emotional and emotive. It’s called “practice” because it is infinite, without a point that says, “There – I’m done.” Spiritual practice does not expect perfection – just attention.

In its deepest and most personal sense, spiritual practice is non-verbal, pre-verbal, maybe. Its most profound effects can be experienced, but not quite explained. It can be approached through the best of our arts – poetry, painting, sculpture, music, dance – but it remains a singular rapture, *approached*, only, in metaphor – but never grasped in fact.

Margaret Benefiel, in her book *Soul at Work*, tells us, “Spirituality includes the intellectual, emotional, and relational depth of human character, as well as the continuing capacity and yearning for personal development and evolution.”¹

She goes on to explain, “Spirituality is the understanding that everything is transient and there is a more expansive relationship and responsibility that we have to ourselves and others that we must ultimately respect.”²

UU lay leader David Rynick said in his workshop at UU University prior to the 2007 UUA General Assembly, that “Spiritual practice is what we do

¹ Benefiel, Margaret. *Soul at Work*. New York, Seabury Books. 2005. Pg 9

² Benefiel, *ibid*. Pg 45

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repeatedly with the intention of moving closer to that which is most true and alive for us.”

Like David, I have the regular spiritual practice of Zen Buddhism. I sit in silent meditation each morning, and make a point of calling myself to mindfulness throughout my day. I sit weekly with a group of UUs and others at our church each Wednesday night. I go regularly to weekend and week-long formal retreats – usually in silence – at a Zen monastery in Oregon, and I have a formal relationship as a student of the teachers there.

Through this practice, I find myself slowly growing a more spacious mind. On rare occasions, I actually experience internal quiet when I am being silent. Meditation encourages me to stop piling on more and more; instead, I am learning how to let things go so that my overly-busy mind can rest and refresh. I am learning how to trust who I really am, instead of worrying so constantly over who I *think* I am or should be. I am learning to have faith in myself – I agree with Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg, who defines “faith” as “Trusting your own deepest experience.”³

What I’m finding as I continue my every day spiritual practice is that I’m developing greater capacity to be caring, thoughtful, in balance and at peace. What I’m cultivating through this practice, I think, is a relationship with wisdom.

Every religion offers and expects a spiritual practice of its people, and I’ve wondered if that’s the case with Unitarian Universalism. Certainly, we don’t have a common form of spiritual practice these days – we have long since abandoned the book of common prayer, for example, and we’ve formally adopted a proclamation of the diverse sources of our faith today. Individual UUs have embraced spiritual practices from all these sources of

³ Salzberg, Sharon. *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*. Riverhead Books, NY. 2002

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faith, and in the true sense of liberal religion, are inventing more all the time!

But is there a unique, or at least identifiably UU spiritual practice that we all teach, learn, and employ, maybe without even realizing it? Some might say that social justice work is the most obvious. Others might say that verbosity is our shared practice – we surely do love to talk and discuss, metaphorically and otherwise! In fact, there is a recognized UU Spiritual Practice based in the memorization and recitation of poetry.

Some have said our shared practice is “commitment to community,” but I don’t think that’s sufficient – it’s both too broad and too narrow, it seems to me. I have heard some declare that their UU spiritual practice is coming to church on Sunday.

Let’s listen again to David Rynick’s definition: “Spiritual practice is what we do repeatedly with the intention of moving closer to what is most true and alive for us.” Does coming to this fellowship’s gatherings on Sunday, even if it’s every Sunday, meet the criteria? I would hazard a guess that most of us haven’t thought much about “what is most true and alive for us,” even though we might feel it keenly on that emotional and emotive level. Without the specific “intention of moving closer,” I’m not sure that attending Sunday services as the only act of “moving closer” really qualifies as a stand-alone spiritual practice.

So, if we choose not to adopt a spiritual practice that belongs to or springs from another faith tradition, what would a UU spiritual practice look like?

Here are four aspects of spiritual practice I think are necessary to touch the soul and transform the experience of life:

- Ritual
- Contemplation
- Connection

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- Action

Ritual is a repetitive, physical manifestation of metaphoric action.

The purpose of ritual is to provide a familiar container and pattern so that you can relax into deeper meaning without having to consciously define it.

Contemplation is a time of going down into your deepest self. It is intensely internal, stripped away from all pretense, raw and bare. It is receptive and vulnerable. It includes surrender and honesty, great courage, and great trust.

Connection is spiritual work with others – fellow seekers and practitioners, wise leaders, teachers and mentors, community members at all different levels of spiritual maturity. This is where we learn patience and tolerance and love and forbearance. This is where we live compassion, discipline and boundaries. This is where we move through the cycle of leadership – apprentice, practitioner, master, mentor.

Action is where our spiritual practice is made manifest. This is where we harvest the wisdom seeded and grown in the fields of spiritual practice, and nourish the lives of those around us, including the world that depends upon our stewardship.

