

What Is a Spiritual Practice?

Rev. Lilli Nye

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Last year, we had a recurring theme of “Big Scary Words” that ran through a number of the services and sermons. We used the series to take a new look at various religious words that had been carrying a strong emotional charge for many of us. Although we didn’t get through the long list of words that we created together, and although we will, of course, continue to grapple with challenging religious ideas as time goes on, this morning it’s time to formally release the Big Scary Words series, and begin a new one.

This year’s sermon series will address the rich subject of spiritual practice. The theme was suggested during a discussion of the Music & Worship Committee. We had become aware that the subject of spirituality and spiritual practice was coming up from the grassroots of the TPC community itself, and that there seemed to be both a lot of curiosity and a lot of confusion and uncertainty on the topic.

It’s understandable why there’s a lack of clarity among UUs about the “what” and “why” and “how” of spiritual practice. It’s an area of religious life that has, for decades, been largely neglected in Unitarian Universalism. As our religious culture has focused on the breadth and pluralism of religious ideas, we have distanced ourselves from the devotional practice that was part of our Judeo-Christian roots. We turned from traditional methods, but never really found anything to replace them. Dialogue has become our central practice.

There is an old joke about a Unitarian Universalist standing before two great doors. One door has inscribed on it, “ENTER HERE UNTO HEAVEN” and the other says “ENTER HERE UNTO A *DISCUSSION ABOUT* HEAVEN.” Faced with this choice, the UU says—with little hesitation and genuine excitement—“A discussion about heaven! That sounds really interesting!” Passing up the opportunity to actually *experience* heaven, the person chooses the second door.

Beyond the self-deprecating humor, there follows the somewhat dubious picture of that individual joining other like-minded folk in the *Realm of Eternal Intellectualization*, a place in which a truly experiential spiritual life is kept forever at bay by a *fascinating* but ultimately noncommittal discussion of religious ideas.

We need more than intellectual process in our religious and spiritual life. Let’s go back to the image of the doors, but now I want us to imagine four doors. Each of us is standing in front of four doors that enter into four different spaces. One door says “A Discussion about Heaven.” Another says “Belief in Heaven.” The third says simply “Heaven.” And the last says “Building Heaven on Earth.”

These four doors represent four dimensions of the religious or spiritual life, four processes. All four processes are necessary; all are part of being spiritually engaged and

whole. They don't go in any particular order, and they all influence and support one another. The four processes are *Understanding*, *Faith*, *Experience*, and *Practice*.

1. The door that says "A Discussion about Heaven" represents the process of gaining *Understanding*. That's where we go to work with ideas and words and concepts on an intellectual level. We do it through dialogue with others, through inner dialogue and reading and listening. It's the process we use when teaching, learning, reasoning, and engaging critical thought. It's the place where we organize knowledge, and where we sort out what rings true and false. Although this kind of understanding happens mostly "from the neck up," it influences other aspects of our beings. Through ideas, we can find ourselves deeply challenged, inspired, or motivated towards action.

The engagement of the mind and reason are crucial to a balanced spiritual life. Without them, we would have only blind, obedient faith and a narrowed perspective. But in Unitarian Universalism we spend perhaps too much time behind that door marked "Discussion," too much time at the head level. That's what the joke is about. We do this *soooo* well. I'm doing it right this very minute, as are you! We do it so well that we're in danger of overusing this strength to the point where some of our other capacities atrophy and our religious and spiritual lives are not as deep and complete as they could be.

2. So let's consider the next door. This door says "Belief in Heaven." It represents the dimension of Faith, and by that I mean the core beliefs and feelings that we hold toward life. Our faith resides at a deeper level than intellectual process. Our faith enables us to get up and face each day no matter how difficult, to create a purposeful and meaningful existence, to commit ourselves to what we love and care about, and to cope with tragedy and even rise above it.

Faith does not necessarily require a belief in God or metaphysical things, but it does require a belief in goodness—the goodness within ourselves, within others, and in life itself. Faith requires the belief that goodness is worth calling upon and striving for, even when there is little evidence of it.

A person's capacity for faith is something like the body's capacity to heal and balance itself. If the body is properly nourished, it will be more resilient when it encounters disease or injury. When we are nourished by love and understanding, by fellowship and sharing, by insight and beauty, we become more resilient. When we are isolated, we tend to become more susceptible to depression and despair.

This is one of the reasons we UU's place such importance on community, on fellowship and sharing and creating beauty and goodness together. Many folks come into this place because their spirits are feeling undernourished. The more open we are to one another, the more we can infuse one another with strength, resilience and joy. The more faith we have, the more we are able to embrace life, whatever it brings.

So we have the door that opens into Understanding, and the door that opens into Faith.

3. The door that says “Heaven” represents the dimension of Spiritual Experience. There’s a certain debate that Unitarians tend to get into about *what the word spiritual means*. This debate is a good example of spending a bit too much time in the discussion department. We seem to think we have to work it all out in our minds before we can decide whether or not we want to be spiritual.

One does not need to believe in supernatural or metaphysical things to have spiritual experience. Nor does one need to have intellectual understanding of the word *spiritual* to have a spiritual experience. You don’t need consensus with others about what constitutes spirituality in order to have spiritual experience. You don’t even need to have *faith* to have a spiritual experience! Some very moving testimonies that I know of describe spiritual experiences that came to people in the midst of their deep despair.

