

Necessary Home Improvement: A Spiritual Guide

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Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here,
on a late summer morn,
to celebrate the summons of love and justice,
to journey together, blest by our differences,
to sing with abandon,
and to think and feel courageously,
finding solace and spirit for living. And so

Grounded in gratitude for the cosmos that is our home, claiming deepening wisdom as our authority, and daring to engage joy, burden, loss and insight in a deliberate community of many ways and ages, the flame summons us to awake: to listen with our whole lives, to open, to serve.

Singing #1000

Ingathering : *Story of the Synagogue that meets in a Mosque (a true story about a mosque in the Bronx housing a Jewish Chabad congregation when their old synagogue no longer could be repaired.)*

Greeting (*announcements, caring cards etc*)

Affirming (led by Ginnie Vogts, co-chair of the Justice Action Ministry, after she says the following:

"Charity begins at home" is a proverb most of us have heard. The responsibility that calls to us with the most urgency is to look after the welfare of our nearest and dearest ones. And that's as it should be.

We are a diverse congregation. Each person has different levels of time, energy, and financial resources to draw from. For many of us, taking care of our immediate family—however we define family—is just about all we can manage. If putting food on the table, keeping a roof over your head, and tending to your and your family's basic needs consume almost all of your time, money, and energy, you may feel that you don't have much left over to contribute to the community as a whole.

Others of us have a surplus of time, money, and energy. Whether we have much or little, it can be rewarding to extend our concept of "home" beyond the walls of our house, and our sense of "family" out into the local community, to the state and country we live in, and even out to the whole world. To do so is to experience the world as your home, and to make meaningful

contributions to the quality of life in the greater community.

One of the most important benefits of participating in social justice work, besides the good that it does for the community, is the good that it does to the doer. Sometimes it even does more good to the doer than to the intended recipients.

That's because justice work takes you out of yourself and into the world of others. You receive the gift of seeing how other people live, relieve a little of their suffering, testify on behalf of an issue important to both them and to you, companion the oppressed, teach yourself about a issue you didn't know much about, join with others publicly to take a stand, and often make the kind of difference in the world that builds up instead of tears down.

That's why First UU's Justice Action Ministry, with acronym J-A-M, or JAM, is planning a Justice JAM session on September 23 after both services. JAM is sponsoring this event because this congregation voted to support two initiatives for the next two years: Poverty Alleviation and Women's Health and Reproductive Choice. These are broad areas and vitally important, especially today.

At the Justice JAM you can look over all the opportunities for meaningful social justice work available right from within this congregation. You will get a first-hand look at justice projects supported by this congregation and your pledges. You can meet folks already involved, ask questions, see descriptions of volunteer roles, find out what time commitments are needed, and look for projects that can involve younger people too. JAM is very eager to find ways for children and youth to participate with meaning.

We are excited about this roll-out of JAM as a congregation-wide effort, and hope you will help get it off to a good start by visiting the Justice JAM session on September 23. Let's make our Justice Action Ministry something we are all part of, and proud of. Together we can *build* a safe and supportive home, not just for our own families, but for the family of humanity; and not just *within* these walls, but *outside* them as well.

**"We can also build. We carry a new world here,
in our hearts. This world is growing this moment."**

Buenaventura Durruti 1936

Singing #1017 We are Building a New Way

Communing

"I don't know," I heard a fellow say earlier this week.

"I'm agnostic."

From the context, I guessed he was talking about God.

But it seems to me today that being agnostic about God, not knowing about God, is the very last thing to worry about, not the first.

After all, I'm agnostic about almost everything.

That tree outside the window? I have no idea what its name is. I have no idea what my friend Babar will eat tonight at the Eid supper that closes the days of Ramadan over in Arabia where he

is job hunting right now. I don't know why that man was shouting on the street corner to no one in particular, and wildly waving his hands as I drove past him this morning. I don't know whether that young woman I saw in front of Starbucks was laughing from joy or embarrassment.

I don't know whether that sixteen-year-old guy standing in front of the Marathon gas station all by himself was feeling lonely, or just happy to be alone.

I don't know the name of the tune the Mexican fellow with Juan on his nametag was whistling as he mopped the floor near where I paid for the gas.

I don't know sometimes what's important to do next, or whether I am happier today than I was yesterday.

I don't know the names of most of the stars, most of my neighbors and most of my feelings.

What I *don't* know is so much vaster than what I *do* know that I can't imagine what ground I would stand on to say something, one way or the other, about Ultimacy.

So come, Silence.

Fill my spaciousness now for a moment.

I know so very little, I am so agnostic about most everything, that there certainly is plenty of room for you...

silence...

