

“Return Again”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
September 29, 2019

The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.

Reading

“Beginning to Begin” by Gunilla Norris from *Inviting Silence: Universal Principles of Meditation*¹

Can we recognize that now and then there comes
an inner sense, a fleeting thought, a little yearning
to live our lives differently?

We don't know what this means or what it requires.
We shake these notions off like a dog shakes off water
and go about our business.

But the longing continues...

Could we sense that this longing is not lack
or something worse
—some kind of fundamental flaw in us?
Could we receive it as an invitation instead,
a calling, a small voice inviting us home,
back to our truer self?

This shift in thought can move mountains.
It can let us begin to begin.

¹ Gunilla Norris, *Inviting Silence: Universal Principles of Meditation* (USA: Bluebridge, 2004), 9-11.

Sermon

At noon two Fridays ago, we opened up the front doors of the church. A line of children who had been gathered on the lawn soon formed just inside the doorway - all of them eager to join in the ringing of our church bell. Here, at Bethany Church and at Trinity, our church bells were rung for a full five minutes to join in calling our for awareness and action on climate change.

Also joining us was Montpelier-based rabbi, Tobie Weisman. She had asked if she could bring a shofar. Rabbi Tobie explained to those of us gathered that the shofar can be heard as a call to awakening. The shofar is traditionally blown on Rosh Hashanah and at the end of Yom Kippur, and one intention behind the blowing of the shofar is to awaken people from their spiritual slumber.

In the Jewish tradition, Rosh Hashanah begins today at sundown. This marks the Jewish new year which is timed with the cycle of the moon. It begins a period of ten holy days of observance, the Ten Days of Awe, concluding with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

In Judaism, it is said that on Rosh Hashanah the Book of Life is opened and the Angel of Life writes each person's destiny for the coming year. Over the ten days of *teshuvah*, Jews are called upon to return to themselves and examine their lives and to make amends with those they have wronged or who have wronged them. The Book of Life is kept open until the last sound of the shofar on Yom Kippur when it is then sealed for another year.

This ten day period is a holy time - a time of remembrance, a time to be in community, and a time for individual reflection and deepening of religious practice.

P.J. Schwartz, a rabbinical student, reflects on the meaning of the holiday in this way: "One theme that I am always reminded of, especially during Rosh HaShanah, is that we can recreate and renew ourselves, as well as the world around us. Judaism provides us with a time of year for us to speak about ourselves differently, examine the world with a clearer mind, and remind us that with a commitment to ourselves we can become who and what we want to be."²

² P.J. Schwartz, "Rosh Hashanah - A Personal Reflection," August 14, 2012, <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/2012/08/14/rosh-hashanah-%E2%80%93-personal-reflection>.

In Unitarian Universalism, we share this commitment to examination of both the world and ourselves. This introspection and reflection are hallmarks of our own faith tradition which affirms and promotes the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

In many ways, autumn feels like a natural time of year, particularly here in New England, to begin slowing down and the season itself invites us to begin to turn inward with intentional self-examination and thoughtfulness.

As plants begin to die back, animals make final preparations for the winter ahead, and leaves fall to the ground, we are also invited to shift gears and get back to the essentials.

For many of us, this time of shifting inward can be a chance to return - to “return to the home of your soul” as we sang together for during our Gathering Song.

That home of the soul, the inward place where our true self resides, can often go unnoticed or even ignored. Yet, as Gunilla Norris writes, “now and then there comes an inner sense, a fleeting thought, a little yearning to live our lives differently.” It is important to listen to this inner sense, this longing, this yearning.

This small voice may be telling us that we have gone astray, that we have lost a connection to who we are or who we most want to be. I know that I have heard this inner voice on a number of occasions in my life and felt this longing to return.

In his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, the Quaker activist and educator Parker Palmer reflects on the ways we are pulled away from ourselves and how it is we find our way back. He writes:

“There was a time when farmers on the Great Plains, at the first sign of a blizzard, would run a rope from the back door of their house out to the barn. They all knew stories of people who had wandered off and been frozen to death, having lost sight of home in a whiteout while still in their own backyards.

