

Practice, Practice, Practice: Our Heritage of Unitarian Universalist Practice

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When I came to the first religious congregation that I joined, I was exhausted, confused and distressed. I was in my late thirties. I had the job that I had sought; I was working in a university counseling students at the counseling center and teaching masters degree counseling students. I had a loving husband, a wonderful daughter and a comfortable home. And I was lost, discouraged and disillusioned.

I loved working with and teaching students, but I was a token woman in my department. I came to work in academia unprepared for the vicious fights among faculty, the constant petty competition. There were just enough women on the faculty then that students began to feel brave enough to make official complaints of sexual harassment from professors. I served on the sexual harassment grievance board and learned that most of the male counseling faculty had engaged in sexually harassing behaviors. In the counseling center, I heard many difficult stories of severe trauma and childhood abuse. I witnessed deep pain and despair, and I still had some unresolved issues with my own family of origin.

It was in this context that my husband, daughter and I first attended and then joined an unprogrammed Quaker meeting. Quaker meetings for worship are first of all an hour of meditation and silent prayer. The Friends are very clear about teaching their history and tradition of spiritual practice. Through that practice, I began to heal and to grow, to find myself again, to renew my spirit and grow my soul. I am reminded of the line in the hymn, "Amazing Grace," "I once was lost but now am found." That feels very real to me. I have changed; I have been changed in powerful and lasting ways.

We come to church for many reasons: to be renewed and recharged, to find a community with shared visions, shared values, to find a place to serve. Most of all I think we come or first come back because we are hungry. Maybe we are feeling lost, confused

and discouraged as I was. We are spiritually hungry and want more than the consumer culture. I am reminded of a Peggy Lee song that was on the radio when I was a kid. I think I remember it because it felt kind of frightening to me: “Is that all there is, Is that all there is my friend - then let’s keep dancing . . .” For me, the song is a vision of alienation and meaninglessness. For many people, life feels just that way: “that’s all there is.”

We don’t want to feel like that or to believe that “that’s all there” is in that despairing way. We come to religious community searching for meaning, purpose, and yearning to grow our souls. We want feelings of deeper connection. Spiritual practice is the path to a more centered, peaceful and compassionate life. Yet when Rick and I came to Unitarian Universalism, we heard very little about spiritual practice. We knew these were our people. Our values were shared and affirmed in the UU congregation. The hymns often made me cry (still do sometimes!). And something was missing. The Unitarian Universalist Association conducted a survey in 1997 that showed that I was not alone in the feeling that something was missing. Seventy-six per cent of Unitarian Universalists who responded said that something was missing for them in their faith communities. More than half had considered leaving because of that feeling that something was missing. What was that feeling? Most said it was a sense of spiritual celebration, a feeling of reverence. Eighteen per cent explicitly stated that they missed spiritual discipline and depth. ⁱ

I think, now, that part of what was missing was our own history. For some time, especially in the late 20th century, Unitarian Universalists lost our history, lost our theological foundations in spiritual practice. We lost the wisdom of our elders.

Many of us have come to Unitarian Universalist congregations feeling hurt, angry or confused by ideas of the holy, sacred, divine. Some ideas have made no sense; some have been cruel and frightening. You may have been told that you would be judged and punished for being who you are, for loving who you love or even just for thinking and asking questions. Some of us have rejected the idea of spiritual practices because of past painful

religious experience. Others thought that spiritual practices were outmoded, superstitious behavior or perhaps quaint activities that just are not rational or scientific. Even those who grew up as Unitarian Universalists often did not know that we have a spiritual, devotional tradition and that that tradition is essential to Unitarian Universalist theology.

I had regular spiritual practices before I came to a UU congregation, primarily reading, meditating and yoga, and I continued those practices. Many UUs, many of you have spiritual practices, but we have thought that we needed to import them, to use spiritual practices from another tradition. We have learned Buddhist meditation or Hindu mantras, Kirtan singing, and Sufi dances. I am not saying that those practices are wrong or that we should not use them. Indeed, we should if they work for us and are meaningful to us.