I do know a few names. The names of those I love, struggle with, care about, worry about, miss terribly. These I speak into the echoing shrine of my own heart, to remember that they are part of this moment as much as I am, being a signature part of my days here on earth.

naming

I do know that I have dreams, however. And I know that dreams of repairing the broken world, the tattered days, the fractured visions, are the substance of my deepest faith, the faith that keeps one foot in front of the other.

Anthem for the morning Song lyrics by John Mellencamp

Save some time to dream
Save some time for yourself
Don't let your time slip away
Or be stolen by somebody else
Save some time for those you love
For they'll remember what you gave
Save some time for the songs you sing
And the music that you've made

Could it be that this is all there is?
Could it be there's nothing more at all?
Save some time to dream
'Cause your dream could save us all

Save some time for sorrow
'Cause it will surely come your way
Prepare yourself for failure
It will give you strength some day
Try to keep your mind open
And accept your mistakes
Save some time for living
And always question your faith

Could it be that this is all there is?
Could it be there's nothing more at all?
Save some time to dream
'Cause your dream might save us all

Cast your eyes up to heaven
Oh what does that mean to you
Try not to be too judgmental
So others will not judge you
Save some time to think
Oh before you speak your mind
Many will not understand
And to them you must be kind

Could it be that this is all there is?
Could it be there's nothing more at all?
Save some time to dream
'Cause your dream might save us all

Oh yeah
Your dream might save us all

Readings:

The First Reading by the late Wislawa Szymborska 1986

Our Ancestors Lived Short Lives
Few of them made it to thirty.
Old age was the privilege of rocks and trees.
Childhood ended as fast as wolf cubs mature.
You had to hurry, to get on with life
before the sun went down,
before the first snow.

Thirteen-year-olds bearing children,
four-year-olds stalking bird nests in the rushes,
leading the hunt at 20 –

they're not there, then they are, then they're not.
The two ends of the circle of infinity
fused only for a flash.
Healers used to chew charms
with all of their youthful teeth intact.
Children matured before their parents' eyes,
their grandparents empty sockets seeing nothing.

And anyway, they didn't spend time counting their days.
They counted nets, bulbs, sheds, and axes.
Time, so generous to any star you can think of,
offered our ancestors just a few moments,
then snatched it back as if the effort hurt.
A few steps along the glittering river that flowed from darkness and vanished into darkness.

There wasn't a moment to lose,
no put-off questions, no patience for future revelations.
Only what they experienced in the moment.
Wisdom couldn't wait for gray hair.
It had to see before it saw the light.
It had to listen for a voice before the voice sounded.

Good and evil...they didn't know much about them, but they knew all they needed:
when evil triumphs, good goes into hiding,
when good shows up, evil backs off.
Neither can be overthrown *once and for all*.
Thus joy and fear lived side by side,
Despair always held the hand of hope.
Life, however long it is, will always seem brief.
Too brief for anything more.

The Second Reading is *T'hillah or Psalm 53*, written not by David, as it claims, but by a later author sometime during the Exile in Babylon, around 530 BCE. This is my edited version of Eugene Peterson's very contemporary translation

Bilious and bloated, they gas
"God is gone!" so they foul themselves,
they poison the rivers and the skies,
thistles are their cash crop.
God looks around for someone not stupid,
one man, just one woman.
But comes up empty. A string of zeros.
Sheep taking turns *pretending*
to be the Shepherd.
The ninety-nine follow the one.
Imposters!

Don't they know they can't get away with this,
treating folks as if they were a fast food meal?
Squatters all!

Preaching

It's not that I have moved around a *lot* since I left my family home, but the place where I live now is the place where I have lived the longest in my life. Almost 14 years. Before I moved there, I had lived in dorms, rooms, and rented cottages, lofts and apartments, both when I lived in Michigan, and when I lived in California. When I moved here, I noted that the housing prices were half of California's, so, at age 49, I ventured to buy a place of my own. (Well, *begin* to buy a place of my own!)

And this year, I have finally noticed that the place I bought 14 years ago is, quite simply, falling apart. The carpet unraveled and looked so filthy I feared I could grow corn in it. The paint on the walls is faded or nicked or scratched. The furniture sags, or splinters, as the upholstery thins itself threadbare. The kitchen counter fissured as if shaken by an earthquake, the counter hinges loosened, the plastic shelving in my refrigerator cracked and clattered onto the floor. My television started to work intermittently.

Not only that, after my mother died last year, I began to realize how most of the things I had inadvertently collected over the years – 6000 books, knick-knacks, candlesticks, gifts of art and objects of memory and sentiment – no longer meant the same to me. I found I wanted to pare back to essentials, to unload the souvenirs and detritus of the decades. I wanted simplicity. I wanted empty spaces. I wanted clean lines, transparency.

I wanted, in short, a new life.

