

**How Is it With Your Spirit?**  
Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown  
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
November 12, 2006

**Readings**

“Burnout – a Misnomer” – by Ric Masten

burnout  
you've seen the results  
in the shop on the shelf  
row after row of grey empty faces  
with nothing happening in the glassy eyes  
except

a little surface reflection

burnout  
you know the symptoms  
a history of dependable service  
then suddenly for no reason things go dark  
and you're a dead piece of furniture  
waiting  
to be removed from the living room

burnout  
the psychological repairman said  
and shrugged and shook his head  
having checked everything  
except the cord  
which of course  
was disconnected  
in a word “unplugged”

and to think  
i nearly went to the dump myself  
because someone less than a poet  
trying to describe a condition  
came up with a misleading term  
clearly  
a case of burnout demands a second opinion  
and this is mine  
find an outlet  
and if the cord doesn't reach  
move the set

chapter 16 of *Tao Te Ching* (Stephen Mitchell translation)

Empty your mind of all thoughts,  
Let your heart be at peace.  
Watch the turmoil of beings,  
but contemplate their return.

Each separate being in the universe  
returns to the common source.  
Returning to the source is serenity.

If you don't realize the source,  
you stumble in confusion and sorrow.  
When you realize where you come from,  
you naturally become tolerant,  
disinterested, amused,  
kindhearted as a grandmother,  
dignified as a king.  
Immersed in the wonder of the Tao,  
you can deal with whatever life brings you,  
and when death comes, you are ready

## **Sermon**

A few weeks ago, on that very rainy, windy Saturday morning, I was up early to set out a little before 8:00 to the annual Ballou Channing District Fall Conference. I brought a CD to listen to in the car, battened down the hatches, and headed off to the Unitarian Universalist church in Fairhaven, down near New Bedford.

A little over an hour later I pulled up alongside the cathedral-like Fairhaven church. I was the only car on the road; the church was dark.

Hmmm.

I was so sure that the conference – at which I was due to co-lead a workshop on global warming – was in Fairhaven.

I called home. Susan informed me that my calendar indicated quite clearly... Barnstable.

Right! Barnstable! Why was I thinking Fairhaven?

Okay, off to Barnstable – probably another hour, and though I would miss some of the opening presentation – regrettably, since I had been looking forward to hearing Charlie Clements again, the president of the UUSC – even so I would be there in plenty of time for my workshop.

As long as I didn't get lost or something foolish like that.

I did take one wrong turn, about a hundred yards from the Barnstable church; then drove a mile before I realized my mistake, drove back, parked. And breathed. And breathed again.

Then I walked across the street to a church filled with warmth and with friendly Unitarian Universalists, including several Old Shippers, and the remaining twenty minutes of Charlie's inspiring presentation.

But... how was it with my spirit?

As I drove from Fairhaven to Barnstable I turned off the radio and CD player and reflected on that – how was it with my spirit?

Well, not bad really. But I had to acknowledge that it had been a long couple of weeks, that I was tired, that maybe I had said “yes” to one too many things... and that all in all it was understandable that “Fair haven” sounded much more pleasant to my unconscious mind (...my spirit) than “Barn stable.”

We are, after all, human beings, not machines. And even some machines sometimes need a rest. I’ve always been intrigued by a common suggestion from computer or cable tech support. “Okay,” they’ll say (and you know they are wondering if you can pull off the things they are about to ask you to do... but this first task is pretty straightforward), “Okay... turn off your computer (or cable box, whatever it might be) and unplug it.”

This is good. I can do this.

“Now,” they say after ten seconds or so, “plug it back in.”

And remarkably this sometimes works! Somehow the computer or the cable box “resets” (and I guess only God and the computer programmer know just what that means) and then the machine once again purrs along as it was meant to. Just given a moment to “reset.”

Yes, I took a breath or two or three in the parking lot when I arrived in Barnstable. It wasn’t a long pause. But, it was just enough to “reset” – at least for the time being.

