

Eternal Question #6: What has Life Taught You Thus Far?
Kitsap Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Reverend Elizabeth Stevens
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Chalice Lighting

Albert Thelander

We hallow this time together by kindling the lamp of our heritage.

We remember those who have gone before us, who protected against any tyranny
over the body, the mind, or the spirit;
who led the way in a free search for wisdom and beauty and justice.

We dedicate ourselves to be parts of that stream of light, awakening light
within ourselves
and bringing peace and justice into our world.

We come together to be lifted by the presence of each,
to learn from one another,
to share with one another.

We light our chalice
to symbolize the light in each
to remind us of the light within
and the light beyond.

Meditation

In the silence of this moment,

Let us listen
for the gentle stream of our breath, flowing in and out
filling us with lightness and stillness.

Let us listen
for the gentle throb of our heart beat
thrumming, murmuring faithfully of our aliveness.

There is so much beauty in this world...
in the trees and the birds and the mountains...
in the hearts and the faces of the people who surround us.
Breathe in the beauty.
Let it flow through your body.
Let it bless you.

There are so many truths to explore...
different perspectives, different experiences,

different stories that give shape and meaning
to our lives.
Breathe in acceptance.
Let your own truth settle into your bones.
If it lives solid in you
you'll find you'll no longer need to defend it.
Other truths will exist painlessly
in their own cage of bones.
The air and the light
can move through the spaces in all of us.

Hope lives in you,
and love, too.
You'll hear it when you listen
to your breath, to your heartbeat,
to the silence.
You'll hear the song that whispers
never hurrying, but never stopping, either...
We are the ones who carry the song.

Sermon

Today is the sixth in a series of sermons on the Ten Eternal Questions
posed by Zoe Sallis in her book of that name...
questions our chalice circles are chewing on over the course of this year.

The question this week is "What has Life Taught You So Far?"
Not, "What have you learned?"
or "Who is your favorite teacher?"
But "What has life taught you?"

I'm very fond of learning from books and people,
but I have to admit, learning from life can be tough.
At least for me.
I'm pretty smart, and so head learning has always come easy for me.
You soak in the information like a sponge,
and regurgitate it as necessary for tests or papers or in answer to questions.

Life rarely settles for rote memorization
or glib answers.
Life rarely settles for head learning at all.

The lessons life has to teach
keep on coming 'til you learn them in your heart.

They say you learn best
that which you're meant to teach...

and one of the lessons that life keeps sending me over and over again
is about balance.

When I was in seminary, I wrote a sermon called "Spiritual Scheduling."
It was about finding and keeping your balance
by treating time spent with your day-timer
as a spiritual practice.

In it, I lamented our instant gratification culture,
and lifted up the idea that given some time to center down,
we all could listen to our higher instincts,
set priorities, and find balance.

It was a good sermon...the people I preached it to,
the UU Congregation in Davis, California,
Really liked it and me.

Over the years, I've preached that sermon
at probably ten or twenty different churches.

Each time I pull it out,
I have to re-write it and add the new insights I've gained...
For example, at one point I added these two lines:
"I had thought that I wouldn't have to be as mindful
about scheduling
once I became primarily a stay at home Mom."

You could tell who in the congregation had spent any time at all
as a stay at home Mom because they were the ones
who laughed out loud when I read that line.
One woman outside of Richmond, VA, even snarfed her coffee.

Now, I have never adapted "Spiritual Scheduling" for KUUF.
Why is that?
Because since starting to serve as a called minister,
I've been too busy –
too busy learning from life
a myriad of different lessons that come under the general heading of
"balancing career and family."

Assuming that I'm right, and that the need for balance is one of the lessons
I need to learn over and over again
so that I can teach it better,
well, I have a bone to pick with life as a teacher.
Because every time I learn my lesson,
and believe me, I've learned it over and over again,
before I even have time to catch my breath,
along comes a change in circumstances

that throws everything out of whack again.

I KNOW that I can't help others
if I'm not taking care of myself properly...
or I can, but I can't sustain it for very long.

I know that taking care of myself doesn't have to include
manicures and pedicures and endless hours at the gym...
but it does have to include rest
and relaxation,
time outdoors
and time moving my body around,
whether cleaning or gardening
or walking the dog.

I know that it's about staying present,
remembering to breathe,
not living in regrets about the past
or anxiety about the future.

I know that balance requires
settling for "good enough"
rather than holding out for perfect.
So many tasks and challenges are asymptotic,
bringing you ever closer to perfect but never quite making it.
When you find yourself making tiny changes
that no one will notice but you,
it's time to move on.
I sometimes call myself a perfectionist in recovery.
"Hello, my name is Liz, and I'm a perfectionist."

I get it! Really!

Yet it's not enough for this demanding taskmaster.

Life seems determined to teach me that balance is both elusive,
and worth striving for.
Leading a balanced life is simultaneously vitally important
and practically impossible.

Life keeps on teaching, keeps on pushing and challenging
and sending tough situations your way
until you learn to live not by head, but by heart.

