

Whole-Hearted Spirituality
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While traveling with our youth on their Boston Heritage trip last week I had the opportunity to make a pilgrimage to the site of Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond. There I looked on the same body of water that inspired Thoreau to write the prophetic words Mark just shared with us. The walk to the site is one of simple beauty. The trail meandered from the sheltering woods to the edge of the pond and past boggy wetlands where the mists still lingered at midday. We were surrounded by stands of white pines, then emerged to look across the waters that inspired a generation. The day was clear and warm. A brilliant blue sky peaking through the deep green boughs. The path approaching the cabin is well-worn. We were lucky enough to arrive when no other visitors were present would disturb our moment of silence, as we looked on the outline of the simple hut that had served as Thoreau's home for his two-year two-month sojourn. There he lived simply. From there he went out to change the world. His spirituality encompassed his whole heart, nurturing it as well as setting it aflame when he saw injustice.

This idea of the heart enflamed in the peaceful woods set me to thinking about spirituality, its purpose in our lives and our in our religious tradition. It leads me to reflect that we too need a whole-hearted spirituality. Our hearts have four chambers, two atria that draw our blood in and infuse it with oxygen and two ventricles to pump that blood back into our bodies in service of our lives. We need all four chambers of our hearts – just as we need all four elements of spirituality. Spirituality in its earliest definitions meant to breath. Spiritual practices help our lives to have breath, bringing vitality and purpose to our existence. The four elements I'll describe are my classifications you're welcome to create you own. My four elements include silence, study, creating community and serving the world. A whole-hearted spirituality embraces all four of these elements, seeking to create a balance in our lives. This balance is needed so that, just as our blood needs the oxygen to feed our bodies, our souls have the sustenance to help us be creative in the world.

Let's begin with the sustenance side. Just as blood comes into the atria to be infused with oxygen we need practices that infuse our lives with that deep something, as important and invisible as oxygen. For instance, even a raging extrovert like me needs time for silence. My primary practice of silence is walking. Each morning I begin my day at 6 AM with a half hour walk. I am accompanied by my dogs, who are able companions in my silent ritual. I'd never thought of these walks as a spiritual practice, until last winter. On those cold dark mornings I took to carrying a walkman so I could listen to music or the news of the day. After a few mornings I noticed that I was out of sorts as the day began, finding it harder to focus. I was more restless and even angry. I realized that I'd sacrificed my time of silence, the time when I'd notice the state of the trees, the quality of the air and the feeling of the earth beneath my feet. I needed that time because it was then that my being would remember its connection to all those elements. I ditched the walkman and found peace returning.

I think we're often afraid of silence, afraid of where our own insights might take us, unwilling to turn off the noise so that we can experience our simple connections to the world. It was in his silent sitting by the pond that Thoreau realized he was partly leaves and vegetable mould himself. Such connections are the source of beauty and joy. Sure they challenge me each day – but the challenge is one of love not guilt. It is a challenge whose rewards are beyond measure.

How to begin a practice of silence? One of the simple practices that I might do when I'm on a bus with 22 youth somewhere between here and Boston and we're lost again -- (or some other situation that might give rise to anxiety) is meditating on my own heart beat. I would like to invite you to join me for a few moments of this practice. As thoughts come into your mind, let them go and feel you heart beating in your chest, feel that rhythm. – practice --

That beating is like a rhythm of the universe. It's always with me and easy to focus on. This is my practice; it may or may not be yours. In Hinduism they have a belief that each person follows their own path, developing the practice that suits their needs. For you this time of silence may be one of prayer or sitting mediation or something I've not even thought of. What that Hindu belief stresses is that we seek a path.

Our other atria of spiritual practice are study. Again what you choose to study is up to you. But I know that study is central to my well being. My primary spiritual practice of study is music. While practicing music everything I'm immersed in something that allows everything else to disappear and my being to focus on this art. While I enjoy playing tunes I already know, I find that learning a new tune, challenging myself to grow, is when I am most engaged. I also know that at times only in music can I find connections. When I find the gist of a rhythm and understand what the writer intended it's a moment of revelation and joy. The music fills me when I'm empty and reveals beauty when I'm open to it. Just as the plucking of the harp strings spoken of a goodness universal to Thoreau, so too each time I take up my pipes it is a learning experience.

Study is a very broad term. Many traditions encourage us to study sacred texts. What makes a text sacred is the way it affects us. Poetry of all sorts is a favorite sacred text of mine. On the advice of a colleague, I'm trying my hand at memorizing poems. By knowing something so thoroughly it becomes part of us. Then it can be available to us as reminder of what's sacred or important. I've begun to memorize my second poem, Sunflowers by Mary Oliver:

Come with me

into the field of sunflowers.

Their faces are burnished disks,
their dry spines

creak like ship masts,

their green leaves,

so heavy and so many,

fill all day with the sticky

sugar of the sun.

Come with me

to visit the sunflowers,

they are shy

but want to be friends;

they have wonderful stories

of when they were young -

the important weather,
the wandering crows.

Don't be afraid
to ask them questions!
Their bright faces,

which follow the sun,
will listen, and all
those rows of seeds -
each one a new life! –

hope for a deeper acquaintance;

each of them, though it stands
in a crowd of many,
like a separate universe,

is lonely, the long work
of turning their lives
into a celebration
is not easy. Come

and let us talk with those modest faces,
the simple garment of leaves,
the coarse roots in the earth
so uprightly burning.

