

7 December 2008 ☆ Inward and Downward
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“How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.”
~ Annie Dillard

“Give me this day my daily yoga.” This is a prayer that I feed myself when I encounter an unexpected moment of struggle or plain old bummed-out-ness. “Give me this day my daily yoga”: these words are a way to almost tease myself into remembering that my Yoga practice is just that: a *practice* – cultivated but never perfected; designed not to give me stronger shoulders, but a stronger soul; not more open hamstrings, but a more open heart.

The subtext of my prayer goes like this: “Give me this day an opportunity to be present, and open, and patient, and a loving witness to all that’s unfolding around and within me.” That’s what you do on the yoga mat, after all: the point is not to become a pretzel; the point is to watch what happens to your mind, and your breath, and the volume knob on your own private talk radio station when your body is moving, and pushing, and pulling against itself. On the mat, at the core of the practice is gentle observation without struggle. Taking the practice *off* mat is where the real effort (and prayers) come into play.

At my best (... and I’ll let you estimate how often that is...), I manage to live the practice: to gently observe and *be with*, rather than fight against, the myriad ways that the world colludes to pierce the bubble of perfection. The Witness, sometimes, manages to step out from under the shadows of the external world – which is so captivating, and where we believe we have ultimate control – and go inward.

For all of these reasons, yoga has long been for me not an athletic pursuit, but a spiritual practice: it’s a vehicle by which I navigate “the labyrinth of [the] inner [life].”¹ “There is no way out of one’s inner life,” writes Parker Palmer, “so one had better get into it. On the inward and downward spiritual journey, the only way out is in and through.” My yoga practice – combined with a mix of journaling, meditation, and a long Sunday night walk – carries me in and through.

The term “spiritual practice” gets tossed around loosely – at least, in the circles in which I travel – and yet some of you might not even be familiar with that term. Since it’s helpful for all of us to be on the same page, let’s back up to talk semantics for a moment.

The topic of “spirituality” prompts many of us to pepper our speech with capital letters: spirituality is deepening our awareness of (capital-M) Mystery; it’s the process by which we bring our life to (capital-L) Life²; it’s refocusing our lens to see that whether or not we believe in (capital-G) God, we are not God.³ If those are the gentle parameters of

“spirituality,” then spiritual *practice* is how we *get* there, and return there when we’re taken off course. (My favorite explanation comes from poet Mark Nepo,⁴ who says, “Anything that removes what grows between our hearts and the day is spiritual.”)

What does that look like? What constitutes a “spiritual practice?” If there’s any bad news, it’s that, in my opinion, the term has been spread too broadly: a spiritual practice is *not* just anything that makes you feel good (I’m sorry, but watching reruns of Grey’s Anatomy with a bag of chips does not count as “spiritual”). The good news is that each of us gets to determine our own path along the inward journey; if nobody else thinks it’s a spiritual practice, it doesn’t matter: *you* get to discover what serves you, and your journey inward.

While I’m loathe to suggest that there’s a “right” and a “wrong” way to find one, I’d suggest that all meaningful, authentic spiritual practices share four basic characteristics: *intentionality*, *regularity*, *depth*, and what I call (for lack of a better term) a *takeaway factor*.

Intention means that when you sit down to meditate, or put on your jacket for a walk in the park, or go to your singing group, you do so mindfully: with devotion for what you’re about to do, and with an unspoken invitation to be opened, or changed, or simply to remove what’s grown between your heart and the day.

Engaging in a spiritual practice with *regularity* means just that: whether daily or weekly, our spirits/souls need consistent nourishment through some habitual, familiar way. It’s the well-worn path down to the river, where we bring our vessel to be filled.

There are a lot of things that we do mindfully and consistently – flossing comes to mind – and so we arrive at the third criterion: *depth*, or *transcendence*, is part of spiritual practice. There’s a hunger or impulse to go below the surface – inward – and reconnect with the Larger Life (there are those capital letters again!).

Those three characteristics already add up to a lot, so it might seem unfair to add a fourth. But it seems to me that any meaningful spiritual practice informs – and *steers* – our daily course through life. These practices challenge us to be centered on the meditation cushion or the hiking trail or the yoga mat, and they *also* challenge us to bring our Higher Self with us into the rest of our day. (That’s where we need doses of loving kindness, and stillness, and non-reactivity: out there, in the jungle of the world. Spiritual practice has a purpose, and it’s to give us a deeper ability to live in that world, and be *of* it.⁵)

By now, there are likely ideas taking shape in your imagination about spiritual practices you’ve tried, or know about, or have integrated into your life. Some of you come to Live Oak every Tuesday night to join our Sangha in Buddhist meditation. Some of you

dedicate time every few days to meet yourself on the pages of a journal. Others of you, like me, have found ways to embody spiritual practice: through Tai Chi, yoga, or even hiking. Two weeks ago, I taught you a moving meditation that my colleague created,⁶ which he does first thing when he gets out of bed each morning.