Today we live in a blizzard of another sort. It swirls around us as economic injustice, ecological ruin, physical and spiritual violence, and their inevitable outcome, war. It swirls within us as fear and frenzy, greed and deceit, and indifference to the suffering of others. We all know stories of people who have wandered off into this madness and

been separated from their own souls, losing their moral bearings and even their mortal lives...

The lost ones come from every walk of life: clergy and corporate executives, politicians and people on the street, celebrities and schoolchildren. Some of us fear that we, or those we love, will become lost in the storm. Some of us are lost at this moment and are trying to find our way home.”

“My own experience of the blizzard,” he writes, “which includes getting lost in it more often than I like to admit, tells me that...the soul's order can never be destroyed. It may be obscured by the whiteout. We may forget, or deny, that its guidance is close at hand. And yet we are still in the soul's backyard, with chance after chance to regain our bearings.”³

The invitations to return to that home of our soul are all around us if we pay attention. The guidance is close at hand. We are still in the soul's backyard.

The invitation to find our way back home to our true self may come from outside - from the nudging of a close friend or loved one, from a message heard right here in this gathered community, from a book that has found its way to you at the exact right time.

Yet, we can also build into our lives practices of our own choosing that can serve as invitations to ourselves to reconnect, to regain our bearings, to return to who we are.

Claudia Horwitz in *The Spiritual Activist*, defines a spiritual practice as “a habit that gives us energy and reminds us of what matters most.” Erik Walker Wikstrom says that spirituality is the “quest to move from not-life to life, from being asleep to waking up...” And so, a spiritual practice is anything we do that moves us toward a more aware way of being. In that same vein, Sharon Salzberg writes that “spiritual practice, by uprooting our personal mythologies of isolation, uncovers the radiant, joyful heart within each of us and manifests this radiance to the world.”⁴

³ Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 1-2.

⁴ Claudia Horwitz, *The Spiritual Activist: Practices to Transform Your Life, Your Work, and Your World* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002), 6.
Erik Walker Wikstrom, ed. *Faithful Practices: Everyday Ways to Feed Your Spirit* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2018), ix-xi.
Sharon Salzberg, *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1995), 1.

Ultimate meaning, awakening, connection, joy.

Spiritual practice helps us to find our way back when we are lost, to grab a hold of that rope when we've lost our bearings, to attend to that inner yearning and to reconnect with what is sacred within us and around us.

Spiritual practice is essential in my own life, and rest assured, that I find space for it. I'll share one example. I was delighted back in June as the church year was beginning to wrap up to dedicate a day to engage in the practice of personal retreat. For a few years now, I had held the intention of going up to Greensboro to visit the Green Mountain Monastery which is the home of a religious community founded by Catholic priest, Thomas Berry. Father Berry has died, but a small community of women religious sisters still lives there carrying on the mission of living close to the land and bringing about greater ecological consciousness. They also open up the monastery for groups and individuals to engage in retreats.

I was thrilled to find a day to be able to make the drive up there. For several hours, I had use of the hermitage, as they call it, all for myself. It is a simple structure made of straw-bale with just a small table, wood stove, and sleeping loft. There are also several walking trails on the property, and after setting my things down in the hermitage, I went out before the rain began to take a walk and ground myself in where I was.

With each step I took on the trail, I could feel myself becoming more centered and reconnected. A few hours of quiet, stillness, journaling, and reflection in a beautiful place were good for my soul.

Now, this particular practice took me out of my normal environment and routine. Sometimes we have the luxury of time for that kind of practice. And, spiritual practice can also be built into our daily lives. Taking a slow mindful walk or dedicating an afternoon to quiet reading and reflection are practices we can engage in without going far from home.

As we begin this new year, I invite you to consider what practices you are already engaged in that nurture your spirit, that invite you back to your true self.

For some of you, the phrase "spiritual practice" may feel foreign or intimidating. I would bet, though, that there are already practices you are engaged in now that help you to re-

connect - with yourself, with others, with the world - and that infuse your life with a sense of meaning and awareness of the sacred.

