

Practices of the Spirit

Wendell Berry once said, “This place, if I am to live well in it, requires and deserves a lifetime of the most careful attention.”

Attention is something that is supposedly under one’s direct control. I like to think that I can control what I am attending to, focusing on. But if I am honest with myself, I have to admit that my attention frequently wanders, despite my best intentions. But this isn’t just the case with me, it’s the case with almost everyone. If you doubt it, just try counting backwards from 100 to 0 and see how far you get before your attention wanders.

Many spiritual practices can be understood as exercises in sustained attention. When I meditate, I like to use the technique of counting my breaths. I count to ten and then start over again. Frequently, my attention will wander and I stop counting. I’ve learned to simply start counting again.

The mind has been compared to a drunken monkey. It lurches from place to place. It is difficult to keep it steady and focused. But the practice of meditation is just that—a practice. Most skills require practice. When we were very young, we learned to walk by practicing walking until it became automatic. So it is with practicing the skill of mindfulness. What are called Practices of the Spirit are skills that can be learned through practice. Some years ago I participated in weeklong UUMA sponsored retreat on spiritual practice. We practiced many skills: silence, walking meditation, fasting, eating slowly and deliberately.

The practices most often associated with spirituality are meditation and prayer. But there are many more types of spiritual practices. Many practices can be “spiritual” such as saying hello and looking at a cashier or waiter. Whenever I go through a check-out line and the cashier says hello, how are you? I always make it a point to make eye contact and say the same to them. “Hi, how are **you** doing?” Often they seem surprised but almost as often they seem grateful.

Chris Brownlie, a former member and DRE who is now a UU minister, told me of her practice to initiate a conversation with people she was standing in line with at stores. In a similar vein, Dr. Atul Gawande, instructs medical students to ask an unscripted question of their patients when conducting an exam. If the patient responds, see if you can keep the conversation going. He says, “If you ask a question, the machine begins to feel less like a machine.” I would add, it’s another way to pay attention.

Religiously observant Jews are expected to perform a Mitzvah, a good deed or act of kindness each day.” A random act of kindness is a mitzvah, even if you don’t call it that.

One of my very favorite scenes from a movie is in *Harvey*. The main characters are Jimmy Stewart and his special friend, Harvey, who is visible only to him, despite the fact that’s he’s a 6’ 3 white rabbit. Elwood’s sister is embarrassed and attempts to rid herself of the source of her embarrassment by having Elwood committed to a mental hospital. No matter what happens to him in this process, though, Elwood remains unfailingly polite and gracious. Dr. Chumley, the director of the mental hospital, becomes troubled that Elwood doesn’t seem to ever get upset over his sister’s machinations. At one point, he asks, “Good heavens man, don’t you have any righteous indignation!”

Practices of the Spirit

Elwood answers, Dr. Chumley,

“Years ago, my mother used to say to me, she’d say to me, “In this world Elwood, you must be oh so smart or oh so pleasant.’

Well for years I was smart. I recommend pleasant. And you may quote me.”

Sounds like a spiritual practice to me.

In September of 2007, Dr. Randy Pausch, a Carnegie Mellon University computer-science professor, gave a lecture at Carnegie Mellon. He had just learned that the pancreatic cancer, which he had hoped was defeated, had returned and returned with a vengeance. His doctor told him he probably had three to six months before it would claim him. The lecture he gave was part of a series where distinguished faculty are asked to think deeply about what matters to them, and then give a hypothetical "final talk", with a topic such as "what wisdom would you try to impart to the world if you knew it was your last chance?" Only in Randy’s case, it wasn’t hypothetical. It really was his last chance. He spoke of his childhood dreams and how he set about achieving them, how his new dream was enabling others, especially his children. He concluded with some advice:

“Get a feedback loop and listen to it. Your feedback loop can be this dorky spreadsheet thing I did, or it can just be one great man who tells you what you need to hear. The hard part is the listening to it.

Anybody can get chewed out. It’s the rare person who says, oh my god, you were right. As opposed to, no wait, the real reason is... We’ve all heard that. When people give you feedback, cherish it and use it.

Show gratitude. When I got tenure I took all of my research team down to Disneyworld for a week. And one of the other professors at Virginia said, how can you do that? I said these people just busted their ass and got me the best job in the world for life. How could I not do that?