The conference was excellent; the workshop was well-attended by enthusiastic, committed Unitarian Universalists – inspiring and enlivening to my spirit; and later on I was back in Hingham in plenty of time to celebrate the dedication of a beautiful child, the grandson of one of our members, which was also inspiring and enlivening to my spirit.

And, all things considered, I had also, loud and clear, been reminded of the need – an enduring need, a never once and for all need, to make the time to “reset” my spiritual connections.

So... how is it with *your* spirit?

This morning with the children I spoke in terms you’ve heard me use before. Among other things, I told them and reminded us that the word “spirit” means, at root, breath. So that when we talk about the condition of our “spirit” we are wondering how things are with the deep wellsprings of life for us – that which gives us life.

Now, depending on your theology, you may believe that we hold those deepest wellsprings in common – call the source God or (as in the second reading) Tao or Brahman, call it what you will. Be that as it may, it is also true that the waters of life travel different paths for each of us, whatever the ultimate source.

So... what gives *you* life? What restores *your* spirit?

Linus suggested to Charlie Brown in an old comic strip that, because life can be hard, everyone should be issued a banjo at birth. Well, that works for me!

But for you it may be something else. It might be Mozart or Bach; or it might be opera or jazz, reggae or rap.

Or it might be that morning cup of tea. It might be a walk in the woods. It might be a hug from someone you love. It might be the words of Mary Oliver or Emily Dickinson or Walt Whitman. Or maybe the words of the *Bible* or the *Bhagavad Gita* or the *Tao Te Ching*.

And at different times it may be many different things.

What gives *you* life? What restores *your* spirit?

My message this morning is, you see, quite simple. Just this. It is, it seems to me, essential that we have answers to these questions for ourselves, and that we try to live our

answers. Because times come for each of us when our spirit is low, maybe even feels as though it has been utterly sapped. At worst, we may need to consult with a physician – untreated clinical depression can be life-threatening, as you know. But most of the time we just need to remember our answers to those questions: What gives us life? What restores our spirit?

Ric Masten, in this morning's reading, used the phrase "burnout," a phrase we don't hear so much anymore; but that's not to say we don't get burned out anymore. Did you read the recent study that reports that we are a sleep-deprived nation? And that when the average person has had less than six hours of sleep, they might as well be alcohol impaired, according to measures of reaction time and judgment? Well, burnout, exacerbated by sleep deprivation, may be a national affliction. But the answer to it, even so, is largely individual, one by one.

Ric suggests a simple solution at the end of his poem. Plug the set back in! In other words, plug back into the source of energy and life – spirit, however you understand or experience it, whatever the particular connection for you.

I think I once recounted to you an incident shared by poet David Whyte, during a period when he was working, as he put it, to "save the world" at a non-profit organization of some kind. Near the end of a particularly harried day, he rushed to a scheduled staff meeting, and, standing at the doorway to the conference room, asked, "Has anyone seen David?"

And he was the only David working for the organization.

He took the rest of the day off.

That evening, by happy coincidence, Whyte had already planned a visit with his good friend, the Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast. The advice which came of that meeting? Not for a long rest, not to stop altogether what he was doing. But rather to find again his source of enthusiasm, his source of life, his source of spiritual energy. And this began a many-month period of reflection for Whyte, which in turn led to a reorientation of his life, led to his putting his life as a poet at the center, and putting his poetry in service of the spiritual needs of others, bringing poetry to the workplace, to the corporate world, and to the rest of us too.

Of course sometimes it may not be a wholesale reorientation of your life that is called for. It may be simply that rest of some kind *is* precisely what is necessary for the health of our spirits.

On another long drive recently (this one with no wrong turns!) I found myself behind a van with a bumper sticker that read: "Pause for Prayer." Well, we Unitarian Universalists have many ideas about prayer; for some of us prayer might be a daily practice, for others it may be a meaningless word. But most of us recognize a need to "pause" sometimes – and if not "Pause for Prayer" maybe pause for meditation or contemplation, or maybe just a nap. *Pause* anyway – to "reset" our spirit, to reconnect to the source of life.