The images of this poem could be studied a life time and still filled with richness. The rows of seeds remind me of my place in the universe. Their lonely celebration, my intimate connection to all that surrounds me. And the words themselves echo the beauty that is, even amid the pain of our constantly changing world. As is obvious by my need of notes, I don't have it memorized, yet.

The one poem I do have memorized is Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Night". When I first heard of the value of memorizing poetry as a spiritual discipline, I realized that at moments of struggle I've said those last lines from Frost's poem "Miles to go before I sleep, miles to go before I sleep." These words, uttered in silence to no ears but mine, remind me that this moment is but part of a longer journey. At times, those simple lines help me to keep going.

If you don't have a favorite poem to begin to memorize I'd encourage you to look in the back of the hymnal. There are many wonderful selections there, and during the slower parts of the service this could give you a chance to occupy your thoughts with something productive. This type of spiritual study is similar to the lecto divino of the Catholic tradition or Jnana Yoga in Hinduism or even koans in Buddhism, seeks to engage our being in depth questions. It's not just our minds at work, but as they roll from our tongues and vibrate across our bodies they involve our entire self. Through this avenue we pave a deeper understanding of why we believe what we do, beyond a conscious understanding to the very core of our being.

Liberal theology has been accused of not having moral values, as if freedom, compassion and acceptance weren't moral. Instead I think we haven't always had the spiritual practices that help us to root and express those values. Yet by infusing our beings through silence and study with this deep knowledge our actions in the world take on that humble certainty, a knowledge that we are acting from our best and deepest selves. This is a sense of value that is born out of our feelings of connection – our inescapable sense of responsibility to the beauty that surrounds us and the desire for all to have the opportunity to experience such a joy. For me this is a powerful basis of knowing to sustain our lives and not allow us to be swept up in the latest fad or swept away by the despair of the times needs. This knowing for me is the sense of eternal connection to the

forces of life that infuses all which surrounds me. It's that connection known through silence and study that gives me the will and strength to act in the world.

Action, acting in the world is where the next two chambers of our whole hearted spirituality take us. As our prophet of the morning Thoreau wrote, "Do not be too moral. You may cheat yourself out of much life. Aim above morality. Be not simply good; be good for something." So as we replenished our blood with these internal practices; it needs to be sent into the world. Spirituality that does not lead us to creative participation in the world is self-indulgent and bankrupt. Like the right ventricle beating in our chests, the third chamber of our spiritual heart leads us to create community around us. Here, today, we are engaged in that creative act. Coming to Fellowship on Sunday morning is a spiritual discipline. When we don't use the newsletter like a TV guide (selecting only those programs that look appealing) but instead seek to part of a community so we can engage ourselves in the search for what matters then we have a spiritual practice. Creating community isn't easy – it means taking risks. At a recent meeting we were discussing coffee hour. A number of the folks expressed their discomfort with this time of ritual fellowship, not knowing what to say, afraid of saying the wrong thing. One feared foe pa that comes up frequently, (which occurs because with two services we don't know everyone) is people mistakenly ask someone if they are new whose been attending for years. My solutions is to ask how long someone's been coming, rather than if they are new. Or better yet, ask "What brings you to the fellowship?" Then you've created an opportunity to learn about what matters. Knowing what matters to each other is how we connect. Connections create compassion and caring and eventually community.

This is why I believe our milestones are a spiritual practice. Here we seek to share what's important in our stories and incorporate them into the larger narrative of this community. The act of telling and sharing is a sacred act, it's how we understand life on a deeper level – our own and those with whom we share this space and time.—milestones

Part of the common story of this fellowship is its role of caring for the larger community. Here we discern how to be present in the world. This is the second ventricle, the final chamber of our whole-hearted spirituality, engaging the world in which we live. This may occur through larger groups like our own social action projects such as the Industrial Areas Foundation. It may be through other national or international organizations, it may be through peace marches or (as in Thoreau's case) civil disobedience in the face of injustice. It is the means of exercising our values in the face of injustice. There are times when standing in a sea of people gives us heart, confidence in the power of untied action. Then there are times when it feels like we are uttering a whisper trying to shout down the ocean. At such moments, when despair might lead us to give up, we need to heed the words of Martin Luther King when he said he had little faith in decades but great hope in centuries. This isn't a call to complacency but an admonition to never give up. It's a reminder that we need the depth of our connections to sustain us and remind us of the beauty for which we strive to create. It's also a reminder that the communities we create are prophetic beacons of what we believe to be possible.

Henry David Thoreau walked those same paths upon which I trod; he found solace and revelation in the waters of the pond, on the wings of the hawks and the mists of the morning. In his cabin he sat by the light of a candle and wrote his reflections and studied his teachers. Then, he engaged his community and sought to change the world. His life went on to influence people like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, two other prophets who understood the connection between our internal spiritual lives and our impact on society. Prophets are everywhere, one is sitting right next to you and one lives in your very soul. Each morning the sun rises and hangs a signal, its message is that life begins again, as the sunflowers turn their heads in acknowledgement of that message they invite us to their celebration. As Mary Oliver reminds me each time I try again to commit that verse to memory, it's not easy. But let those up burning faces set our hearts flame, inspiring us to nurture that prophetic voice with silence and study, and then let it sing in our community and the world. May it be so.

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