

"Spiritual Growth"

Inspired by a sermon by the Rev. Richard Davis
Salem, Oregon Unitarian Universalist Congregation

The Opening Words are:

This is a Unitarian Church
Our religion is a spiritual journey
And each of us is an explorer.
Reason is our map
And conscience is our compass.

From the sign outside the Unitarian Church
In Edinburgh, Scotland UK 1990

Good morning. The message this morning is inspired by a sermon by the Rev. Davis, as you see in the Order of Service. A copy of the original is available on the table with the flowers and online.

I believe our religion is a spiritual journey and each of us is an explorer. Let's explore a Unitarian Universalist view of spiritual growth together this morning.

Aging is a distinctive part of the spiritual journey. As I age, experiences have brought home to me the fact that control of our lives is mostly an illusion. As I reflect, I see that most of life is out of our control, beginning with where and when we were born, who our parents are and who their parents were.

But there is one area we have a chance to control and that is in our response to what life brings us. That is where spiritual growth can happen. One person encounters adversity and responds with bitterness. Another encounters a similar or greater challenge and chooses to overcome, to learn, to persevere, to look deeper into the nature of reality and find peace. One person decides that the purpose in life is to maximize personal enjoyment and takes the road of never ending diversion whereas another chooses to devote his or her time and energy to support some life-affirming cause, seeking to heal the world. We have a choice: to grow or not to grow. That is the question.

How should we spend our time on earth? We don't have forever to decide, the days and years flow by. The ancient Psalmist said "Teach us to number our days that we might get a heart of wisdom." The recognition that our days are numbered reminds us we must choose how to spend them. There are many paths to follow to lead deeper into wonder and mystery, toward a greater awareness and appreciation for the miracle of life.

Spiritual Growth has a discipline, a practice. There is the practice of GRATITUDE.

In the Fall 2009 ISSUE OF THE UU WORLD the UU Minister in Albuquerque, Christine Robinson, writes, "You don't have to believe in a thankable GOD to develop gratitude. Our thank-yous remind us that we are dependent on those around us. Our thank-yous acknowledge the web of relationships in which we live. "I urge you to read the whole article, page 19, in the issue on the table before us. The adult religious education class, Intersections, will discuss this article on November 29th at 10 am. You are invited.

As an exercise in practicing gratitude, I welcome this opportunity to express my gratitude to all of you here today. I also give thank yous to the many people no longer here whose lives have enriched this place and added to the treasures we have stored up to hand on to those who come after.

I can testify that aging is a distinctive part of the spiritual journey, but anytime is a good time to reflect on where we are in the journey. And any time of year is a good time. This is my favorite time in Lubbock. The trees call attention to themselves as their leaves turn yellow and red. Every tree in Lubbock is a planted tree, treasures we can count when we count our blessings.

To recollect is to gather past experiences of success and failure as stepping stones for the way ahead.

After planting Unitarian Universalism in Lubbock just a little more than 50 years ago, we celebrate the treasures we have stored up and turn our thoughts to the way ahead, to how we can take care of what we have

planted and how to nurture ourselves for the tasks ahead. The growth we want to foster is, in large measure, spiritual growth.

For me, as for many of you, physical growth ceased some time ago. But what of spiritual growth? That's a different matter. I agree with Rev. Davis that spiritual growth refers to something significant and meaningful. So significant that the third one of our Principles and Purposes states: "We covenant to affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations." Rev Davis says, and I say, it is our intention as Unitarian Universalists to foster spiritual growth that leads to a deepening in wisdom, a stronger commitment to truth, and love for our neighbor.

What could be more common? More ordinary? Does it even need saying? I think so! Oh, yes.

We religious liberals tend to forget that this way, our way, is a gift to human kind. A long tradition held that the highest degree of spirituality was attained by austere disciplines and severe punishments of the flesh. Such practices were common among the Jews and the pagans long before the Christians perfected them.

In contrast to that kind of practice we recommend increasing our appreciation for the comfort and even joy that we may experience in relationship, being mindful of our connection to others and bringing more mindfulness into every aspect of our lives.

In addition to practicing gratitude and mindfulness, spiritual growth depends on your faith. I am not speaking here of a set of beliefs, a theology, but rather the implicit trust we have that things are a certain way. Every person has an implicit faith in some notion of ultimate reality according to which we orient our lives.* _____ Having implicit trust in some type of ultimate reality is a universal human characteristic whether you can put it into words.

