

“Spiritual Practice: Not Just for Yogis Anymore”
A Sermon by Rev. Barbara H. Gadon
First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, DE
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I learned to meditate because I was going to Auschwitz. A rabbi friend invited me to accompany her on an interfaith retreat; I said yes, and I was terrified. It was led by Bernie Glassman, a Jew by birth and now a Zen master. Bernie's idea was that no one can really handle the notion of something as big as the Holocaust by 'figuring it out'. There are no words for it; such atrocities defy explanation. He goes further to argue that it's actually helpful to go into the “place of unknowing” - a place of complete humility about our ability to 'master' such things - and just bear witness to it all. That this would be, somehow, healing. Insight would come. (Bernie Glassman, *Bearing Witness*) It would require the ability to see some pretty horrific things, and not turn away, nor get so disturbed you couldn't function. We would be there, Polish Catholics and American Jews, Germans and Japanese, Native Americans and many others, we would sit right in the middle of that place of devastation and cruelty, and bear witness. Meditating.

I started with some instruction by Jack Kornfield, a Buddhist teacher of Insight Meditation, a popular form in America. I didn't travel to Tibet, or find a master to study with in some exotic part of the world – I sat in my living room and played a cassette tape. Worked just as well, I think. I sat still, paid attention to my body, what I was hearing, how I was feeling. I was instructed to simply notice everything that I thought, felt or sensed. Sounds like navel-gazing at its finest, I grant you. But I was cultivating pure awareness to the present moment. Which is tougher than it sounds. You quickly run into what the Buddhists call the “monkey mind”. All the ruminations, weird obsessions, snatches of memory and future plans, laundry lists and bodily sensations that make up our thoughts. I think of them as a swarm of bees that hum around in our heads. Here's a sample: I usually meditate first thing in the morning, so one of the bees is my rumbling stomach. Insight Meditation teaches you to say to yourself, “hungry, hungry”. You don't do anything about it, just notice it. Another bee buzzing around is a list of things I have to do at

the church office - “thinking, thinking”, I note. Now I'm worrying about my sermon, “anxious, anxious”. Then it begins in earnest: *Wonder how my dad is doing, geez, John Stewart was funny last night, what was that line? My car is making that weird sound again – hope it's not expensive. I hope my friend so and so isn't mad at me, well what if she is, she was rude, too, you know.* At some point I notice that I've been off to the races as it were. Those bees and I are tearing it up. You can get so caught up in your thoughts you forget you're supposed to be meditating. But instead of clobbering yourself for this, and getting all caught up in THAT, meditators are encouraged to express gratitude for the moment when you have, finally, noticed. It is a moment of pure awareness. Sometimes I use a mantra to bring me back to concentration - “trust” or “love” have been helpful mantras for me. Bringing the mind back to the present, over and over, however you do it, that is the practice.

Thoreau reports difficulty with the monkey mind, too. He had his own swarm of bees. His spiritual discipline was walking – miles and miles each day, often deep into the woods. You might think, “Well, Thoreau, one of the spiritual giants of American history, and look at all the *time* he had on his hands. Surely this was easier for him!” He describes going into the forest and “being well of an hour into that wood” before he could shake off the worries and obsessions buzzing around in his head. It took almost an hour before he could actually notice the trees and flowers that he had been walking among. So we think this is a 21st century problem, that our heads are particularly swarming nowadays, and they have been, all along. This is why an ancient practice like meditation still applies. Good intentions don't get us anywhere – we need to practice.

Late this summer, when the board, executive team and ministers met to discuss goals for the year, there was one suggestion that generated great interest. Many of you saw it in a letter we sent to members several weeks ago – it was to encourage every member in the congregation to form a spiritual practice. Well, you happen to have two ministers now who are great enthusiasts of spiritual practice, so Josh and I decided to do a series of services about them. Throughout the year, we intend to lift up different groups and classes that we offer at our church to help you learn them. I've

made a list of the practices for which we offer classes or groups and put them at the table at the back of the room on a pink sheet. Please take one and see if any of them call out to you.

What is spiritual practice? First, a spiritual practice is anything you do with regularity and intention, to help you pay attention to the present moment. A walk in the woods, a la Thoreau. Meditation, contemplative prayer, yoga, tai chi. Different art forms can do this. A sport that requires intense focus, like tennis or basketball. All of these focus us in the present. Human beings tend to be run by fixation on the past, and worry about the future. We seldom see what is here and now. I can't possibly be the first person who has ever told you this. We all know it. And yet, simple awareness of this fact doesn't really do much to help us get there. It takes practice – and it takes a willingness to keep doing it after it gets boring, inconvenient or difficult – which I guarantee from my personal experience it will.