In an interview on Krista Tippett's radio program, *On Being*, Sylvia Boorstein talked about the spirituality of the everyday.⁵ We may think we don't have time for a spiritual practice, she said, and yet it can be a spiritual practice to simply approach the everyday activities of life - washing the dishes, folding the laundry, preparing a meal - with the kind of intention and mindfulness that transforms that activity into a practice of deeper meaning.

No matter where we are in our spiritual journey, engaging in spiritual practice can be meaningful and beneficial for us all.

The renowned cellist Pablo Casals is said to have put in several hours of practicing scales on the day he died at the age of 96. A few years before that, a friend had asked him, why, after all he had achieved, was he still practicing as hard as ever. He replied, "Because, I think I'm making progress."

So, regardless of our age or stage of life, we can all continue to make progress on our spiritual journeys.

This church year, as we consider some important questions for our future as a congregation and dedicate much of our time towards a high level of activity and productivity, I also invite us to deepen our spiritual practices - collectively and individually. The Adult Lifespan Spiritual Exploration Committee will be offering a series on Spiritual Practices beginning in November to support you in this endeavor. Stay tuned for more details, and if you'd be interested in offering a practice as part of the series, you can speak with Kristin Glaser.

No matter where we are on our journey, we start where we are on this day and in this moment. Each time we engage in a spiritual practice it can be the beginning of something. We may not know exactly what that something is yet, but we can still claim it as a beginning.

⁵ <https://onbeing.org/programs/sylvia-boorstein-what-we-nurture/>

Betsy MacWhinney of Washington state shares a story of how a practice rooted in poetry helped both her and her daughter begin to return to themselves.⁶ It was the early 2000s and Betsy's daughter was a young teenager at the time. The recent presidential election had put her in a funk.

It soon became apparent that what seemed like general teenage angst was much more serious than that when Betsy caught sight of a scary-looking scab on her daughter's wrist. Betsy reached out to mental health professional and both she and her daughter started to see counselors. A little while later, she learned that her daughter had teamed up with another classmate to let out their rage at politicians by spray-painting on the grounds of the elementary school.

Betsy did not support this vandalism and was at a loss. At this point, she started to leave poems in her daughter's shoes in the morning. She says, "When one of your primary strategies as a parent involves leaving Wendell Berry's "Mad Farmer Liberation Front" in your child's shoe, it's clear things aren't going well." Betsy tried to reach her daughter by leaving her Mary Oliver's lines, "You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves," And Wendell Berry's admonition to "Be joyful, though you have considered all the facts." Betsy wanted her daughter to know that the world loved her and she should really try to start loving it back.

Betsy reflects that as an ecologist she embraced science and didn't typically invite poetry into her daily life. Yet, there she was in a cheap restaurant drinking bad coffee with scissors and a glue stick and discarded magazines assembling a poem in the form of a ransom note desperate to get her daughter back.

For a few weeks, her daughter didn't comment on the poems, though Betsy felt encouraged when she would find a well-worn, folded-over poem in her daughter's pocket while doing the laundry. The days grew longer and her daughter became more involved with life. She was making plans, planting seeds, decorating her room.

Several years later, Betsy had a glimmer that her daughter had found her way back when her daughter was invited to join a group of students on a long trip to Sierra Leone. The professor explained that it was likely to be a long trip with a lot of physical and emotional hardship. The professor asked, "What would you do if you get to the abyss and it begins talking?" Betsy's daughter, now several years out from being coaxed back

⁶ Betsy MacWhinney, "Bringing a Daughter Back from the Brink with Poems," New York Times, February 26, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/style/bringing-a-daughter-back-from-the-brink-with-poems.html>.

with that daily offering of poetry, responded, “Well, I would have a lot of questions for the abyss, indeed.”

Every day, every hour, every moment we are beginning to begin.

We get lost.

We lose hold of who we are by ambition, by distraction, by despair.

Yet, we can find a way back to ourselves, back to one another through simple acts that remind us that the invitation always stands.

Life is calling us home.

So may it be.