Given my perpetual quest for balance
and spiritual groundedness,
You can understand why I was so interested to hear

what my friend and colleague, the Rev. James Kubal Komoto had to say in his sermon, "How to be a Spiritual Person in Fifteen Minutes a Day."

He preached the sermon here last February,
and he's shopped it around the district at other congregations as well.

In it, he crystallizes everything he's learned so far about the spiritual life
into four categories,
represented by four particular qualities,
and brought into focus by four particular questions.

Four is a good number, don't you think?
Enough to capture some of the complexity of life,
but not so many that you can't remember them.

For James, the spiritual life calls us to cultivate our ability
to live in relationship,
to enjoy our own lives,
to live with integrity in the face of frustration, failure and loss,
and to find meaning in our experiences.

The four qualities we need to embody are
compassion (or kindness),
gratitude,
acceptance,
and faithfulness.

The questions we need to ask ourselves each morning are:
How can I live with a little more compassion today?
What am I grateful for in my life today?
What is it that I need to accept...about life, myself, or somebody else...today?
And what commitments or values will I be most faithful to today?

Behind James' four pillar construction are some key insights that resonate for me.

Kindness is key not because we need to be kind to each other,
but because being kind, choosing to be kind,
is the way to grow inner peace.
Our tendencies toward meanness,
toward nit-picking, judgment, gossip
keep us from feeling secure in our own being.
When we attack others,
we're usually reacting to something we don't like in ourselves,
and so these behaviors,
these moments of meanness,
hurt us as much if not MORE than they hurt the target of our meanness.
So just don't do it.
Right on, James.

He reminds us that gratitude leads to feeling satisfied and happy,
rather than the other way around.

We try to convince ourselves that when we achieve "X",
when we finish "Y",

once we get "W" and "P" and "Q"

We'll finally be satisfied and happy, we'll feel grateful...

But it doesn't work that way.

We need to choose to be grateful for what we have.

When we adopt an attitude of gratitude,
we'll become happy.

Happiness is a choice,
not an accomplishment.

James' four attributes are compassion, gratitude, acceptance, and commitment.

What is compassion but unconditional love directed toward others?

What is gratitude but unconditional love directed toward life and the world?

What is acceptance but unconditional love directed toward ourselves

and toward imperfections and failings we perceive in ourselves, each other, and the world?

What is commitment but unconditional love directed toward that which we choose to dedicate our lives to?

I would crystallize James four into the one:

the spiritual life is about getting better at loving unconditionally.

It makes me wonder, though.

If people have been on this spiritual journey for thousands of years.

how come we aren't better at unconditional love?

Why are people so frequently sidetracked and ambushed

by divisiveness, hate, judgment, greed...

shouldn't we know better by now?

When you look at the contrast between technological advances on the one hand,

which are teachable, translatable, and move forward at an almost alarming rate,

and contrast that to social and spiritual progress,

which is glacial at best,

and moving backward at worst

(fundamentalism is, after all,

an attempt to return to an earlier stage of faith)

Well, it makes you wonder.

Maybe life's not such a great teacher, after all...

or maybe human beings are just phenomenally thick skulled.

I wonder if it's because the realm that life moves in,

those social and spiritual changes,

are heart changes rather than head changes.

Maybe those changes are just harder, slower to make.

Or maybe it's because they're subjective.
Life lessons are usually unique rather than universal,
though there are clearly common threads.

Perhaps the subjectivity makes it harder to learn the lessons
and also harder to pass them on.
After all, you typically can't back up your conclusions with research data.

There's a series of advice statements that were zipping around cyber space a few years back.
They're often attributed to Kurt Vonnegut (who has been claimed, somewhat controversially,
as a Unitarian Universalist)
They're actually written by Mary Schmich, a columnist at the Chicago Tribune.

She writes:

Wear sunscreen.

If I could offer you only one tip for the future, sunscreen would be it. The long-term benefits of sunscreen have been proved by scientists, whereas the rest of my advice has no basis more reliable than my own meandering experience. I will dispense this advice now.

Don't worry about the future. Or worry, but know that worrying is as effective as trying to solve an algebra equation by chewing bubble gum. The real troubles in your life are apt to be things that never crossed your worried mind, the kind that blindsides you at 4 pm on some idle Tuesday.

Do one thing every day that scares you.

Sing.

Don't be reckless with other people's hearts. Don't put up with people who are reckless with yours.

Floss.

Don't waste your time on jealousy. Sometimes you're ahead, sometimes you're behind. The race is long and, in the end, it's only with yourself.

Remember compliments you receive. Forget the insults. If you succeed in doing this, tell me how.

Keep your old love letters. Throw away your old bank statements.

Stretch.

Get plenty of calcium. Be kind to your knees. You'll miss them when they're gone.

