

## **Pay Attention**

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Unitarian Universalist  
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*Come into this circle of love and justice,  
Come into this community where we can dream and  
Believe in those dreams—  
Come into this holy space where we remember who we are  
And how we want to live.  
Come now, and let us worship together!  
--Rev. Marilyn Sewall*

### **Meditation**

We are many...  
Yet we gather as one...  
As we allow this quiet time to embrace us,  
    May we *feel* that we are one, interconnected whole  
    As a community... on this dear earth...

And from this deeply felt oneness, deeply felt wholeness of connection...

May our prayers reach to all who suffer, all who are ill or lonely and in need of healing, all who are in need of work, all who are in need of a home, all who live in the midst of violence or war...

From this deeply felt oneness and wholeness in our hearts and in this community, we pray for oneness and wholeness in our world, on this sweet earth we call home. From ancient writings, three diverse (or are they?) approaches to the idea of a spiritual path or way:

### **Readings**

From the Navaho:

With beauty before me may I walk  
With beauty behind me may I walk  
With beauty above me may I walk  
With beauty all around me may I walk  
In old age, wandering on a trail of beauty, lively, may I walk

From the Tao Te Ching: The way that can be named is not the eternal way.

From the Gospel of John, Jesus' words: I am the way, the truth, and the life.

## Sermon

Our third Unitarian Universalist principle is worth recalling on this, our Association Sunday. This principle affirms the importance of mutual acceptance as we encourage spiritual growth within our congregations. “Spiritual growth.”

We toss that word “spiritual” around a lot these days. And many people talk about being on a “spiritual path.”

Do you have a spiritual path or practice?

Some of you might have a ready answer.

Others might respond with more questions: I’m supposed to be on a spiritual path – have a spiritual practice? When I can’t even get through the day with the list of things to do I’ve already got? Now I’m supposed to add spiritual path and practice to the list?

This summer I received my quarterly edition of the journal “Parabola”, self-described as a journal of myth and tradition. Each issue is organized around a theme. The theme for the summer issue was “Finding the Right Path.”

Apparently not only are we meant to have a spiritual path, but it had better be the right one!

And they don’t seem to be easy!

There was an article in this issue about a ninety-year-old hatha yoga master in India, with a photo of him standing on his head. At ninety I just hope I’ll be standing on my feet, or even just here at all!

Another article described an African people known as the Tuareg, and their code of honor and care, their path. A story from their tradition tells of a man who was the guest in the tent of the family of the woman he hoped to marry. He was sitting on the ground near the entrance to the tent. A rival for the woman’s affections arrived also and, as is the polite custom, thrust his sword into the ground upon entering. By chance, the sword went through the first man’s hand on its way to the ground. But no one was the wiser, for the first man, as a point of honor, said not a word during a long evening of feasting and song. (The woman, by the way, later discovering the blood on the sand and divining what had happened, chose him to be her husband.)

Whether true or apocryphal, it is another story suggesting the depth of discipline required to live a spiritual path. Which had better be the right path!

So.... what about us? Mostly just trying to make it from one day to the next, maybe much of the time feeling we’re just muddling through... what about us?

First, that word “spiritual.” What does this oft used, oft misused and sometimes abused word mean?

I return to the Latin root of the word, “spiritus.” It is about breath. It is a translation from the Hebrew “ruah” which is the breath that God breathed into Adam in the Genesis creation story.

So I think of the spiritual dimension of life as having to do with whatever enhances, deepens, enriches life, embracing and transcending mere biological survival.

For some people, prayer or meditation has this enhancing and deepening effect. For others a walk or run in the woods. For others dance or song. For others or at other times, service, helping one another brings more life to our lives.

In other words, the range of what we might call a spiritual path or practice is much wider than we may have thought.

Then there is the idea of a path – a spiritual *path*.

And if a path is meant to get us from here to there, where is a *spiritual* path meant to get us? To heaven? To enlightenment? Or maybe just back to where we started and always have been... yet more awake, more alive?

It is in any case an ancient metaphor, this metaphor of path or way. In the readings we were reminded of the Tao, of Jesus as the Way, of the Navaho “beauty way.” We could go on. There are the “margas” in Hinduism, different paths suitable for different temperaments, yet all leading to the one goal of liberation.

On it goes, in just about every ancient tradition: paths or ways to some spiritual goal, whether understood as awakening, liberation, enlightenment, salvation... in any case (or so I would suggest) greater aliveness.

Back to that summer edition of “Parabola”: “Finding the Right Path.”

I started wondering as I read the various articles about various paths: Have I had a path for all these years of my life? Much less a “right path”?

Well, as a small boy I said my prayers every night. “Now I lay me down to sleep...” At the time I wouldn’t have named this a spiritual practice or part of a spiritual path, but perhaps it was.

I studied philosophy in college – a disciplined searching and questioning. Was this a spiritual path? I certainly felt (and still do feel) more alert and *alive* in the midst of a philosophical give and take, conversation about things that matter.

Also while in college, I first learned meditation from a monk visiting from Thailand. I learned some yoga from a middle-class American teacher who lived near campus. And I did feel a little more awake or alive when I practiced these disciplines. I still do, however sporadic my practice sometimes is.