What I am saying is that we have a long and meaningful tradition of spiritual practices that are directly related to our contemporary Unitarian Universalist theologies. I want us to know this tradition and to learn these about these practices, to try them out. I hope that we can affirm our tradition, indeed be proud of it.

When I first thought about this sermon, I thought I would say a good bit about specific practices and that we might try some of them in the worship service. Then I realized that would be four or five sermons rather than one. So, in future months, I will come back to some of these practices in some depth. We will experiment with them, but not this morning.

Here is what I hope you will most remember about what I am saying this morning:

1. Regular Spiritual practice is key to growing spiritually, to finding more peace and meaning in life, to being happier, more centered and more effective in life. Our social justice work is deeper and more meaningful when we are engaged in regular spiritual practice.
2. There is now compelling, scientific evidence for my first statement.

3. Our historic Unitarians and Universalists knew that regular spiritual practice was essential and their suggestions and practices are still meaningful today. Our theology is grounded in spiritual practice.
4. Participation in a religious community is important for our spiritual practice. We grow more when we are in relationship, are in community and are connected. Spiritual practice is not about being solitary. It is about living with joy. And our spiritual communities also growth in depth and spirit when its people engage in spiritual practice.

What do I mean when I say spiritual practice? I mean something that you do regularly which slows you down, changes the constant brain chatter (what the Buddhists call “monkey mind,”), focuses your attention and awareness on the moment, and often (not always) leaves you feeling more centered and loving, more peaceful and more hopeful. It can be prayer and meditation, devotional reading, writing. It can also be walking, running, drawing or knitting. It might be singing or dancing. There are many ways to engage in spiritual practice. It is an activity that shifts your focus away from the self and away from judgment.

Andrew Newberg is a radiologist who studies spirituality and the brain. With psychologist, Mark Waldman, he wrote *How God Changes your Brain*. They write:

For the past four years, Mark and I have been studying how different concepts of God affect the human mind. I have brain scanned Franciscan nuns as they immersed themselves in the presence of God and charted the neurological changes as Buddhist practitioners contemplated the universe. I have watched what happens in the brains of Pentecostal practitioners who invited the Holy Spirit to speak to them in tongues, and have seen how the brains of atheists react – and don’t react when they meditate on a concrete image of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ

They have mapped “neurochemical changes caused by spiritual and religious practices.” And they concluded:

1. Each part of the brain constructs a different perception of God.
2. Every human brain assembles its perceptions of God in uniquely different ways, thus giving God different qualities of meaning and value.
3. Spiritual practices, even when stripped of religious beliefs, enhance the neural functioning of the brain in ways that improve physical and emotional health.
4. Intense, long term contemplation of God and other spiritual values appears to permanently change the structure of those parts of the brain that control our moods, give rise to our conscious notions of self, and shape our sensory perceptions of the world.
5. Contemplative practices strengthen a specific neurological circuit that generates peacefulness, social awareness and compassion for others.ⁱⁱⁱ

They say, “Nearly every spiritual experience, in some small way, changes our sense of reality and the relationship we have with the world. Generally, it increases our sense of unity and wholeness, not just in the metaphoric sense, but in the way we conduct our lives. . . These feelings are also associated with a greater sense of purpose and meaning in one’s life.”^{iv}

This is exactly what our Unitarian and Universalists elders knew and taught. I want to share how I learned about this history and to put Unitarian and Universalist spiritual practices in a theological context. I was well into my seminary studies and had had a couple of courses on spiritual practices, before I learned anything at all about Unitarian Universalist spiritual practices.