Maybe you'll marry, maybe you won't. Maybe you'll have children, maybe you won't. Maybe you'll divorce at 40, maybe you'll dance the funky chicken on your 75th wedding anniversary. Whatever you do, don't congratulate yourself too much, or berate yourself either. Your choices are half chance. So are everybody else's. Enjoy your body. Use it every way you can. Don't be afraid of it or of what other people think of it. It's the greatest instrument you'll ever own.

Dance, even if you have nowhere to do it but your living room.

Read the directions, even if you don't follow them.

Do not read beauty magazines. They will only make you feel ugly.

Get to know your parents. You never know when they'll be gone for good. Be nice to your siblings. They're your best link to your past and the people most likely to stick with you in the future.

Understand that friends come and go, but with a precious few you should hold on. Work hard to bridge the gaps in geography and lifestyle, because the older you get, the more you need the people who knew you when you were young.

Accept certain inalienable truths: Prices will rise. Politicians will philander. You, too, will get old. And when you do, you'll fantasize that when you were young, prices were reasonable, politicians were noble, and children respected their elders.

Respect your elders.

Don't mess too much with your hair or by the time you're 40 it will look 85.

Be careful whose advice you buy, but be patient with those who supply it. Advice is a form of nostalgia. Dispensing it is a way of fishing the past from the disposal, wiping it off, painting over the ugly parts and recycling it for more than it's worth.

But trust me on the sunscreen.

In the juxtaposition of the practical and the profound, the proven and the merely supposed,
it becomes clear that some lessons can't be taught.

They have to be learned.

You can almost imagine a room full of bored college grads,

lost in their own thoughts,
and you cringe,
wishing they'd listen,
but knowing that they,
like the rest of us, have to learn these lessons the hard way.

I've heard it said that the only true path to spiritual growth
is through an awareness of pain and brokenness.
I'm not sure I agree with that,
but I do think that lessons learned through adversity
are some of the most important lessons to hold onto...
and to share.

Sometimes I wonder if Unitarian Universalism
shies away too much from the tougher, more painful lessons.
Are we, as Linda, a research physician in Alabama who works in a free clinic in Guatemala,
a fair weather faith?
She is reported to have said, "When I can think, function,
and the weather is no worse than cloudy,
it's fine.
But Unitarian Universalism does not sustain or comfort or guide me
when I am on the darkling plain."¹

My late and dearly loved colleague,
the Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley,
shared in a piece
published in the 2006 Skinner House Book Christian Voices in Unitarian Universalism
that when she encountered a crisis,
she found herself turning to the religion of her childhood,
Christianity,
and reclaiming it from a Unitarian Universalist point of view.
In the story of Jesus, she found the depth and the comfort she needed.

She wrote:

If I have any advice for those struggling to discover their own truths, it is found in the
ancient wisdom of a Sufi parable: If you want to move beyond a surface understanding of
any religious tradition, you've got to dig a well—a well as deep as the self. You have to go
into the depths of that tradition if you are to find the living water that awaits your thirst.²

Are there depths to dig in Unitarian Universalism?
Or, in our quest for inclusiveness
do we wind up with a breadth that keeps us on the surface,

¹ : Reported in "And Trust the Rest to Other Hands: A Guidebook to the Darkling Plain" by Barbara Jamestone: http://www.uuf.org/Sermon04-05/And_trust_the_rest_to_other_hands.pdf

² : Reproduced in the newsletter of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, Quest, February 2007.

keeps us from finding that which we need to sustain ourselves
in the dark times, the hard times,
the hurting and broken times?
How many of us, like Marjorie,
find ourselves plumbing the depths of other spiritual traditions
in search of the sustenance we need?

While I've dug into Buddhism
and more recently into Christianity
for wisdom on how to handle pain and suffering,
I believe the truest source of learning is life--
my own, and the lives of people I know and love.

I have found there some first hand wisdom,
and an answer to Linda on her darkling plain:

Grief is like a mountain lake.
It's deep and it's bone-chillingly cold,
and there's no way through it but through it.
No one can swim it for you...
you have to cross it yourself,
you have to dive into the cold, dark depths of it
and fight your own way back to the surface.
But it helps to have someone with you,
waiting for you,
cheering for you,
reaching a hand down,
throwing a life line,
loving you through it.

Being that person, that person in the boat,
watching anxiously over the edge,
reaching down with outstretched arms,
bringing hot drinks and warm blankets,
concern and care,
is important, important work.
It makes a difference.

As others have done it for me,
So I have done it in turn,
So I will continue.

Life has taught me that when it comes to pain,
and grief,
and trauma,
and depression,
there is no more valuable gift than whole-hearted presence.

That is the light,
the beacon we need to hold out and hold up.

We learn,
we share,
we grow,
we care,
and somehow, the world goes on,
more beautiful and more meaningful
because of our struggles to make sense of it.

What a miracle!

I hope that these lessons learned
are useful to you
as you create meaning out of your own life,
your own learning.
And more, I hope that you open up to one another,
share the lessons learned
in your lives.

May we always be a learning community,
grounded in acceptance, and trust,
and love.

So be it, and so may it ever be.