As I've already said, what serves you and your soul is no one's business but yours – but it's essential that you know what that is; it's crucial to what we do here, as members of this Beloved Community.

I once shared with you the phrase “how you do anything is how you do everything;”⁷ at the top of your order service today is Annie Dillard's reminder that “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.” Both of those messages point to the same truth: the more we refine our ability to be present and at ease in any given moment, the more present we can be to every person, every being, every act of work, that we encounter throughout our days.

I was thrilled when, recently, I heard a presentation by the Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs, who is a friend and colleague, as well as President of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. Having served as a parish minister for three decades, and wanting our UU congregations to be as transformative as possible, Rob has dared to express his wish “that we could name three expectations for members of every Unitarian Universalist congregation.”⁸ The number one expectation? “To develop a daily spiritual practice: ways to find and keep your balance so you can live a more loving, more effective life; you will let the congregation help you do that and help you sustain you in that.”

(Rob's second and third wishes, incidentally, are that our members would all develop the skills needed for small group intimacy, and to put our shared values to work in the larger world by being agents of transformation.)

It sounds so juicy, doesn't it? Who wouldn't want to live a more loving, more effective life? But if there's any resistance at all pushing back from your heart's center, let me guess what that resistance might be: guilt. All too often, spiritual practice takes on a patina of guilt. We miss a day, or a week, or can't make time at all for *any* exploration inward. As a result, we're reluctant to start, or to resume, a practice – all because we can't get past what we deem a “failure” to follow through.

You already know that UU's don't put a high premium on guilt, so let me grant you absolution in the form of an insight from my colleague, Erik Walker Wikstrom⁹: falling away from spiritual practice is *part* of the practice itself. If we didn't drift away from our intention, or regularity, or depth... the practice would be meaningless.

Erik explains that any spiritual practice¹⁰ has a three-fold movement: 1. focus and conscious attention; 2. distraction, where our attention is “kidnapped”; and 3.

recognizing the distraction, and consciously returning our focus. This 3-part process goes on at the micro level – that is, in the moment of the practice – as well as at the macro level – which is what makes “the practice” *the practice*.

Here’s what I mean by that: let’s take basic meditation as an example. You’re sitting on your cushion, watching your breath and inviting stillness. Suddenly, your mind starts thinking about what you’ll eat for dinner, whether your hair care product is really working for you, or the girlfriend you had in tenth grade. You’re distracted – pulled away. As soon as you notice that, there’s a choosing (*intention*): an opportunity to name the distraction and return loving awareness to the breath, and to stillness. Sitting with perfect focus for twenty minutes is nice, but spending twenty minutes gently and patiently *choosing* to focus, no matter what your mind throws at you, is the practice that grows stronger. That’s the “micro” level.

Our attention to the practice is just as susceptible to being kidnapped at the “macro” level: perhaps you *used* to sit quietly to meditate every day, but eventually felt like you didn’t have time. Or maybe you once *planned* to begin each day with prayer and journaling – and did so for a few weeks – but more pressing needs surfaced.

That’s *great*, says Erik. You heard me right: great. Distractions serve as an invitation for us to return back to the practice. If your mind wanders during meditation, you have an opportunity to choose where to focus again. If your prayer life has drifted into nothing, you have an opportunity to choose to return to it. The whole thing is just training the spiritual muscles that allow you to be focused and present in your life. What you practice grows stronger, whether it’s avoiding a spiritual practice, or cultivating one.

If you remember nothing else about this sermon, remember these two things: embrace the distractions, and embrace the moments of being tested.

Embrace the distractions for what they are: a measure of any distance that’s grown between you and your inner journey, and an invitation to close that distance.

And embrace the moments of being tested: the long line at the bank, the rude driver on the freeway... whatever the figurative grain of sand is, that works its way under your shell. Love the moments when, like Parker Palmer, you’re suspended off of a cliff and forced to see that “the only way out is in and through.”

May we each find ways to travel the labyrinth of the inner life,
 spending our days, and our lives,
 gracefully weaving our way in and through. Amen.

Endnotes

1. *Let Your Life Speak*, p. 85.
2. A phrase borrowed from my friend and colleague, the Rev. Ken Collier.
3. A phrase borrowed from the Rev. Erik Walker Wikstrom.
4. In *The Book of Awakening*, p. 119.
5. A comment by the author Elizabeth Gilbert.
6. The Rev. Tom Owen-Towle.
7. The title of one of Cheri Huber's books. Huber is a Zen Buddhism teacher.
8. In a joint presentation with Gini Courter, Moderator of the UUA, on the UUA's new DVD, "Ministry Matters: Strengthening Lay and Professional Leadership."
9. Erik shared this insight at his Nov. 2008 Refugio workshop.
10. I'm grateful to my brilliant colleague, the Rev. Erik Wikstrom, for this insight.