Sometimes I’ve thought running might be my spiritual path or practice – or part of it. There’s no question that I’m more consistent in my practice of running than just about anything else. Almost every day I’m on the road or in the woods – slower than once I was, but still moving. And on good days I surely feel more awake as I run and sometimes for hours afterwards. Is this just about getting a little more blood flowing to the brain? Or is something else going on?

And each morning I read a poem or ancient text, then write a little. That feels like a spiritual practice too.

Could I include music? I feel more alive when I’m playing music.

And service. Like many of you, I do feel more alive when I’m helping someone else, even in a mundane or simple way.

So many practices and paths.

But this leads me to wonder: Is there any sense in which all these practices or paths – questioning, meditating, running, reading, writing, music, service – are actually part of *one* path?

Well, as I’ve mused over all this, it occurred to me that just two words might suffice to name the path I’ve been on for most of my life without having named it as such, a path which threads its way through all of these practices and activities, a path which perhaps you are on too: attention and love.

Maybe it is your path too.

Attention: Each one of these different “paths” or practices I’ve described, whatever else they might have in common in common share “attention” – the intentional practice of being more mindful, more present to the moment and the fullness thereof.

And now I recall that my very first sermon, years before I even entered seminary – about forty years ago actually – was about attention. It was Sunday morning chapel on Lookout Mountain in the Adirondacks. I, a camp councilor taking my turn leading the service, talked about paying attention. And in the middle of the talk I suddenly tossed a tennis ball at the campers on the benches... to see if they were indeed paying attention! (Consider yourself fortunate this – I do not have a tennis ball hidden behind my back this morning.)

Attention. Whether meditating, praying, running, singing, serving.

But raw attention isn’t enough.

It *must* be coupled, it seems to me, with love – love which is leavened with a guiding ethical framework, but love at the heart of it: compassion, kindness... love.

Might it be that all spiritual practice in the end is about attention and love?

Isn’t love itself a spiritual practice? Since love is not only a noun but more essentially a verb?

And might it not be, completing a circle, that “attention” is itself simply a form of love?

For we are naturally more attentive to that which or who we love.

And in turn – the circle keeps turning – practicing attention, attention seeking understanding, attention to the depths of the world and of others, not to surfaces only... broadens the range of what and who we love.

Attention and love.

I’ll draw towards a conclusion with a story from the Zen tradition that illustrates some of what I’ve been saying. (*From a re-telling in Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart, edited by Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, slightly adapted here*):

There was a young man who had been disappointed in everything he had tried in his life. So he resolved to attain enlightenment to be freed from all his sufferings. He made his way to a remote mountain monastery and there asked the abbot if there was a short way to enlightenment for someone like him.

The abbot replied that there was, if he was willing to completely apply himself to the path. Then he asked the young man if he had ever truly concentrated on anything in his life.

The man responded that he hadn’t really, since his family was wealthy and he didn’t have to work. Then he said that there was one thing, actually – chess. He had spent most of his time playing chess.

The abbot thought for a moment, then asked his attendant to call the oldest monk in the monastery, and tell him to bring a chess board and pieces.

The old monk arrived.

The abbot spoke: “O monk, you have vowed obedience to me and kept your vows for many years. Now I require you to play a game of chess with this young man. If you lose, I will cut off your head – but you will be reborn in paradise. If the youth loses, I shall cut off his head, for chess is the only thing he has ever tried hard at – if he loses the game, he deserves to lose his head too.”

Both the old monk and the youth, looking at the abbot's face, could tell that he meant what he said.

The game began.

As move succeeded move, the young man felt the sweat trickling down his neck and back. The chessboard became the whole world; he was utterly concentrated on it. At first he was a bit on the worse end, but then his opponent, the old monk, made an error, then another. Before long the monk's position was crumbling, and the youth seemed on the verge of victory. At this moment, he stole a glance at the old monk's face. He saw in the lines and wrinkles of the monk's face great purity of soul, worn with years of austerity and effort. By contrast, he thought of his own worthless life, and a wave of compassion came over him.

He deliberately made a blunder, then another, and soon it was he, the youth, who was about to be defeated.

At this, the abbot leaned forward and upset the board and pieces.

The youth and the old monk were stunned.

The abbot spoke. "There is no winner, and no loser. There will be no head to roll. Only two things are required, complete concentration, and compassion. You have today," he said to the youth, "learned both." You were utterly attentive to the game, and from the depths of that attention, you felt an upwelling of compassion and love – and you were prepared to sacrifice your life for it.

Stay here and your enlightenment will be assured.

So I say to us this morning. Stay *here* – paying attention to this moment. Which will lead to simply *being* in this moment, and love overflowing in this moment. How often do I invite us to this kind of presence of mind and heart in the moment, presence with and for one another. Simple, though not always easy.

And though we will each find our own *practice* on this one wide path of attention and love – so many practices – perhaps it can be just as simple as *reminding* ourselves each day to live with more attention and love. In my book, *that's* a "right path" however you slice it.

Finally, whatever our path, know that as I said at the outset, we *are* supported as we walk our paths, supported by our Old Ship community as well as by the larger Unitarian Universalist community, along with the principles and sources of our Unitarian Universalist tradition.

This means that we *could* say that whatever our practice, we walk the Unitarian Universalist path.

So may it be.