But, for these last 14 years, I was not entirely aware, I'm ashamed to admit, even at my age, that nothing endures forever. That everything has to be renewed or repaired in some way in order to keep moving forward at all. Everything falls apart after a while eventually – weren't Siddhattha the Buddha, Jesus the Prophet, Nanak the Guru and Mirabai the Poet shouting this simple message throughout their age-old sermons? Why had I not paid attention? Why were upkeep and repair and home improvement new ideas to me?

But they were.

And so mid-July, after some wonderful weddings and sundry office work, I took some time off to repair my home and create the context for a new life. I shopped the furniture marts of Columbus until my eyes crossed. I pushed-away impassioned sales folk who insisted that I buy a television the size of bed-sheet for my loft. I replaced my dead carpet with hardwood floors, moving my six thousand books and their shelves first here, and then there, and giving at least 2000 of them to the Kidney Foundation to sell. I covered outlets with painter's tape, precariously wobbled on ladders repainting walls from top to bottom, coat after coat, and called Sears to put in a new countertop made of something that will not crack during the *next* 14 years unless hit directly by a meteorite.

It was costly, believe me, but I realized living in a broken house was costlier. It had to be done.

Now, while all of this was going on, I (like you perhaps?) got clobbered by the summer's difficult events. Remember the *derecho* (a new weather word for me), that series of thunderstorms siphoning power from a couple hundred thousand homes in 100 degree F Columbus, back in July? But more importantly, of course, I think of the *derecho* of *shootings* that siphoned off my spiritual electricity – namely, my native and quite buoyant optimism. The senseless deaths at a Colorado movie-house, or Wisconsin Sikh temple, or near a great University in Texas, broke my heart.

When I attended the memorial service for the Wisconsin Sikhs at our own Columbus Gurdwara (or temple) out on Wilson Road, I witnessed their tremendous grief. And I couldn't help but remember just a few summers ago when a raving man entered one of our own congregations, down in Knoxville, and gunned down Unitarian Universalists there as they worshipped, spewing hatred for their "liberalism."

Moreover, three other things have been breaking my heart recently. First: the horrible and highly successful attempt to disenfranchise as many voters as possible, especially in the so-called "swing states," even though no one can find many examples of the voter fraud this disenfranchisement is supposed to "fix." Two: The actions of a Baptist pastor down in Mississippi who, pressured by some of the longer time white members of his congregation, refused to perform the marriage ceremony for two African American *members* of his congregation in the church building itself. Oh, the church apologized – after the hue and cry nationwide – but only to their own congregation. No apology has been sent to the couple. The words of the psalmist come to mind, words I wouldn't mind reading in the pulpit of that church to the pastor and people there: "God looks around for someone not stupid, one man, just one woman. But comes up empty. A string of zeros." And three: The clear shift in this political season to talk about wealth and big money influencing elections as never before. *How to Buy the White House* is the way a Time cover story this summer pointedly put it.

There is a lot going on, and I doubt that I'm alone in being clobbered by all this. It's been discouraging. It's been painful. But (and this is my point this morning) it's also *reality*. It's the way the world is right now. It's not an illusion. And in the wise words of David Richo which I often quote: "The spiritual life is whatever we do to help us shed our illusions."

Our illusions. Like the one I had that there were no cracks in my counters, my carpet was neither unraveling nor worn out, that my furniture was not falling apart, that the paint would outlast me. I was fooling myself for a long time. I was buying into the GREAT ILLUSION, in fact, namely, that once you accomplish something, it's finished once and for all. This illusion was often, unfortunately, lifted up by our romantically optimistic religious ancestors, that progress is an inevitable staircase leading to perfection. First we defeat race problems once and for all, then we defeat poverty once and for all, then we get rid of war once and for all, then we rest, sit down, and sip rose-petal wine in paradise for good.

This really is the same illusion I have been living with in mundane form. My furniture was great

when I bought it, and I foolishly imagined it would stay great. My carpeting would be immune forever to the dirt and dust I track in every day. It's really a bit like saying that since I brushed my teeth once, I'm done for the month; or that if I go to the gym once a month, that takes care of my fitness forever. Illusion. Superstition. And the spiritual life is whatever we do to help us shed the Great Illusion.

So that's why I love the words of the psalmist. The psalmist, in that snazzy translation I read, reminds us that some of the things we are facing now have been around for – ah – several thousand years. *They poison the rivers and the skies*, the poet complains, "they" referring to the self-anointed power brokers of the early iron age when the psalm was written. The poisoning of our common environment is not simply a post-industrial age business. People have been fighting environmental carelessness for centuries. It's still a battle being waged.

And clearly, some people in the news, the famous Koch brothers for example, anoint themselves as movers and shakers even though they have not been elected to anything. The way the psalmist puts it, using the pastoral culture metaphors of the era: *Sheep taking turns pretending to be the Shepherd*. Then the psalmist adds, in words that were written down long before the dramatic proclamation of the now fading Occupy movement: *The ninety-nine follow the one*.

