



Ploughshare

A Piece of Mike's Mind

by Rev. Mike Morran

Several people have recently asked me about my upcoming class: SoUUlful Living; an Introduction to Living A Spiritual Life as a Unitarian Universalist. SoUUlful Living had its genesis during my first sabbatical about ten years ago. It was becoming clear that First Unitarian did a fine job teaching a religiously liberal philosophy, but that was only scratching the surface, especially for many of our newer members.

On that sabbatical, wanted to explore; how can we take our deepest core values and our rich theological history and move into the future, growing in ways that are...: a) religiously grounded, b) radically inclusive and inherently communal, c) include specific methods and disciplines for spiritual growth, d) are systematically teachable, and e) that individuals and communities could actually practice and feel the results of?

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A Reminder to Breathe

by Erin Kenworthy, DRE

Two years ago, our youth hosted a worship service and they used a song from the original Disney movie, The Lion King, to set the tone as we sent our graduating youth into their young adulthood. I think it was meant as an encouragement and an optimistic warning, rather than a statement on the very real turn of affairs that had taken place on our national stage. "So prepare for a chance of a lifetime, prepare for sensational news. A shining new era, is tiptoeing nearer..." sounds like a sprinkle of hope.

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The answer (so far) has been SoUUlful Living and other classes that have been offered at First Unitarian since then. SoUUlful Living is intended as an introduction, and the outline (5 sessions over 5 Weeks) is as follows:

Week One: Unitarianism

- God is One: - Conceptual origins of Unitarianism, with examples from Bible, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Indigenous traditions
- God and Creation are One: - Pantheism, Process concepts
- We are One: - Manifestations of the One, consciousness, the Universe aware of itself
- Cosmology and the Universe, Gnosis (intuition), a field of possibility!

Week Two: Universalism – Inherent Possibilities

- Inherent potential, not inherent sin
- Enough Hell right here on Earth
- The Body Divine
- God is Love
- All are Sacred and Worthy, “God bless the world, no exceptions.”

Week Three: Pluralism and Covenant

- No one handle on ultimate truth – Mystery and Authority
- Revelation is ongoing
- Many paths, one faith – Stained Glass analogy
- Wholeness and health arise from community and interdependence
- Born from and into Oneness, therefore born into covenant.

Week Four: Love and Justice

- The measure of a religious life
- Practice of Love (concepts from MLK, Thurman, Gandhi, Fowler, Tolle, etc.)
- Implications of Unitarianism and Universalism for social responsibility,
- Spiritual Growth opportunities through giving
- “By their associations you will know them” (James L. Adams, etc.)

Week Five: Swimming to the Other Side: An introduction to the methods and disciplines of Liberal Religion: Insight – Nature - Prayer and Blessing - Community – Dialogue – Study

Everyone is welcome! We start Tuesday evening.

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“Be Prepared” is sung by the movie villain, a lion named Scar. Scar is a usurper who plans to steal the throne in that story, and the song lyrics read like our current administration’s second term election plan. The point being that their teeth and their ambitions are bared, poised to “make the pride great again” with promises of food, prizes, adoration, all spoils of a coup built upon lies and scams from an insecure leader. Sound familiar?

Three years ago, I felt caught unprepared. The 2016 election results came into focus on a night when my highest hopes transformed into my most nightmarish-haunted house scenario. It was as if the evil clown had us cornered, and there was no exit door in sight. The roller coaster that has ensued has exhausted the emotional resources of even the best of us at times, and brought out some of the very worst in our collective selves many times. I’m tired, and I’d like to get off the ride, but we are all on this ride together and I’d like to not be abandoned, so likewise, it feels unforgiveable to abandon you. Come sit next to me, because it looks as though the only way to get past this is to go through it together.

