

**“Unitarian Spiritual Practices: Reading” Rev. Kathryn Ellis**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration March 27, 2011**

This morning I am continuing a series about historic Unitarian spiritual or devotional practices. In a 1997 survey, 76% of Unitarian Universalists said something was missing for them in their religious lives, in Unitarian Universalism; sixty per cent said that they considered leaving their congregations. What they said was missing was greater intensity of celebration, joy and spirituality, and more spiritual depth and discipline. They said they wanted deeper, more spiritual worship.<sup>i</sup> Former Unitarian Universalist association president, Rev. Bill Sinkford, talked about the need for a language of reverence<sup>ii</sup>, but perhaps what we need is as much a practice of reverence as a language

In part this deep hunger comes from historical amnesia as both Unitarians and Universalists have long histories of devotional practices. 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, and reading is an essential part of our spiritual practice heritage.

To say books and reading saved my life is probably overdramatic, but reading certainly has given me a life. As a girl in a noisy, often unhappy family, books opened up the world to me. They showed me that there were lots of ways to live in the world, lots of ways to understand things. I vividly remember getting my first library card; I think I was five years old. My father took me to the children’s department of the city library, I can still see it. I just had to be able to write my name and I could do it. I was so excited! I chose a big pile of books and was disappointed that I could only take four home.

Books gave me inspiration and models. There was *Heidi* and *Nancy Drew*. But most of all, like so many girls since 1868, I wanted to be Jo March in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. Harriet Riesen, author of a recent Alcott biography wrote of Jo. Jo is “bold, outspoken, brave, daring . . . principled and real. She is a dreamer and a

scribbler, happiest at her woodsy hideout . . . or holed up in the attic, absorbed in reading . . . (She wants) to be free.”<sup>iii</sup> Like Jo and perhaps like many of you, I entered fully into the life of the book that I was reading; I could be completely absorbed.

Books helped Alcott and many women of her era and later to be free, to learn of other ways to live, new ways to understand the world. Like her character, Jo, Louisa May loved reading, writing and independence. I think she, too, may have been absorbed and found some peace in reading. Her childhood was difficult in many ways. Alcott came from a Unitarian, transcendentalist family. She grew up in a time of literary and cultural ferment. Her father, Bronson Alcott, was an impractical idealist who often could not pay his bills; he expected his wife and daughters to take care of all the household affairs. Bronson was also a widely-read, self-taught educator, with new ideas of educating children through dialog. He believed in respecting children, not in beating them. Ralph Waldo Emerson was a friend of the family who lent Bronson money; Emerson encouraged Louisa’s reading and gave her free access to his library. In 19<sup>th</sup> century America, women were not expected to be educated.

Another very well educated woman lived in Concord, Massachusetts with the Alcotts, the Emersons and the Thoreaus. Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley was a little older than Emerson; she read everything! She taught herself Latin, Greek, and German. She read science and theology and the latest philosophies to come from Europe. She taught many boys who went on to Harvard, and it was said of her that if she had been a man, she would have been one of the best professors at Harvard.

Elizabeth Peabody was another woman in that circle who pursued her own education. Peabody had worked for Bronson Alcott as a teacher. Later, she opened a bookstore and circulating library in Boston.

All her life Elizabeth had depended on the generosity of men with fine libraries . . . For one brief season in 1833, she’d been allowed to borrow books from Boston’s only lending library, the privately owned Boston Athenaeum, a privilege that required a special vote of the trustees, in just one month she’d taken out

twenty-one titles . . . She envisioned her bookstore as a gathering place for her intellectuals companions, a locus of conversations, both formal and informal, . . .<sup>iv</sup>

Elizabeth's vision came to be. William Ellery Channing, Margaret Fuller, Emerson, Thoreau, and Theodore Parker were all part of conversations at the bookstore. Also part of Elizabeth's circle was her brother-in-law, education reformer and public school advocate, Horace Mann.

Until he met Elizabeth Peabody ten years earlier, Mann (a politician) had not taken the slightest interest in the cause of education, now (in 1842 Independence Day Speech) he was exhorting his listeners to 'pour out light and truth, as God pours out sunshine and rain . . . go forth and TEACH THIS PEOPLE.'<sup>v</sup>

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarians highly valued reading; they began the first American literary journals such as the Atlantic Monthly. Reading was part of the theology of self-culture. Humans, they said, were self-searching and self-forming; we have the responsibility to grow, to develop our capacities. Unitarian theologian, William Ellery Channing said, "The soul is always bursting its limits." Spiritual practice helps us to grow ourselves, to develop our sense of purpose and the power of that purpose.