Second, spiritual practice is something that quiets us somehow. It starts with faith in the notion that underneath the swarm of buzzing thoughts and sensations is actually something powerful and wise. You can call it many things – the still, small voice, God, the soul, conscience, interdependent web - your choice. You cannot, however, demand that the inner voice make an appearance. There's nothing you can do to force it to speak. But you can learn to be quiet enough, and still enough to allow it to come.

My husband Robert teaches yoga, as many of you know. (People often ask if I practice yoga too, and I say no, we are a mixed marriage.) Robert tells me that the practice of paying attention to the body, through the various poses, quiets down the mind. You also see where you are carrying tension, and a slow coaxing of the rigid parts of yourself makes you become more pliant. Focusing specifically on the body is especially valuable for Unitarian Universalists, who like to think of our bodies as those handy devices that carry our heads from place to place.

Other forms of spiritual practice come with a desire for, or an

experience of, a higher power – like prayer. Prayer, too, is a big part of my life. But prayer evokes questions about to whom or what we pray, that deserves its own sermon – at least one. So that will be next month's sermon. For now, I will say one thing about prayer – it has been the easiest and most direct way for me to surrender my need to control situations, and to receive guidance from within. Other forms of spiritual practice do this, however, and don't require a specific theology for you to use them.

There is one more dimension to spiritual practice, a moral one. Cultivating your attention needs to be directed toward a noble purpose. What are you doing it for? What values are you attempting to serve? I love these spiritual teachers who are marketing their books and CDs around the same egocentric desires that encourage us to buy everything else – to have more success, wealth and beauty. So you see titles like “God wants you to be rich!” or “Yoga for a slimmer, lovelier you!”

Serious religions start out with some pretty demanding moral ideas. Buddhists make a vow to become a Bodhisattva, which is a vow to liberate all beings. Christians would say it was to become like Christ, loving and compassionate, putting all others before yourself. It is a Jewish ideal to practice *tikkun ha olam*, the repair of the world. And if you affirmed and promoted all seven of the Unitarian Universalist principles to the letter every moment of the day – you'd be pretty exhausted. And a saint. None of these lofty goals alone will do a darned thing to help us get there.

So spiritual practices are intended, not as yet another self-help scheme, but to generate enough awareness, to create enough room within us, to care about more than just ourselves. To really know in our core that life is about more than us. There is a short poem about this that I love. It goes: “What if the universe was about more than just us? What is it about? And what about – us?”

Asians often express surprise that Americans are taught meditation first when they learn about Buddhism. They begin with generosity – which Asian Buddhists places first because it seems (to them) the easiest place to begin.

This is followed by wisdom, patience, ethics, and right effort. Meditation is way down on the list. Americans with our individualistic culture, often don't even mention the others.

People sometimes wonder if spiritual practice is peaceful, if you have some ethereal feeling of oneness with the universe. That may or may not happen, and when it does, it certainly does not last. On the meditation retreats I've been on, where we have done sitting, walking or eating meditation for a whole day, you might think it sounds dull, but it gets pretty intense. Retreat leaders, during the question and answer portion of each day, will get this evil smile on their faces, and say, "How's the *weather* in there?" Because there is this weather in all of us, we just don't know it. And in meditation you watch thunderstorms come up, then gorgeous, beatific patches of sun, then blizzards, and back to sprinkles. And you watch as you go from one form of weather to the next, sharpening your awareness, letting go of your terror or dread at a storm, or your tendency to cling to the sun.

There's a Jewish story I like, about King Solomon. Solomon was in a terrible state of depression and anxiety. He couldn't seem to shake it. If he was feeling bad, he was convinced it would be forever. If he had a moment where he felt good, he was terrified of losing it. One night, he had a dream about a magical ring that had the power to make a sad person happy, and a happy person sad. He didn't know why, but he knew it would help him with his problem. So he sent out three of his advisors, and they looked all over his kingdom in search of this ring. They approached every jeweler and merchant they could find. They came back to Solomon empty-handed, and said, "Sorry, we couldn't find it." King Solomon said, Guess what, I'm the king, so you'd better go out and look some more. Finally, the youngest advisor came across a poor jeweler he had overlooked before, in a tiny village. When he asked if the man had ever heard of a ring that could make a happy person sad and sad person happy, the jeweler got inspired. He went back into his shop, and on a plain gold band, he engraved the letters, "*Gam Zed, Ya-ov*", which stand for an expression meaning "This too shall pass." King Solomon understood what this meant immediately, and was delighted. If you're sad, that emotion will pass. We tend to be most willing to say, "This too shall

pass” when things are going badly. The trick is to remember it when things are going great. If we're happy, guess what? That moment will pass, too. King Solomon found that wearing this ring restored his sense of equilibrium. He went on to do great things for his people.