This month brings us to one year until the next presidential election, and liberal leaning folks such as ourselves are finding it necessary to conserve our resources. We have not yet identified our clear plan for battle, are tossing resources and efforts in a lot of directions, while threats to our values remain ever present. The manifestation of this, for me, is to decline social invitations, pull back on future plans, disengage enough to breathe through the hard parts, find the small things that I am willing and able to manage, and let the time pass. When the time comes to push my shoulder into the fray, I’ll be ready, but for the moments leading up, I’d like to catch a breath if you please.

The problem, however, is that holding your breath cannot go on forever, unless you’d like to just stop here. If we are to live and move through this, we all need to breathe, be reminded to breathe in some cases, and to remind others to do the same. Our community is a place for us to breathe together, to be reminded that we are not on the ride alone, and that our values are still alive and resonate in this uncertain world at this uncertain time.

Sunday mornings have traditionally been reserved for our worship. And, we carry our Unitarian Universalist identities every other day of the week. Our commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every individual pulls at us when we read news about families separated at the border. Our spiritual attachment to the web of all existence feels tugged when we see stories about climate change effects felt around the world. Our participation in this faith occurs in a multitude of small and large moments throughout the week. We worship whenever we engage with our spiritual needs and values alone or in community.

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Our covenant calls upon us to gather. While conserving energy, and holding in breath are natural responses to fear, threats, and uncertainty, these behaviors halt the flow that ultimately carries us through the discomfort, pain and grief that we face. Breathe when you need to, be present in your worshipful moments. Attend opportunities for sacred rest and renewal because there is much to be done in the coming year. Let us gather to share our resources and be renewed, to challenge the despair that partners with isolation. Let us be prepared, supported, and replenished in the presence of one another, facing the same direction with hope, ready for what may come.

President's Corner

by Mary Sullivan, President, First Unitarian Board of Trustees

This has been a very big month for me, punctuated by travel to three “reunions”. Let’s take a minute to look at this wording and its roots.

1. “Reunion” (noun meaning the act or process of being brought together again as a unified whole)
2. “Union” (noun meaning the action or fact of joining or being joined or a state of harmony or agreement)
3. “Unite” (verb meaning to come or bring together for a common purpose or action).

Just in case you wondered, I’m well aware that none of you need this study in word definitions. However, I did so for a reason. My three gatherings were very different types of “reunions” and might exemplify three somewhat differing definitions. All my reunions were joyous, but in various different ways.

My most recent reunion type sojourn was to Eugene, Oregon with my two daughters to surprise my son for his 34th birthday. He moved from Denver just two months ago to accompany and support his partner through her two years of graduate work at the University of Oregon. This was the best imaginable time spent with family, including a day at the coast frolicking in the frigid water in bare feet, playing tic-tac-toe and hangman in the sand, and participating in a beach yoga session led by my youngest daughter. But wait, there’s more! We spent another couple days in Bend, which is very reminiscent to me of a typical Colorado mountain town. There were also hikes to waterfalls and leaf viewing excursions, with my observing all three of my children in rapt astonishment at the bright red hues and huge dimension of leaves they had never seen in Colorado. Can’t get much better than this in my book. This reunion exemplifies the # 3 above in that we came together to celebrate a birthday and rejoice in time together, which is exactly what we did.

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On to another reunion, a “major one” to my catholic high school in Decatur, Illinois. I will not specify which year reunion, by references to lapses around the sun or how many fingers or hands it takes to count up. Let’s just suffice it to say it was indeed a big one and I bet you can figure it out. This gathering most closely exemplifies the definition above of #1 above because we gathered as a “unified whole” as members of the same high school class of 90 students. We had close to a 50% turnout when you count spouses of other class years, whom we all knew. The interesting dynamic of this gathering was that we did not exemplify a unified whole when we were all in school together; we were divided by clichés, socio-economics, GPA’s, sports, etc. But this was the first reunion that all of those dividing factors were truly GONE. People visited, kibitzed, socialized with everyone present with no returning to past isolating norms. It was a reunion in the true sense.