Look, by admitting this, I'm **not** saying that improving the world, repairing the brokenness of our shared nation and shared planet, is a waste of time. I am **not** saying that, while trying to improve *my personal home* is hopeful, trying to repair our common home, the our nation in the world, is hopeless. I am saying no such thing. Progress and positive change do happen, just not on our romantic timetable of upward and onward forever. Such timetables are the illusions we need to shed if we are to move toward a fair world without slogging through despair. Progress toward a just world moves in jolts. Two steps forward, one step backward. Any progress toward equality and justice scares many people, so in their fear, they try to dismantle it. They're clearly afraid that they will lose the privileges they have come to rely on.

Nevertheless, the movement of history is forward for the most part, not retrograde. The poet Szymborska points this out clearly. In our generation, we count days on our iPhones, years as well as light-years on our computers, and we all know folks who have reached the age of 100 or close to it. A couple thousand years ago, no one even counted things like their days – they counted "*nets, bulbs, nets and axes*." When they were 30, they recognized themselves both old, and lucky to have made it *that far*. All mothers were teen mothers. (I am talking 13 here, not 18.) "*Wisdom couldn't wait for gray hair*," the poet wrote succinctly. But, she adds, just because they lived their lives in mostly survival mode does not mean they didn't know things.

*Good and evil...they didn't know much about them, but they knew all they needed:
when evil triumphs, good goes into hiding,
when good shows up, evil backs off.
Neither can be overthrown once and for all.
Thus joy and fear lived side by side,
Despair always held the hand of hope.*

The illusion that the troubles of the world can be dealt with once and for all is our illusion. It

wasn't theirs. Their lives were short, but we might learn something from their wisdom. The spirituality of justice is meaningless if it imagines that the work stops for good one day. It goes nowhere if it sincerely, but romantically, believes that one day, everyone will be all grown up and we can sit down in a heaven on earth. It goes nowhere if it sincerely believes that eventually people will stop trying to forcefully yank everything back to the 1950s, stop trying to deny power to everyone but themselves, stop trying to buy authority, respect, and even the right to tell the truth with their vast fortunes.

I believe that stewing in resentment because this is true does not serve justice. That resentment is based on the Great Illusion. I think justice depends on people like us shedding our illusions, and moving forward knowing that we can only move one step at a time, and that we will be resisted. But I also believe in lifting up the good news higher than the bad news that I outlined earlier: voters are being disenfranchised, racialized ignorance still thrives in America, the self-anointed think they can buy me and you, and gunfire continues to ricochet in our hearts. The good news is that improvement for the nation and the world is not hopeless. I will say the names of Bishop Tutu and Aung San Suu Kyi louder than the Koch brothers. I will tell tales of Jews and Muslims sharing the same small quarters in peace and friendship. I will tell of organizations alive in Columbus and in Ohio that are working on issues of gun violence like never before. I will talk about Jew, Christian, UU, Jain, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist and simple people of conscience showing up at a Sikh temple in solidarity and sympathy. I will sing songs like "Building a New Way" and "Save Some Time to Dream" instead complaining and resenting that I am still living in a world that needs you and needs me, a world and a nation that are still full of cracks, spiritual wear and tear, the seemingly relentless shenanigans of swaggering, unashamed greed. I will shed illusions every day, especially the illusion that paradise should have arrived already, and together with you, *face* reality with courage and conviction instead

My home is feeling more homelike every day once I gave up the illusion that I didn't have to do anything to make it so. And little by little, we can make our nation a home again, where we redo what King did decades ago and get votes back, challenge the right of anyone to buy the nation, and work on issues of race even though some progress has been made. Home improvement you see, as I learned this summer, is not an option. It's a summons, a call, a promise, a gratitude, a form of honesty, a bow to reality. Home improvement is the emblem of life itself, the very portrait of love.

Offering

Home improvement is indeed a spiritual matter. The opportunity to maintain this, our *spiritual* home, makes this fact vivid. True, to some extent we are like turtles – we take our spiritual homes wherever we go. But, a safe place to gather with others is a spiritual necessity.

A safe place to listen with our whole lives, to open, and serve becomes a home for our spirits. How amazing it is to build up this building, these programs including our Justice Action Ministry, and these people which together serve as our spiritual home! The offering in support of this haven for us all, is now asked and gratefully received.

Returning (*have everyone hold hands*)

Come gentleness, come anger,

hold hands with us, and never let us go.
Come judgment, come mercy,
hold hands with us and never let us go.
Come yes, come no.
Join hands with us and never let us go.
Come peace and come unrest.
Join hands with us and never let us go.
Come moon, come sun, come stars,
join hands with us and never let us go.
Come Love, and illumine every part of us,
 the fury and the fairness,
 the friendship and the flight,
 the fist and the felicity
with your revealing, reveling and unraveling light.

Singing 1057

Blessing