I invite you to consider your spiritual practice, and develop it mindfully. Pay attention to where you feel most alive and true. If you respond to nature, can you plan for a regular time in your element? Can you recognize the importance of ritual in deepening your experience of nature? Walking in silence while counting your steps or breaths, maybe, or standing at a specific point and holding your arms out and noticing the feeling of the out-of-doors through every pore?

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What qualities might spiritual practice allow you to explore, and make more abundant in every aspect of your life?

When you are part of a diverse group, how do you intentionally balance the sense of your religious beliefs or spiritual practice with respect for the spiritual perspectives and presence of others?

How might you bring your values and practice into transformative action for yourself and others?

Who or what is your teacher?

The Rev. Kathleen McTigue, in the book of Unitarian Universalist essays on *Everyday Spiritual Practice*, summarizes her practice this way:

To fall asleep with the question, “Where in this day did I really hear the language of my life?” moves us every day a little nearer to awakening with the question, “Where today will I really hear the language of my life?” Where today will I find God?⁴

Our Unitarian Universalist mission and ministry differs from that of many religions because it is based in covenant, not in creed. We rely on our shared values rather than dogma, and we depend upon shared covenant, the agreements we hold sacred in our company, to help us navigate the uncertain waters of the unknown and unfamiliar, to arrive at the truth as it is continually evolving and being revealed.

The Rev. Dr. John Buehrens, past president of the UUA, notes that UUs do not require common beliefs, but we do ask one another, “What hopes do we share? What promises are we willing to undertake in order to realize

⁴ McTigue, Kathleen, “Listening to Our Lives” in the collection *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life*. Scott W. Alexander, ed. Skinner House, 1999.

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those hopes? How shall we treat one another on the way?"⁵ These are covenantal questions, not creedal tests.

The Rev. John Gibbons of Bedford, Massachusetts, says:

"I believe [our churches] exist to serve the cause of liberal religion; to spread the gospel that all people are worthy. Were more people to follow liberal religious ideals of generosity, compassion, justice, [tolerance] and love, I am convinced that our world would be a better place. Ours is an enterprise that is life-saving and world-changing. It's time to let others in on our little secret. Many very good and important things are happening here, and our outward-facing faith obligates us to invite others in."⁶

This is the business that you are about here and now, at the Evergreen UU Fellowship, and it is a crucial business these days. Blind faith and easy security have evaporated like so many Bernie Madoff investments. Anxiety is a given for most of us now, and some in this community are rounding the corner to panic and despair. Our future is changing in ways that even the wisest among us are unable to clearly predict.

What is not changing, and what will help us meet whatever our future brings, is the solid ground of the values we uphold and the meaning we make together as religious community. These remain sure and hopeful, powerfully steady as we live out our sacred covenant in love and truth, respect and compassion, generosity and service.

So, what are we UUs to do, as crisis mounts all around us? We can turn to our religion, and offer it more visibly, more intentionally, more prophetically to the world and to our neighbors. We can offer the kind of

⁵ "Covenants," a message delivered by John Buehrens, President, Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations; date and details unknown.

⁶ Rev. John Gibbons, First Parish Church (UU), Bedford, MA. Date unknown; included as a reading in a sermon by Rev. Kathleen McTigue, delivered 6/6/04 to Unitarian Society of New Haven.

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faith that can't be taken away. Our religious values and practice can give us and others the moral courage and spiritual strength to find comfort and reassurance in fearful and uncertain times, to live fully with troubling questions even when we don't know the answers, and to find that wisdom and steadiness which must lead us to a world of greater peace, and justice, and caring for all. This is the wealth we are looking to spread, and this is the kind of change we are craving – and will have.

I leave you with the words of Mary Oliver, in her poem "Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does It End?" from the collection *Why I Wake Early*, published by the UUA's Beacon Press⁷:

There are things you can't reach. But
you can reach out to them, and all day long.

The wind, the bird flying away. The idea of God.

And it can keep you as busy as anything else, and happier.

The snake slides away; the fish jumps, like a little lily,
out of the water and back in; the goldfinches sing
from the unreachable top of the tree.

I look; morning to night I am never done with looking.

Looking I mean not just standing around, but standing around
as though with your arms open.

And thinking: maybe something will come, some
shining coil of wind,
or a few leaves from any old tree –
they are all in this too.

And now I will tell you the truth.

⁷ Oliver, Mary. "Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does it End?" *Why I Wake Early: New Poems*. Beacon Press, Boston, MA (Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations). 2005.

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Everything in the world
comes.

At least, closer.

And, cordially.

Like the nibbling, tinsel-eyed fish; the unlooping snake.
Like goldfinches, little dolls of gold
fluttering around the corner of the sky

of God, the blue air.