

Opening Words

We are here
on the Sunday that serves as a gate
to the winter holiday season,
to worship, to celebrate life
and cultivate gratitude, hope and love
even though times are tough.

And so, though our ways of thinking and feeling about the meaning of our days may differ, we agree to journey together, side by side, face to face. Within this circle of strong spirit, mutual care, and ethical vision, may we ourselves remain open to being transformed by a welcoming heart and emerging justice.

Sequence:

Light that no eye saw,
bursting in the dark,
casting the sparks of a thousand galaxies
into the abyss.
Light that slowly pushed its way through dust to shine off the waters of a freshly rounded earth.
Light that shimmered on the arching back
of tiny stretching cells,
on the xylophone bodies of ancient sea creatures
and in the new soft round eyes of fish.
Light that crossed a thousand million years
to reflect on the tail of an amphibian,
or on the teeth of a tyrannosaur.
Light, now obscured by clouds,
now shining past *all* clouds,
and coming to rest on the tusks of mammoths.
Light pulsing in our ancestors' pupils,
leaping off campfires and pictures in the sky.
Light rolling off the tongues of Chinese poets
and Jewish teachers and Greek scholars,
finding a thousand ways, despite the violence that sullies the earth and our spirits, to remind us that we are all and each children of that first light, not self-derived, but lamps and candles and lenses that take it upon themselves to transmute that light into love, and love into gratitude, and gratitude into this healing, healing silence....

silence

Light shining in our memories, in the eyes of children we once were; and shining in the ligaments of loyalty and kindness that bind us to each other and even to people we sometimes would rather turn from. Light in our love and radiating from our painful losses; light in our naming of those we love in sacred silence or sacred pronunciation. Light in our memory and hope made plain before us by naming:

naming

Light in the silence between the notes; light in the notes that exist not on the page but between us, extended like hands; light in the musician's heart and vibration of instrument. Light in the pleasure of what we receive...

Readings

The First Reading *The virtue of this first reading will be that many of you in this room will be able to hear as if the author read it, since Meg was here in October both preaching and offering us a joyful concert. This is an essay from her book Waking Up the Karma Fairy.*

Let me explain to you something about me and spiritual practice. I stink at it. There is nothing I do serenely day after day, glowing from within, filled with light and peace. The practice of mindfulness, for example, makes me so irritable that I have to quit after a minute or two. My mind and body are doing five things at once. I have to find a practice that suits me. Gratitude is one thing that has been working well so far.

I was on my way down from the mountains on Interstate 26 when, a mile before Saluda, my car's engine turned off. I was going downhill, and for some reason, my spiritual practice of gratitude kicked in. "Thank you that I am going downhill." I came to a stop at the bottom of the hill. After trying to start the car two times, I gave up, got out and stood facing traffic (to flag down someone with a car phone). "Thank you that it's not too hot," I said. "Thank you that so many people have car phones now. Thank you that I am not in my pajamas. Thank you that it's not raining. Thank you that I have shoes I can walk on."

Soon, a huge black truck was barreling right at (me). It screeched to a dynamic stop.

It was a tow truck.

"I heard calls about you being broke down, and I was on my way to a road right north of here, so I thought I'd come get you first."

I'm the luckiest person I know. Or maybe I have hit upon a spiritual practice with instant results. Either way, I'll take it.

The Second Reading *comes from the late zany poet, James Broughton, from the West Coast, both California and Washington State. This is called Notes for a Keynote Address at the San Francisco Art Institute on Becoming a Doctor of Fine Arts. (in part)*

A teacher's pleasure is to give good advice.
A student's pleasure is to ignore it.
Therefore, by all means, try all means...
Esthetics is for the artist
like ornithology is for the birds.
Hardening of the categories causes art disease.
...there is a lot of nothing
in the eye of the beholder.
Don't trip on the leaps of your life...jump!
Where is the view livelier
than out on a limb?
Adventure, not predicament.
Only the nonsensical is at ease with the absolute.
Embrace the energies that agitate the sea,
fecundate the animals, cause trees
to flower and stars to shine.