Lastly, this visit back to the Midwest served as an opportunity for my very close high school/grade school friends (6 of us) to spend precious time together (see definition #2 above.) This seems like a no-brainer, except for one very interesting observation: we are all VERY DIFFERENT people than we were when we befriended one another, as much as 61 years ago! We differ in religion, politics, socio-economics, health, life-choices, activities, etc; and yet, we love and respect each other deeply and nothing seems to alter that. We can irritate the hell out of each other on occasions and we know specifically what sets us off about this one or that one. We definitely avoid certain topics and know each other well enough to steer clear of sensitive areas. But nothing comes close to threatening the “union” that was formed so many decades ago.

All this “reuniting” with folks of such divergent life spaces got me thinking about why our country and world just keeps getting more fractured. Why can’t this same type of “united” allegiance prevail in this wonderful country of ours? Why are friends, families, co-workers, social groups, etc. being ripped asunder by differences in politics and beliefs? Don’t be looking to me for any answers, and also I don’t think simply blaming any one person or creed holds any answers for these increasing divisions.

But I am personally on a quest to understand this national/global rupture a bit better. I’m currently reading “The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion” by Jonathan Haidt and I’m about to start the mini-series “Why People Hate” a Spielberg/Gibney co-production which explores “the notion that if people begin to understand their own minds, they can find ways to work against hate and keep it from spreading.” I’m truly hoping this type of study will help illuminate the darkneses I keep hidden in my own heart, in order to better understand those in others.

In the meantime, I will continue to revel in the truly fortunate place I find myself; surrounded by family, associates and friends (like you) who support the notion of “unity that makes us one.”

The Culture of Clapping

by Lia Davis, Music Director

Recently, our Board President Mary Sullivan asked me how I feel about applause after music on Sunday mornings at First Unitarian. This question has been raised every year or two for my entire twelve-year tenure at First Unitarian Denver (and perhaps for years before that!) Most folks seem to have strong feelings about this. Some feel applause is a sincere show of appreciation. Others feel it disrupts worship or that it feels obligatory.

UU congregations around the country have their own “culture” around clapping. Some clap, some do not. Others have adopted quieter alternatives to show appreciation, such as waving ones hands in the air, snapping fingers, or rubbing their hands together. First Unitarian Denver’s culture around applause has ebbed and flowed. At times, we have asked congregants to refrain from clapping until the end of a service. They (mostly) oblige for a time, but then clapping becomes more prominent over weeks or months. I think a part of this phenomenon is the small “tipping point” of applause in large groups. If just one person in a group begins clapping, it’s likely that all people will join them in clapping, simply because it’s awkward not to!

On a recent online discussion forum thread of the Association for Unitarian Universalist Music Ministries (AUUMM), the topic of applause in worship services was discussed. I’ve chosen a few of my colleagues’ thoughts to share:

“Clapping is so natural for people in our culture that we've given up fighting it. We've not found something really suitable to replace it that doesn't seem equally artificial or disruptive.”

“Music is never a performance in church for me. Music is always a dialogue.”

“I agree that some songs are so rousing, applause just is appropriate, but after quiet or meditative songs I find it jarring.”

“Trying to control people’s natural exuberance feels like a tired and tiresome legacy of White (Boston-Brahmin, at that) Supremacy culture.”

Darrick Jackson elaborated on this culture in his UU World article *Othering and Belonging*: “The intellectualism in Unitarian Universalism comes with a culture of stillness. We are expected to sit quietly in our seats, listen intently with no emotion on our faces, no movement in our bodies. We are supposed to wait until after the service to express ourselves. I grew up in a culture of engagement. We had permission to respond to the service, to say “Amen” when we were moved by the words or music, to clap our hands and smile and nod our heads whenever the spirit moved us. We lived the hymn ‘When the Spirit Says Do’ every time we gathered for worship.”