Don’t complain. Just work harder. [shows slide of Jackie Robinson, the first black major league baseball player] That’s a picture of Jackie Robinson. It was in his contract not to complain, even when the fans spit on him.

Be good at something, it makes you valuable.

Work hard. I got tenure a year early as Steve mentioned. Junior faculty members used to say to me, wow, you got tenure early. What’s your secret? I said, it’s pretty simple. Call me any Friday night in my office at ten o’clock and I’ll tell you.

Find the best in everybody. One of the things that Jon Snoddy as I said told me, is that you might have to wait a long time, sometimes years, but people will show you their good side. Just keep waiting no matter how long it takes. No one is all evil. Everybody has a good side, just keep waiting, it will come out.

And be prepared. Luck is truly where preparation meets opportunity.”

Practices of the Spirit

- Listen to criticism.
- Be Grateful
- Don't complain
- Be good at something.
- Work hard.
- Find the best in everybody.

I think this is a list of spiritual practices. While they may not sound like what are typically considered spiritual practices they are all actions you can practice. They are also the kind of spiritual practices that people who don't consider themselves to be very spiritual can practice. Like many Unitarian Universalists. Like Randy Pausch, a member of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Pittsburgh.

Every year BeliefNet.Com, a website that is a resource for religious seekers, chose him as the most inspiring person of 2008. He died on July 25th of this year.

The English author Samuel Johnson, once said "...when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."

We can regard death as the comedian Woody Allen comically suggested, "I don't mind dying. I just don't want to be there when it happens." Or we can regard as the Nobel prize winning physicist Richard Feynman did. When Feynman learned he had cancer and would soon die, he asked his doctor if he could avoid, if possible, giving him drugs that might cloud his awareness of his final moments, because, "I want to be there when it happens."

But whether one can expect to die in two weeks, two months, or two years, we all know we are going to die sometime. Most of us, though, most of the time, seem to spend our time as if it will never end. Too often we, in effect, sleepwalk through our days, as the character of Emily in the play *Our Town* discovered when she returned briefly from the dead only to realize, "So all that was going on and we never noticed.... Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?--every, every minute?" to which the stage manager replied, "No. (pause) The saints and poets, maybe--they do some."

The Rev. Forrest Church is the senior minister of All Souls Unitarian Church of Manhattan. He has esophageal cancer which his doctors have been unable to treat and which will most likely soon claim his life. In a blog published in July 22nd of this year he wrote, "Death is central to my definition of religion: religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die. We are not the animal with advanced language or tools as much as we are the religious animal."

Spiritual practices aren't about dying or preparing to die. They are about living. The Zen Buddhist Monk Thich Nhat Hanh had this to say about the practice of living.

Practices of the Spirit

“In the United States, I have a close friend name Jim Forest. When I first met him eight years ago, he was working with the Catholic Peace Fellowship. Last winter, Jim came to visit. I usually wash the dishes after we've finished the evening meal, before sitting down and drinking tea with everyone also. One night, Jim asked if he might do the dishes. I said, "Go ahead, but if you wash the dishes you must know the way to wash them." Jim replied, "Come on, you think I don't know how to wash the dishes?" I answered, "There are two ways to wash the dishes. The first is to wash the dishes in order to have clean dishes and the second is to wash the dishes in order to wash the dishes." Jim was delighted and said, "I choose the second way -- to wash the dishes to wash the dishes." From then on, Jim knew how to wash the dishes. I transferred the "responsibility" to him for an entire week.

If while washing dishes, we think only of the cup of tea that awaits us, thus hurrying to get the dishes out of the way as they were a nuisance, then we are not "washing the dishes to wash the dishes." What's more, we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes. In fact we are completely incapable of realizing the miracle of life while standing at the sink. If we can't wash the dishes, the chances are we won't be able to drink our tea either....Thus, we are sucked away into the future -- and we are incapable of actually living one minute of life.”

Let us practice the skill of washing the dishes to wash the dishes so that we might become capable of actually living the minutes of our lives.

Actually living-- realizing life while you live it? This is the promise of spiritual practice.

Actually living--isn't that what it's all about?