These Unitarians inherited the tradition of reading as a spiritual practice from their religious ancestors, the Puritans. Puritanism was primarily a devotional practice that "encouraged believers to read, meditate and pray on their own. Meditation focused on personal experience . . . encouraged believers along the path of free spiritual expression and initiative"<sup>vi</sup>

Colonial preacher, John Cotton, wrote, "To read the word and to meditate thereon is a daily part of a Christian holy life." Reading was the basis for the deeper exercises of meditation and prayer. . . . It did not finally have an intellectual end. . . . (Reading) opened the way to a changed heart."<sup>vii</sup> The Puritans had many manuals for living, kind of an early American self-help literature. These manuals had rules for devotional reading which included praying before reading. "Reading was not only prescribed as a useful exercise, it was also practiced by a wide range of New Englanders who found it a powerful means of grace."<sup>viii</sup>

Okay, so there's a lot of Unitarian history in a few minutes, but what is it that makes reading a spiritual practice? In the Rumi poem that I read this morning, he talked about two kinds of intelligences. Maybe he discounted the first kind. Reading for knowledge can widen horizons and can be freeing (as it was for those 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian women), and this kind of reading can be transformative, especially if it is not memorizing, but contemplating, reflecting, and responding.

Still this kind of reading seems less like spiritual practice. In 1831, Unitarian minister, Henry Ware wrote *On the Formation of the Christian Character*. Chapter four is "The Means of Religious Improvement," and the first means is reading.

But what is the freedom of the mind bound in the fetters of ignorance? Freedom and elevation can come to it only through knowledge and one chief fountain of knowledge is books. These inform and excite it, and furnish food for thought. Thought is exercise; it is to the mind what motion is to the body. Without it, there is neither health nor strength.<sup>ix</sup>

Ware advocates reading for wisdom more than for knowledge. I think it is reading to excite Rumi's second kind of intelligence. Puritans read to open themselves, to change their hearts.

For me, as a girl, reading brought me some peace. I think it probably changed my heart and mind. But in my forties, I began a more intentional spiritual practice of reading: a brief reading, religious writings or poetry, in the context of meditation and reflection. This reading has been part of transforming me, giving me more peace and a sense of faith as I talked about last week.

Spiritual practice is something that you do regularly which slows you down and changes the constant brain chatter, ("monkey mind"). Spiritual practice shifts your focus away from the self and away from judgment. It focuses your attention and awareness on the moment, and often (not always) leaves you feeling more centered and loving, more peaceful and

more hopeful. 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.

Attached to this message is a guide for making reading an intentional spiritual practice based on Unitarian ancestors' practices. Find a source that speaks to you. It could be scriptures, books of meditations, poetry or other spiritual writing. My favorite is Sufi poet, Hafiz. Then, give yourself time and space to let it speak to you. Twentieth century Unitarian minister Rev. Harry Scholefield said, "If you don't have a spiritual life, you will dry up and blow away." Rev. Laurel Hallman filmed Harry and wrote a curriculum based on his practice of reading and memorizing poetry as a spiritual practice. Rev. Hallman said, "The practice of Living by Heart gives us some spaciousness." <sup>x</sup> We can find that spaciousness in our hearts and minds and lives.

May you find that spaciousness and peace in your lives. May you live in blessing.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.uua.org/ga/1998/fulfillingpromise/169389.shtml>

<sup>ii</sup> Grodzins, Dean (ed.). *A Language of Reverence*. Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2004.

<sup>iii</sup> Riesen, Harriet. *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009, p. 2.

<sup>iv</sup> Marshall, Megan. *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005, p. 391.

<sup>v</sup> Marshall, Megan. *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005, p. 4.

<sup>vi</sup> Hambrick-Stowe, Charles E. *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth Century New England*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> Printing, 1988, p.50.

<sup>vii</sup> Hambrick-Stowe, Charles E. *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth Century New England*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> Printing, 1988, p.157-161.

<sup>viii</sup> Hambrick-Stowe, Charles E. *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth Century New England*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> Printing, 1988, p.157-161.

<sup>ix</sup> Ware, Henry, Jr. *On the Formation of the Christian Character*. Boston: James Munroe in Company, 1856, p.53.

<sup>x</sup> Hallman, Laurel. *Living By Heart*, 2003.

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## **Devotional Reading**

1. Allow yourself enough time to take your time with this practice. Find a quiet place to sit comfortably and meditate. Close your eyes, take several long, deep breaths.
2. When you feel centered, open your eyes and read your chosen piece. (I have included two poems as starting readings.) Sit in silence and notice what about the poem touches you. Which lines and words stand out?
3. Read through the poem again. After contemplating it again, write down in your journal the word or phrase that speaks to you the most.
4. Read through the poem a final time. Then write a response to the word or phrase that you have chosen.
5. Write freely about whatever feelings, associations, insights and thoughts come to you. What does the passage provoke in you? If you find yourself stuck or off track, write the word or phrase in your journal. Try to write freely about whatever comes to your mind for at least five minutes.
6. End your session by expressing your gratitude.