The Sermon: Gratitude as Spiritual Practice

The Great Thanksgiving Weekend! Families and friends criss-crossing the country, the city, the neighborhood. Foods both familiar and new, fancy and home-spun. All the complex feelings that pulse in and out of these days, year after year. A rich time for most, even for some of the homeless in town, who often get fed pretty well at least on Thanksgiving Day itself.

But this year, as we ate the sweet-potatoes, fiery new violence echoed in our ears: the airport in Bangkok closed down; there was horrific terror punctuated by the crack of gunshots in Mumbai; and there was the daily agitation of just about everyone I can think of trying to put some comforting spin on the economic debacle that has the whole world anxious even beyond the violence.

Now my point this morning is simple and clear. I'm saying that not one of us has any control over any of these large, complex and deeply painful events. They are beyond our capacity to do anything about them. We cannot wish away the gunshots. We cannot resuscitate the dead. We cannot pray they never happened. They did. We can only respond to them emotionally, whether by outrage, or denial, or bewilderment, or by some other feeling or knot of emotions.

But they are totally beyond our control.

As I once preached in a sermon, I once led a workshop which asked about 200 Unitarian Universalists there to define the word "spirituality." I came away with 13 mutually exclusive definitions of the word. Everyone there was cross-eyed with surprise. They all thought their own definition was the universal one. No wonder some people recoil from the subject.

But no matter how else people describe it for themselves, I have to live inside my own skin, not theirs, so I have created a definition that works for me in my day-to-day life.

For me, the word “spirituality” names that which helps us to respond to terrible things without paralyzing panic, without simple knee-jerk reactions, and without letting unconscious prejudices and systems of categorization make decisions for us. Spiritual practices, I think, are the exercises which strengthen our spirituality, in the same way that a gym workout might strengthen our muscles. And all of the helpful spiritual practices I can think of are based on this notion that we cannot control horrible events, but we have to find a way to live with them and not be undone by them or defined by them.

This whole notion of control is the hub of the wheel of spiritual practice. I can’t control violence in Mumbai, but I *can* refuse to panic that I cannot control such things, and breathe calmly instead of furtively. I can focus on something small and local, my breath, instead of focusing on something far away and beyond my grasp. In the same way, I cannot make the economy come to life by snapping my fingers, but I can refuse to panic that there are no magic wands in my hand. I can breathe calmly instead of shallowly. In brief, I can respond instead of react. I can breathe instead of choke.

And the word for breath, of course, in one of our root languages is “spiritus,” thus our words *spirituality* and *spiritual practice*. You could just as easily say *breatheality* and *breathing practice* if you would like. And practice? Practice is just a word from the ancient Greek that means quite simply, “to do something, especially again and again.” So in some ways, the idea of practice is not far removed from any of us.

People who play the piano know something about practice. They spend hours on the keyboard, playing small exercises which serve as building blocks for playing concerti one day. People who play harmoniums too, like Steve, and marimbas, like my friend Tom Ace, also have experiences to help them understand this concept. They do something again and again. They practice.

People who paint watercolors know something about practice. And people who play baseball, or who swim the butterfly. Or who practice magic, or write poems, or design railway lines, or bridges, or write up resumes and business plans. Clergy, lawyers, doctors...they all practice their crafts. They all practice. Doctors and lawyers even call their offices “practices.” They all do things over and over again, “trial by error” being the governing phrase.

I know about practice too, even though I can’t play a single musical instrument, and was always pretty lousy at baseball. This is what I can do: I can move my fingers along my computer keyboard lickety-split without looking down to watch them. I really can type fast. And correct my mistakes fast. Why? Because of practice. And that began long ago, in typing class at Notre Dame High School in Harper Woods, Michigan. With Mr. Fahey. From Boston. Complete with an accent. We would sit at our manual typewriters (computer keyboards weren’t even a dream yet back in 1966, and electric typewriters were still a novelty) and type the drills: k, commer, k space, k, commer, k, space, k

commer k space. (We tried to tell him that comma doesn't have an "r" in it, but to no avail.) Today, wouldn't you know it...and we told him this every day...I *never* type that particular sequence of keys, k, followed by a comma, followed by a k, followed by a space.

But because I *did* those exercises every day for a year, I can type fast and efficiently, and every time I type up a sermon or a prayer, I am still practicing and maintaining my skills at a high level. So the word practice is pretty clear, I'd say.