My seminary offered a new summer intensive class, “Unitarian Universalist Spirituality: History and Practice,” taught by the Rev. Rob Hardies, minister of All Souls Church in Washington, D.C. I signed up for that class right away! I didn’t know that there was a Unitarian Universalist Spirituality and neither did most of my classmates. We were eager and excited to learn. This was an exceptionally rich course. We were all hungry and we learned that we had a rich, rich tradition. Indeed, our tradition is a regular feast. Before the class, we read quite a lot. One book was *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional*

Disciplines in Seventeenth Century New England^v because American Unitarianism in particular comes out of Puritan culture. Something that is still essential for us from the Puritans is the emphasis on lay devotional practice, that everyone, not set apart priests, but everyone, have devotional practices to help them to live a more godly life and that they have those practices in everyday life, in the real world, in their families and in their communities. They believed that everyone could have intimacy with God.

We read a 19th century Unitarian devotional manual *On the Formation of the Christian Character*^{vi} by Rev. Henry Ware. Ware's book was a best seller. Our theologies and our language may differ from his, but his advice is still solid. We also read a lot of 19th century American Unitarian writers, like William Ellery Channing and James Freeman Clarke.

When we arrived at the class, we learned more about the theological background of Unitarian spirituality. We learned about their practices and we engaged in many of those practices. Rev. Hardies' primary focus was on the 19th century Unitarians and their concept of self-culture. Our reading this morning was from James Freeman Clarke's discussion of self-culture. Self-culture means growing the self – just as horticulture is growing plants and agriculture is nurturing and growing animals and crops. Channing defined self-culture, “the care which every man owes to himself, to the unfolding and perfecting of his nature.”^{vii}

19th century Unitarianism taught:

1. That each human being is endowed by God with both purpose and power. Purpose is God given, the way to use our gifts in the world. Power is human abilities. We have power to be self-searching and self-forming
2. The goal of human life is to cultivate our powers in service to our purpose – which means in service to God and to humanity. We make God present in every part of our lives.
3. And in doing so, we live powerful and soulful lives in relationship to God and creation. We have the ability to choose to bless the world and we cultivate that ability through spiritual practices. “Prayer can turn moments of devotion into a permanent attitude of reverence.”^{viii}

Their language may be different than ours, but I think this attitude, this stance toward life is still part of our own stance. We hope and work for transformation in ourselves and in our community, in the world. The Unitarian and Universalists of the time had many of the same spiritual practices, but understood them differently. Hosea Ballou told Philadelphia Universalists, “Love God constantly and abundant will be your peace – abundant your joy-abundant your satisfaction.”^{ix}

So what were those practices?

Meditative Self-examination

Devotional Reading

Prayer

Contemplation

Writing – lots of writing – journals, letters

Walking

Spiritual Friendships

Small group Conversations

Attending Worship

Caring for others

Participating in their religious communities

In the coming months, I will talk more about these practices. As I close now, I simply encourage you to begin or to deepen your spiritual practice. These practices are not exotic and they are not difficult. Mostly, they require commitment. If you don't have a practice or are confused about what it could be or to go about, I invite you to come and talk with me about.

Put at its most basic: spiritual practice can change your life for the better. Let us join in singing our hymn of love and pledge ourselves anew.

Amen. Blessed Be.

ⁱ 1997 Unitarian Universalism Needs and Aspiration Survey. Can be found at <http://www.uua.org/leaders/leaderslibrary/demographics/130035.shtml>

ⁱⁱ Newberg, Andrew and Mark Robert Waldman. *How God Changes Your Brain*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2009, p.6.

ⁱⁱⁱ Newberg & Waldman, pp.6-7.

^{iv} Newberg & Waldman, p. 81.

^v Hambrick-Stowe, Charles. *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth Century New England*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1982.

^{vi} Ware, Henry. *On the Formation of Christian Character: Addressed to those Who Are Seeking to Lead a Religious Life*. Boston, James Munroe, 1856.

^{vii} Channing, William Ellery. "Self-Culture" in *William Ellery Channing: Selected writings* ed. by David Robinson. New York: Paulist Press, 1985, p.226

^{viii} Hardies, Rev. Robert, class handout.

^{ix} Ballou, Hosea quoted in Earnest Cassara in *Hosea Ballou: The Challenge to Orthodoxy*. Boston: Universlist Historical Society and Beacon Press, 1961, p. 113.