So, how *is* it with our spirits this day, this season, this post-election time, this approaching the holidays time, this still at war time, this challenge of global warming time? How *is* it with our spirits?

And what about our spirits in the context of these larger challenges we face?

Well, I came across the following very interesting idea in what you might think to be an unlikely place, a book I've been reading titled *The View From the Center of the Universe: Discovering Our Extraordinary Place in the Cosmos*.

The authors, physicist Joel Primack and science writer Nancy Abrams, remind us that in the worlds of particle physics and astrophysics, common sense fails. We cannot transpose the way things work on the ordinary, everyday scale of life to the quantum world of the exceedingly

small or to the cosmic world of the very, very large. In other words, we can't apply Newtonian physics to the entire universe. Reality simply is different, behaves differently, depending on the size, the scale, we're talking about.

What does this have to do with the condition or health of our spirits?

Well, they go on to offer an analogy which quite directly has to do with my question today, "How is it with your spirit?"

They begin with an experience they had had several years ago.

They had attended a conference titled "Faith in the Future." The expert speakers addressed the wide range of daunting challenges facing us on the planet today, and though they were all committed to making positive change in the world, by the end of the conference, "the consensus seemed to be that the future was bleak; a palpable sense of depression filled the room."

Following the conference, Primack and Abrams reflected for some time about this, and finally realized that they had experienced what they choose to call "emotional scale confusion," analogous to the confusion of how things work in the world of physics depending on scale, on size. At that workshop, they write, "participants despaired for the future even though everyone around them was a jewel." Yes, the challenges we face *are* enormous, but, Primack and Abrams go on to affirm, "On the personal, emotional level, instead of being sunk in depression, we should all have been grateful for having learned more about the world and been celebrating the discovery of so many inspiring people dedicated to such high ideals."

You see, the world does *not* need people who are in the condition of unrelieved despair about our present situation and our future prospects. Yes, we need to confront fully the challenges we face, we need to be honest about our global situation *and* honest about the feelings our situation evokes. But then, as Primack and Abrams put it, "Our job is to live with joy while doing everything we possibly can to improve the odds for our planet. Joy can help by increasing motivation.""

And so, you might almost say it is an obligation for us to take joy in one another, to appreciate the beauty of autumn, to have our spirits restored and ever refreshed by good music, good company, good food. Primack and Abrams go on to tell us that "The Talmud intriguingly says that we will be held to account for all permitted pleasures we did not enjoy."

They conclude that none of this means "that our personal choices should not reflect our larger principles, but that what we *feel* about large-scale trends is about the large-scale trends – not about who we are and the possibilities open in our personal lives."

With all this in mind, then, let me close with a double invitation. First, I invite you to notice for yourselves how it is with your spirit; then to call to mind what it is that restores *your* spirit, what it is that enriches and enhances your life; and then, if you need to, to plug back in to those sources of spiritual nourishment.

And second, I invite you to notice how it is with the spirit of someone you care about; and if their spirits are low, call to mind what it is that restores that friend or loved one's spirits; and then see if you can find a way of helping them to plug back in to *their* sources of spiritual nourishment.

And we would do well to remember that our sources of spiritual life and energy are not limited to things we might ordinarily categorize as "religious" or "spiritual": going to church, reading scripture, praying or meditating. These practices and forms of renewal may be on our list; but going for a walk or a run, catching a good movie, playing a game of cards, making and sharing a favorite meal... these more mundane things can be on the list too.

How is it with your spirit?  
What nourishes and sustains your spirit?  
How is it with the spirit of those you love?  
What nourishes and sustains their spirits?

May we each, daily, reconnect and help one another to reconnect with the deep wellsprings of life and love... renewing our spirits, that we may better bless the world with our lives.

So may it be.

### **Benediction**

By whatever name, may we daily return to the source:

Source of life, source of love, source of peace.

May we return to the source daily,

live from the deep wellsprings always,

bless the world from the deep wellsprings of life and love

within us and around us.

So may it be.