But when you wed it to the word spiritual, you get a new phrase. You do something again and again, yes, but what is it that you do? Good question. I now believe that there is at least one reason that I found so many diverse definitions of the word "spiritual" at that workshop. It's this business of thinking that one size fits all, and that spirituality has a universal character about it. It doesn't. And I also have observed that many people are competitive about spirituality, thinking there is some easier, better way to "be spiritual." Or that spirituality always requires steel-trap discipline, and Marine Sergeant fortitude and crispness. And that since they are neither crisp nor well-disciplined, they must be lacking something. They sometimes assume their friends are floating off the ground when they are not looking, glowing in the dark.

For instance, Meg Barnhouse thinks she "stinks" at spiritual practice, and she says so plainly in her trademark unmistakable way. "There is nothing I do serenely day after day, glowing from within, filled with light and peace. The practice of mindfulness, for example, makes me so irritable that I have to quit after a minute or two. My mind and body are doing five things at once."

Well she and I have a lot in common, I guess. I too used to think that I was terrible at spiritual practice. When I read books about it, I always feel I don't come up to par. I tried yoga in high school, for example, and I damaged my knees and had to go to the doctor who yelled at me to stop doing it. I tried meditation in seminary, but had the exact same experience that Meg did... six months of practice and I was living in more panic, not less. There was no peace and light, just "five things at once" like marbles rolling around in the barrel of my mind without ceasing. I still have colleagues and friends who meditate daily for an hour; others that run until they reach something called "that state," and still others who pray contemplatively for great lengths of time, and who seem to glow from within when I talk with them. But not me.

I always felt I wasn't cut out for spiritual practice. I felt quite inadequate and inferior until I recognized that I had let other people define the word for me. This, I came to realize, is not the most sensible thing to do, since I have to live *my* life, not someone else's life.

So I took the only real control I have, small and homely, and used that. I defined spiritual practice as not what other people do, but what I do. I am glad that other people can pray and meditate and do yoga and run so well, really. I just gave up comparing myself to them, to my detriment. I paid attention and came to realize I do do something every day.

Something that tends to keep me from panicking. Something that reminds me of my breath, sure and steady. I just don't do it at the same time every day.

But every day I *do* do this.

What do I do? I give thanks for being alive. Kind of like that wonderful young Religious Education student in our video this morning. I do it in the middle of the night, when I wake up with a start because of a dream. I do it sometimes in the middle of the afternoon at the office, when all of a sudden the sun warms the back of my neck. I do it in the morning when I am surprised that not only do I live, but that there is a whole wonderful universe out there beyond my skin. And I'll do it when, later this week, I will look up at the rare conjunction of planets creating a lovely new and temporary constellation in the sky. I am thankful to be able to breathe with every breath. I am thankful that my head is crowned with stars at night, and is ringed with sunlight come noon. I am grateful for the people in my life, not just on holidays, when I see them face-to-face, but on Tuesday afternoons when I simply hear their laughter inside the treasure-chamber of my memory. I am grateful often when I write prayers for services too, as I stretch out my imagination to embrace a much larger world than my own little life.

And this sense of stretching brings me to the supremely joyful poem of Mr. Broughton.

A teacher's pleasure is to give good advice.

A student's pleasure is to ignore it.

Therefore, by all means, try all means...

Indeed. Most of you know how much I adored my mentor Harry Scholefield. I learned so much from him. But I was never able to meditate in the way he did. Early morning rising. The meditation. The reading of poems until they were memorized. I tried. Oh, how I tried. Time and time again. But he and I were at different stages in our lives. He was retired, and had been for decades. I had my nose to the parish grindstone. He and I had different temperaments. We used to talk about such things all the time.

And it was he who helped me to come to the conclusion that my work was not to take his advice and practice spiritually like he did. My job was to ignore his advice and to find my own means of spiritual practice. It was as if he was reminding me of Broughton's wise words:

Don't trip on the leaps of your life...jump!

Where is the view livelier

than out on a limb? Adventure, not predicament.