Given the blows to our economy we've experienced this week, I'd say we could all use a ring like this. I preached a month ago about fear and the economy, not realizing that this month I would be preaching about...fear and the economy. Lehmann Brothers, AIG and Merrill Lynch? Money market funds? These institutions that impact so much of our resources, so much of our life – these giants that have, without our realizing it, seemed to hold our world in place. Just a month ago, I shared with you Harvey Cox's devastating satire on the Free Market as God. Now, with the government bailing out these companies, at astronomical expense and no real guarantee that even THAT will keep chaos at bay, it's like the death of a god. A god we relied upon. As a financial analyst from the Washington Post said, so much of this is a “confidence game”. People panic about their money, they withdraw funds and sell stock, without our really being able to sift the bad from the good, and it makes the situation much worse.

It's easy to do one of two options. Turn away because you can't stand to pay attention, or panic. Spiritual practice, I submit, is a third option. It's a practice that allows us to be present, take in the information, feel the worry and fear as it arises, and know that, like everything else in this life, this is not permanent. Nothing is permanent – no market, no mindset, no world situation, no emotion – fear, confidence, panic, calm. And become more grounded. It doesn't mean you go off in your cave and think happy thoughts – that's the cartoon version of spiritual practice, and it's dead wrong. But spiritual practice is what gives you the ability to really face anything, pay attention to what's actually happening, and not mistake the thunderstorms inside you as representing reality. Spiritual disciplines can give us the ability to make better decisions because we have a looser and larger sense of the world, beyond the most recent report on CNN.

So, you may be wondering, does this stuff really work? What happens

AFTER you've left yoga class, or after you've left your meditation cushion? I can honestly tell you that when I was in Auschwitz-Birkenau, I did see some terrible things. I stood in the place where women and girls were made to undress before stepping into the “showers” to be gassed. I saw the wooden barracks that still had teeth-marks from prisoners gnawing them in hunger. I sat at the railroad tracks where the trains came in, and people were selected, and taken left for work camps, or right for extermination.

And I saw some wonderful things. I saw the children and grandchildren of people who were in the camps or people who put them there, meet for the first time, and actually embrace one another. I heard an official apology from a Polish priest that made the Jews in attendance weep - they had been waiting so long to hear something as clear and responsible as this. And there were miracles.

We sat on our bright blue cushions right at that place, where you can still hear the sound of trains in the town of Oswiecim. We began our practice with a hand-cranked siren used to rouse prisoners out of their beds. We were each given about 100 names of people who had died in the camps, to recite, to remember. It is said that everyone who goes on this retreat receives a miracle. This was mine – all the names on my sheet were “Krause” - which happened to be the name of some dear friends of mine in Arlington, Virginia, Barbara and Alan Krause, who are like a second family me. In saying all those Krause names, I realized that “Krause” could be anything – German, Jew, Gay, Jehovah's Witness – all were my family. I was able to bear witness to incredible sorrow - and beauty - as people reconciled with one another across generations of suffering. And my practice meant that I was able to pay attention to all that I was seeing, hearing and feeling - the rise and fall of all that emotion – to the point where I saw that there was wisdom, there was healing, underneath it all.

Like it or not, we are heading for times that require us to be spiritual heroes. These are times that will require more steadiness and more courage – and more heart and more caring - than we have had to show before. We need to suit up and show up, and not contribute to the chaos with our own panic.

And you cannot do that by toughness, or individual fortitude alone. You can only do it by connecting yourself, deliberately, to others. You can only do it through grounding yourself in the present, doing what you can, right now, and not deciding what the future will be in advance. The truth is, we really don't know. We do know that this shall pass, and give rise to something else. We do know there is wisdom to be found underneath all this sound and fury. Unitarians and Universalists have believed this and preached this for centuries. What we do matters. What we do contributes to the salvation of the whole. "You may only possess a small light," wrote John Murray, a long-ago Universalist preacher, "but uncover it, and let it shine. Give them not hell, but hope, preach the everlasting love of God." Amen.