I think maybe the only prerequisite for a spiritual experience would be some capacity to feel. If you can feel, then you can have spiritual experience, as I’m sure everyone here has.

If you have ever...

- had feelings of expansion beyond your normal boundaries of self...
- felt profoundly moved or pierced or broken open...
- been seized by a sense of awe, transcendence, unity, joy or peace...
- heard an inner voice or seen an inner vision that resonates with deepest truth...

...these are just a few examples of the tremendous range of experiences that could be called *spiritual*.

But here’s the thing. Spiritual experience is a gift. We can’t make it happen. We can’t wish ourselves or psyche ourselves into it. It just comes as a grace. Still, we can open ourselves, and ready ourselves for it. We cannot make it rain, but we can plow the field and plant the seed.

And this brings us to the last door....

4. The door that says “Building Heaven on Earth.” This represents the process of Spiritual Practice. This is really what I wanted to talk about today.

The word “practice” can be used to mean simply “the way we do things—a habitual or traditional pattern of behavior.” For example, it’s common Unitarian “practice” to hold coffee hour after Sunday service. But this is not what I mean by spiritual practice.

What makes *practice* something other than a behavioral pattern? And what makes practice *spiritual*?

Real practice engages the will. It is purposeful, driven by intention, rather than by spontaneity or by habit.

Practice is similar to discipline. Practice—discipline—needs to be repeated and consistent. You do it even when you don't feel like it, even when it's not convenient, because you have made a commitment to do it.

Wrestling with one's resistance to the practice is part of the journey of the practice. We make the effort to engage the will in order to strengthen the will. We engage concentration, even when it is weak, to strengthen concentration. We engage commitment to strengthen commitment.

Having the practice fall apart and struggling to pull it back together again is also a continuous part of the journey. We fall off, but then we get back on. We fall off, we get back on. Practice involves persistence. By persisting, we strengthen our capacity to persist.

Years ago one of my Sufi teachers gave a group of his students odd little practices such as not eating sugar for a month, or not using the word "Oh" (as in "Oh, yeah, I heard about that"). Once we were instructed not to laugh for a month. "You can smile all you want," he said. "It will perfect your smile!" But we were not to laugh. What could possibly be the point of such practices?

Falling off, getting back on. Falling asleep, waking back up, again and again and again.

The word "Oh" is not important in itself, but remembering not to say it, forgetting then remembering, persisting again and again—this may be very important in developing the capacity to resist mechanical, unconscious behavior. Such practices are about waking out of habit and sloth. The specific method does not matter so much as the effort and the self-awareness that is cultivated by striving in the midst of one's daily life.

So here is the second part: What makes practice clearly *spiritual practice*?

Even if the practice seems insignificant in itself, it becomes a spiritual practice when it is dedicated to a spiritual value, ideal, or purpose.

In spiritual practice, we consecrate our self, our energies, and our efforts in the practice to our highest ideal. If my ideal is to live peacefully and to express peace in all I think, say and do, then each time I remember about the word "Oh" it becomes like a bell, ringing, waking me up to remind me of my dedication to peace.

I might give up chocolate cake because I am dieting. That certainly takes practice. But I might also give up chocolate cake as a way of tuning myself to God, or as a way of honoring my body as a temple. Abstaining from cake then becomes a dedicated, consecrated sacrifice. I choose to keep a space open within myself for the spirit, the ideal, to reside and grow inside me, rather than filling that space with chocolate cake.

Each time I hanker for cake, I am reminded of my deeper hunger for spiritual awakening. Each time I say “no” to cake, I say “yes” to my spiritual purpose.

Practice becomes *spiritual practice* when it is done in love and with an open dedicated heart. Spiritual practice is a form of devotion. This rescues it from dreary piety or duty. The devotion of the heart in our practice makes us more receptive to the presence of spirit, the inflow of inspiration.

Now, of course, a spiritual practice might be full of real content, very meaningful, very powerful in itself—not just a symbolic tool. We will have time in the coming weeks to explore the many kinds and traditions of spiritual practice, what they engage and strengthen in the practitioner, and what their purpose and effects are.

But I mention these silly ones in order to demystify what spiritual practice can mean, to bring it into the most ordinary of life situations.

Spiritual practice means dedicating one’s effort, one’s awareness, and one’s heart to the expression of one’s spiritual ideal in life. Like the inscription on the last door in our metaphor, it’s about building heaven on earth—right here, right now, one breath, one word, one action at a time.

I want to take just a couple more minutes to revisit Rebecca Parker’s essay, “A Spiritual Practice for Our Time,” which we heard from in the reading.

She says, “Overt acts of violence against one another and against the earth emerge from a more covert violence: the loss of our abilities to think and to feel. Critical analysis will not change this culture, nor lessen its effects. We need to rediscover our abilities to think and to feel... Anesthetization needs to end in our lives.”

Spiritual practice is a means to de-anesthetize ourselves.

Too much comfort and convenience is numbing, as are relentless, grinding work and stress. American society has too much of all of these things, which is partly why it is so hard for America to wake up to our own unhealthy state and the unhealthy way in which we relate to the rest of the world.

Spiritual practice helps us to train ourselves out of the habits which make us numb.

We have four doors before us, four ways that we can wake up and become spiritually and religiously whole and alive. The process of understanding, the development of faith, the experience of our own spirituality, and the dedication of our hearts, minds and strength in practice.

May all these doors be open.

Amen.