

The third principle of Unitarian Universalism is Acceptance of one another and the encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. I always found the juxtaposition of these two statements interesting. We accept you for who you are, and now we expect you to change. Well every moment we are changing with every new experience that we have. But in this case I am speaking of an intentional change. Being intentional about looking deep into the well of our soul, and search and consciously think about what our purpose in life is, and what does it mean to live as our best selves, what does it mean to reach our full potential of humanity, what does it mean to be in relation to others, what does it mean to create wholeness in your life and with the world. These are the questions that we need to work on throughout our lives. And if we look at our lives as journeys, I think that changes how we look at that third principle. It is not just an acceptance of others for WHO they are, but an acceptance of others for WHERE they are on their religious and spiritual journey. Particularly our religion, which asks us to search for truth, which asks us to question, which does not rely only on ancient words but rather asks us to incorporate each new experiences and teaching from the world, we tend to create a congregation of people here who are on different parts of the path. And we have to respect that different people are on different parts of that path towards understanding and wholeness.

And the truth is though that many people always think they are farther along the path than everybody else. But we each have our own path to follow. It is the paradox that can make our pluralistic religious community challenging. We are at the same time on our own path, but we are also on an interdependent path with everyone else. So let us remember to hold each other's hearts in our heart. How can we be whole, if the people we are in relationship with are not whole? And let us be open to the notion that maybe just maybe we don't have all the answers, so as our principle states I encourage you to grow spiritually and open yourselves to new understandings of the universe and your lives.

Now I know when I use the word spirituality, I know it brings up different images for different people. I do not necessarily equate Spirituality with supernaturalism. Unitarians in the 19th Century would equate spirituality with the phrase Self-Culture. William Ellery Channing, one of the leading 19th Century Unitarian ministers and theologians defined the phrase self-culture as the "care which every person owes to themselves, to the unfolding and perfecting of their nature." The Spiritual Theology of Self Culture is about human beings ability to improve themselves as humans. This was not to be thought of in material terms. They believed that improvement could be accomplished through interior means of improving ones character.

Spirituality to me is first connecting with our inner self, but then it is connecting that inner self with something greater than or outside of ourselves. It happens first when we make that connection with the burning flame we have within, the thing that gives meaning to our life, and then we bring that flame, this life force, to the world outside ourselves, where we connect it with others and their meaning and we work together to create wholeness with the world. And even though I wasn't a boy scout, I did try to be a boy scout once, I lasted three days but I never was good at tying knots, yet another reason I have gone to loafers vs. laced shoes, but even though I wasn't a boy scout, even I know just like when you have a regular campfire if you want to keep the fire burning strong and burning long, you must constantly tend to the fire, and so too with the fire within ourselves. Our inner fire needs to be tended to or it will go out. So we keep spiritual growth, this meaning making, this connecting to our inner self, this unfolding of our nature as a way to keep the fire lit and burning.

Often when people think of spiritual growth, they think of a monk sitting alone on top of a mountain, serene, peaceful at one with the universe. And thinking of this image, I am reminded of the spiritual seeker in the movie "The Razor's Edge" who says "its easy to be a holy man sitting alone on top of a mountain" and I like to pair that quote with one by the Rock Star Bruce Springsteen who is "its hard to be a Saint in the City" and both statements are true. Secluded and alone on a mountain without distractions it is easier to quiet ourselves and our inner mind and look inward, and reflect, relax and renew ourselves. In our lives though even if we do travel to some secluded place, it will likely be for only a short time while on vacation. so the question is how can such spiritual practices help us in

our day to day lives. How do we take a mountain top experience, and translate it into our daily lives. Or even the more important question, how do we make our daily lives into a mountain top experiences. And that is why I chose the title of the sermon today to be Chop Wood, Carry Water. It comes from an old Zen Story, when a great Zen master was once asked, "What did you do before becoming enlightened?" The master replied, "I was chopping wood and carrying water for my master" "What do you do now that you are enlightened?", asked the questioner. The Zen master replied, "I chop wood and carry water for myself" The questioner queried, "So what is the difference?, you did this before and you are doing the same now" The Zen master answered, "Earlier I was doing it unconsciously, now I am doing it consciously"

So there are two parts of this story that resonate for me. First and foremost is the fact that the work he was doing was the same both before and after he was enlightened. So the message of this story is that a major change in our life is not a pre-requisite to attaining enlightenment. Enlightenment, or spiritual growth, is not based on what we do, but based on what our attitude is towards whatever it is that we are doing. It is about being mindful in all that we do. The second part of the story that resonates for me is that before enlightenment he did what he did because he was told to by someone else. After Enlightenment he did what he did because it was his conscious choice. He took ownership of his choices and his actions.