"Your faith is your vision upon which your heart ultimately rests. * In Hinduism there is a Sanskrit term for this SRADDHA---that which you rest your heart upon. Or as Emerson put it: "That which dominates our imagination and our thoughts will determine our lives." A story from the Native American tradition illustrates Emerson's point.

I will tell the story we heard last week in a slightly different version.

The old grandfather listens to his grandson who is filled with anger at a terrible injustice at school. Then the grandfather says “I, too, at times have been filled with a great hate for those who injure me and feel no sorrow for what they do. But hate wears you down and does not hurt your enemy. It is like taking poison yourself and hoping it will kill the other person. I have struggled with these feelings many times. It is as if there were two wolves inside me. ONE LIVES IN HARMONY WITH ALL AROUND HIM. He will only fight when it is right to do so and in the right way.

But the other wolf is full of anger. The smallest slight will send him into a fit of bad temper. He fights everyone all the time for no reason. He cannot think because his anger and hate are so great. It is hard to live with these two wolves inside me, for both of them try to dominate my spirit. The boy looked intently into his grandfather's eyes and asked "Which wolf will win the fight in your heart, Grandfather? The grandfather solemnly answered, THE ONE I FEED.

Rev. Davis grounds his faith in personal experience and reflection. Personal experience is one of the sources of Unitarian Universalist authority, the first source, actually. It reads: “Unitarian Universalism draws from direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that uphold and create life.”

As best he can say in a few words, his faith is that there is a heart at the heart of reality, a sacred reality affirmed by mystics from long existing religious and philosophical TRADITIONS. He believes this reality dwells in all of us. We are part of an interdependent web of sublime meaning and joyful purpose. He is called, he says, to attune his life to this wondrous reality.

Years ago, my Mother and the other elders were asked by our then Lubbock Unitarian Universalist minister, Al Judd, to express to the congregation, in a few words, one Sunday morning, what they most wanted us to know. My Mother said, “Be kind.”

My faith, at this time, is that IT MATTERS WHAT I DO. I can affect the quality of the day, which Thoreau called the highest art.

Now I encourage you to examine your own faith-- to put it into words, to write it down, to see if it enhances your life and the quality of the life of the planet.

At about the same time as we planted Unitarian Universalism in Lubbock, a group calling itself The Family established, in 1953, the National Prayer Breakfast, the most public manifestation of the group's success in influencing public policy. Every president since Eisenhower has attended the February National Prayer Breakfast, including President Obama this year. As described by Jeff Sharlet in his book, *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism At The Heart Of American Power*: " Their influence is world wide, their members are Senators, Congressmen, former Nixon staffers such as Charles Colson, generals, world leaders, clergy such as Ted Haggard of the New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and heads of giant corporations. Their ministry is to the already powerful. The ultimate reality they orient themselves around is Romans, Chapter 13, Verse 1, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God, the powers that be are ordained of God." Their stated mission is to preserve the existing social order, to preserve and defend the power arrangements in place and to say they are doing it in the name of Jesus. They have made a religion out of the pursuit of political power.

One way to understand the impact of this conception of ultimate reality is to consider one of the problems religion must address: the persistence of dire poverty. Consider The Family's answer to the question of the cause of poverty. The Family declares that Disobedience to God is the cause of poverty. Suffering is God's punishment for human disobedience. The goal is not the eradication of poverty, not even its reduction. The goal is the maintenance of the current social order, a goal that attracts the already powerful by justifying their pursuit of power and authority and wealth. . . .

You get the flavor. I was reading this book as I was preparing for this message. I add this contrast to the vision of Rev. Davis to show you that a lot is at stake. Our spiritual growth needs to be vigorous and empowering. I hope we serve our vision of ultimate reality as energetically as the Family serves theirs. My husband, John, and I have both read this book and I recommend it. There's a copy of it on the table, also.

Our goal is not the saving of souls. IT IS NOT IN SEEKING TO ALIGN OURSELVES WITH THE ALREADY POWERFUL. It is nothing less than what in the Jewish tradition they call TIKKUN OLAM, "REPAIRING THE WORLD."

We encourage each other in spiritual growth because we believe that in the work of relieving suffering and repairing the world we need to practice the spiritual disciplines. The contemporary science of Positive Psychology has confirmed that practicing gratitude, mindfulness, and caring for others help us face the inevitable trials and tribulations life brings. The meaningful life, happiness itself---is almost universally found in a concern for others. Find that booklet with the others.

What may have seemed common and ordinary can be seen as an achievement, a journey to gather treasures to hand on into the future.