If you’ve been reading thus far wondering when I’m going to weigh in on this issue with a definitive recommendation...I’m sorry to disappoint you. I see this issue from many angles and try to hold space for the competing tensions I’ve named above, with empathy and acceptance. I do not feel it is my place nor the place of FUSD staff to “draw a line”, to grant permission to our congregants to clap, or ask them to refrain from clapping in worship services. Furthermore, requesting a uniform response in all worship service feels inauthentic, as our worship services are varied in music and mood.

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When I take a step back and consider worship and congregational culture more broadly, my wish is that it feels inclusive and authentic. I hope that our culture does not lead congregants to feel they need to stifle their emotions or disengage in services.

From my position as one who creates music for worship each week, I will say that I agree with many of my music colleagues that music in worship services is not performance. I never expect applause after music. I think many of our musicians at FUSD feel this way as well. We are worshiping together, not performing for an audience. When music is received and deeply felt by congregants, we feel it too! This reception need not be silent and still; there are many ways to listen.

There are moments in worship when applause may “scatter” the energy or space created by a poignant or meditative piece of music. Likewise, there are moments when silence would feel awkward and stifling after highly energetic music. I’m not trying to reduce this issue to simple categories, but instead offering an invitation to all who worship in our space to be mindful and expressive—both to what they are feeling and to the collective energy in our shared space. I invite your authentic response in each worship service. There is a large palette of ways to respond in addition to vigorous clapping or sitting quietly. If you are moved by what you feel and hear—moved to exclaim “Amen” or “yeah!” or “right on!”, to hold a reverent silence, to clap or cheer, to breathe deeply, to show appreciation through silent gestures, to nod, to hum quietly in resonance with what you’ve received, to raise your hands in witness or reverence or joy—in my eyes, it is all acceptable, and possible. Listen for what each moment stirs within you. Remember that we need not respond alike to worship together.

A Prayer

to be read by Randle Loeb at the Denver’s Annual Homeless Person’s Memorial Vigil on Saturday December 21st, the longest night and a national day of mourning

Aging has no basis in this world when you're alone and languishing on edge in a public space.

Being without a home is a death sentence as much as any grief. There is no limit to your anguish and cry out from a primordial sense of urgency.

Surviving in the cold night and blazing summers is a constant threat Being older and infirm in whatever manner is unjust, like falling down from a precipice where you had been steadfast and safe.

Then Squeezing out an existence from a sense of having no escape.

Ravages of time, of the dissonance of loss upon loss, rips at your feeling of trust, of purpose, of resilience, that once crowned your everyday pursuits.

There is no turning around, turning back but an uncanny sense of turning upside down and inside out.

It is hard when you shake off dreams that rob you of peace and awaken frozen stiff without a way to release the aches in every sinew, every pore, ever gasping for breath.

May your days be full and be at peace in all that you touch, my dear always.

Whole Souul Living

Preparation is the Whole Souul Living Theme for November, a time-honored yet under-rated spiritual discipline. Preparation is the answer to the question, "How can I live a more authentic life?" Or, "What if I have to speak in front of hundreds of people?" Preparation focusses and clarifies both our skills, and our intentions. Consider this quote from Annie Dillard: *"I cannot cause light; the most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam. It is possible, in deep space, to sail on solar wind. Be it particle or wave, Light has force: you rig a giant sail and go. Perhaps the secret of seeing is to sail on solar wind. Hone and spread your spirit till you yourself are a sail, whetted, translucent, broadside to the merest puff."*

Some questions for our individual and communal reflection:

- If Jesus (or enlightenment, wisdom, insight, Love, peace, or ???) were to cross your path this very day, would you be ready?
- Ponder your history and the view from where you are currently.
- What comes next for you? What are you doing to prepare for it?
- Simply having clarity about your intentions is a profoundly simple and overlooked part of a spiritual life. Take some time, right now, to think about what you intend: for yourself, your spirit, your relationships, your community. What is your life seeking, becoming, evolving into?
- Consider the wisdom you have gathered so far. What past events or circumstances prepared you? Does this perspective change how you see your life circumstances right now?



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