And so now I don't spend all day dumping on myself, telling myself that I need to live out my spiritual life in some other way, one, in fact, that does not work for me. I don't have to bow to people who lecture me, saying "You didn't try hard enough!" or "I could teach you yoga so that it wouldn't hurt." No, I *know* what I experienced, and it's not for me. I am, however, immensely glad it's for you. Because there is no "one size fits all" for this stuff. Otherwise, it's a waste of time to ever use the word *diversity* again. Either our differences are real, or we are fooling ourselves terribly. I, for one, think they are real.

And thus, if my friend Babar uses his prayer beads, this is good. He is reflecting on his life, his path, his thankfulness and his sorrows, one bead at a time. He is facing what he can control and what he can't control. If my friend Kevin watercolors out at Lake Merritt in Oakland, he too is reflecting on what he can control and what he can't control, because the water in water-coloring often has a mind of its own. So I see his water-coloring as spiritual practice. If my friend Mario runs miles through the desert, as he will this week, and comes into the presence of his deepest inner questions, that too reflects a spiritual practice, for in no way must the word spirit ever be severed from the word body.

Spiritual practice can be rooted in a religious culture or a secular one...it makes little difference. Spirit's basic meaning is *breath*, remember. The breath of a minister, is, after all, no different than the breath of someone who never enters a church. Neither a religious person nor a non-religious person has any more control over life than the other.

And, of course, by saying that there are thousand different ways to cope with the difficulties of life beyond our control, a thousand different ways to practice breathing with un-panicked steadiness, a thousand ways to give up knee-jerk reactions, does not mean all spiritual practice is equal in dignity. Human beings are equal in inherent dignity, yes, but I, for one, do not think that sitting in silence for an hour, can in any way be equated with the spiritual practice of frightening children about everlasting hellfire. I, for one, do not think that my grandmother telling her beads is the same thing as a television minister making prayer into a species of entitlement...I deserve to get this, that or the other reward because I am pleasing God, as if God were an economist or Santa Claus with lists. I also don't think the spiritual practice of our children...giving thanks for life...is at all equivalent to the spiritual practice of demanding automatic fairness of the universe and asking "Why me?" whenever there is trouble or mayhem. "Why not you?" seems more the kind of spiritual question which, in the monk David Steindl-Rast's words, doesn't mean "taking everything for granted."

I do think that most everyone has a spiritual practice, whether they call it that or not. I just don't think that all of them offer the kind of health which Katherine Mansfield expresses so beautifully. "By health, I mean the power to live a full, adult, breathing life in close contact with what I love...the earth, its wonders, the sea, the sun. I want to enter it, be part of it, to lose all that is superficial and acquired in me and to be a direct and conscious human being."

The gunshots in Mumbai will echo in our ears for a time. Voices which know nothing of the history of Islam in India and its divergent schools of thought will hold forth as if they know something, and start to point fingers. They don't know anything. The grating sound of pundits holding forth about something they know precious little about...the economy...will reverberate for a long while. They are looking, I suppose, for someone to blame, someone convenient and with a target clearly painted on. They'll never find one.

Look, if you see someone about to be hit by a car, it's ok to react and leap to push them out of the way. But those times are rare. The sound of gunshots come often, these days,

however; the difficulties of life show up with clockwork frequency. Which is why we are called to practice spiritually, remembering that we control very little, that our responses to life are better when measured and non-anxious than when panicked. Is giving thanks a spiritual practice? Sure. So is painting by the lake, running through the desert, sitting still for a day, praying on beads like my grandma or my friend Babar, gazing at constellations, writing poetry when the iron is hot, playing mindful golf, engaging in morning worship, reading with attention and questions, and practicing mindfulness. And this: Thanks, thanks, thanks for this, my next breath.

Offering

Psalm for This Very Time

Stars for my cap.
Earth for my shoes.
Mountains for my pulpit.
Oceans for my baptismal font.
Birds for my angels and messengers.
Bears, sparrows and horses
for my cousins and kin.
The prairie for my thanksgiving table.
Morning sun for a cup that brims to the top.
Noon silence for a good hymnbook.
Evening sun for gorgeous vestment.
The stars of night for a wise scripture text.
The people of earth for diverse congregation.
Thanks, Love, thanks for making all this
as clear as when I next breathe in
and as obvious as when I next breathe out.
For the earth, forever turning, this my psalm
of thanks and peace. Amen.