How often in our lives do we see ourselves on a trajectory, we may call it destiny, we may see our lives as the causal results of circumstances outside of our control. But really it is about having a mental discipline to consciously choose our own destiny, and to consciously choose how we will act and react to our circumstances. And to do so we need to be conscious and aware of our circumstances. Now we have to be careful not to fall into the trap of acceptance of our circumstances. But rather to bring that discipline to all that we do. We can look at chopping wood as a chore and rush through it, just going through the motions and see it as a nuisance (and feel free to substitute washing dishes, clothes, shoveling snow for chopping wood).

Or we can bring our full attention to chopping the wood, to bring our passion to it, to bring our best selves to chopping it, to bring our best skill to chopping it, to see our purpose in every swing of the axe. And we can bring this attitude to every action that we do, and in every interaction that we have. Yes if we follow this technique each action we do may take longer, but by being mindful about all that we do we get to appreciate each moment that we have. If we rush through one thing, without passion, without attention, that is the type of habit we will build up in how we live life and then we will have the habit of rushing through all of our actions and interactions.

And truthfully, I have found that when people act in a mindful and meaningful way, time can pass very quickly. When we are engrossed in something, don't we often say, my how times flies. I look at that elasticity of time, this being lost in time as the concept of eternity. Instead of thinking of eternity in the future, we should think of each moment that we have as eternity. We should always try to bring our attention back to my present moment, present consciousness, as a way to slow things down, when everything around us is getting fast and out of control.

But how do we do this. This is not something that people can just turn on and off. This is why it is called spiritual practices. It is something that has to be consistently practiced. It may seem awkward when you start, and some instances will be easier than others, but I can tell you that with the repetition of such practices of mindfulness over time, the effects are cumulative and will change your life and how you live your life.

My first experience with a spiritual practice was meditation. When I was in my twenties, after having some stomach problems, I had a great family doctor who knew me and told me to take a few days off, go to the beach, and learn how to meditate. So, as is my nature, I went out and bought a book entitled "how to meditate" (that book by the way is still in print) and without question, meditation has changed my life for the better. I find meditation helps me focus and remain calm. Yet it also led to a different more contemplative way of thinking, and to a more engaged way of living. Just breathing and focusing on the breath allowed me to open myself up to the greater possibilities of the universe. By going inward, I was enabled to go outward. Because meditation helps me connect my conscious mind

with my unconscious mind, and by connecting with my inner self, I then became more comfortable with myself, and because of that, I no longer needed to be defensive with others, and it allowed me to listen to others with an open and empathetic heart and mind

My second experience with spiritual practices most surprisingly is walking a labyrinth. It has become an extremely meaningful spiritual practice for me that has deepened my ethical life. Members of my Orlando congregation had created a full sized labyrinth, and out of respect for the work everyone did, I walked it. I really did not expect to gain anything from it. Yet in every step I took, I found a metaphor for life. Do we take shortcuts? Do we finish what we start? How do we avoid obstacles? Where we are heading? Life has some twists and turns and we need to continue to see where it leads. For some unexplainable reason the labyrinth had a powerful spiritual impact on me. And it continues to each time I walk one. Now of course one doesn't need a labyrinth. It just takes intentionally spending time on a consistent basis to help us on the path towards mindfulness. There is no one right way or one right practice. We each have to find our way, and I encourage you to try different practices to see what works for you.

And although I have mentioned a couple of personal solitary spiritual practices, spiritual practices do not have to be solitary. Spiritual practices can be in many forms. Communal spiritual practice as we have here, such as worship, connection circles, knitting, choir just to name a few. There could be physical spiritual practices, such as Yoga, tai-chi, or running as examples. We can create spiritual partnerships, whether it be with a friend, your partner, your child, We can create spiritual practices around creativity, such as gardening, cooking, and artwork. In order for any of these practices to have an impact though, we have to do them consistently, with intention and mindfulness. And the more we practice mindfulness, the more mindfulness become a part of our everyday life, in all of our actions, including chopping wood and carrying water.

And by doing so it will change how we see ourselves, it will change how we see the world. It will in fact allow us **to see** ourselves and the world. The Buddha was once asked by a group of seekers of enlightenment, who are you: He answered them, I am awake. And so I ask you, to be awake, hopefully during my sermon, but also to be awake in every moment of your life, be awake to all that is going on around you, be awake to all the suffering in the world, to be awake to all the wonders of this world, to be awake to the wonder that is this world. Be awake to the uniqueness and wonder that you are and the potential of what yet still may be. To do so, I encourage you to keep your inner lights burning long and burning strong. May it be so