

“Reflection and Renewal”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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Readings

Excerpt from Be Still and Get Going: A Jewish Meditation Practice for Real Life by Alan Lew (2007)

Excerpt from “On Self-Examination” by Andrew Norton (1818)

“The unexamined life is not worth living.” Socrates

“The examined life is no picnic.” Robert Fulghum

Sermon

It was over 15 years ago now since I sat in the upstairs parlor of All Souls Church in Washington, DC for an adult religious education class. I had been intrigued holding the paper bulletin in my hands after the service one Sunday by the announcement for a class on UU Spiritual Practices. At this point, I was still very new to Unitarian Universalism. I was also in a period of searching - feeling the tug of my soul towards something and not yet certain what that was.

It was with this feeling of slight trepidation and also immense hopefulness that I sat in a circle of folding chairs with 20-something other people and the Senior Minister.

On this particular evening, the Minister introduced to us a practice called “meditative self-examination.” I learned that this practice was a central one of our Unitarian ancestors. The 19th century Unitarian preacher and theologian, William Ellery Channing called it a “religious recollection of the day.” I shared the thoughts of another early Unitarian, Andrew Norton, on this practice in the earlier reading.

In the practice, you sit in quiet reflection and take yourself on a guided meditation of the day moving chronologically from the morning time through the end of the day, paying attention to its spiritual, moral, and ethical dimensions. You ask yourself questions like, How did I greet the day? Did I greet the day centered or distracted?

What work did I do this day? Was it fulfilling? With whom did I interact today? How did I treat them? Where did I glimpse the Holy today? What made me feel cut off from the Holy? When did I lack integrity? What lessons did I learn from the day and what might I do differently in the future?

There were other practices that we learned about and discussed during that class. Yet, this one made a strong impression.

It was intentional. It asked me to observe and notice. It asked me to hold myself accountable to my choices. And, it focused on my agency to make different choices.

Many religious traditions take a similar approach to self-examination and self-reflection as part of their spiritual disciplines.

Right now, we are in the midst of the High Holy Days in the Jewish tradition. The ten-day period of marking the new year and engaging in rituals and practices in preparation for the year ahead began at Sunday this past Friday with Rosh Hashanah and will extend through Yom Kippur, a holiday focused especially on renewal through repentance and forgiveness.

Central to these ten days of *teshuvah* or “returning” is a time of reviewing the past year and the wrongs and harms that one may have experienced and also the wrongs and harms one may have transgressed against other people. It is a time of intentional reflection. Some Jews refer to this practice as “spiritual accounting,” and it may include a similar kind of reflection on specific questions but framed in terms of the past year rather than just one day.

Our worship theme this month is Renewal. Renewal is about starting anew, refreshing some aspect of who we are and how we are in the world.

And, I don’t know about you but this theme couldn’t have come soon enough! I know my spirit is definitely in need of some renewal with all the heaviness of the world right now and now several months into coping with the coronavirus pandemic and all the ways it has shaken up our world.

As the seasons begin to change and we anticipate a historic election looming, we are in the midst of the cycle that Alan Lew described in our reading, a cycle of fullness, decline, destruction, renewal, tearing down, rebuilding. This is the natural cycle of the

cosmos and one we can witness up close in the natural world around us. This is also a fitting metaphor for a cycle in our spiritual lives.

In this cycle, I believe there is an invitation to us to pause, to reflect, and to take stock. And, truly I believe that we can't start anew unless we first pause and take stock. Some space for reflection and self-examination is needed in order to start again.

The evening practice from our early Unitarian ancestors which I described earlier seems so fitting for this cycle. Some aspects of the practice might seem a bit cerebral. And, I believe we can't just think our way into new ways of being. We also have to try these new ways out, to live and experience them, and then reflect again.

The timing of the practice, though, is one aspect I find particularly inviting. As the sun goes down on the day and we prepare for a night of rest, we are reminded of the cycle of the cosmos and our place in it.

I was reflecting on this when I learned of the news of the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg just after sundown on the eve of Rosh Hashanah this past Friday.

I know that for many the death of Justice Ginsburg feels like being handed a 50-lb sandbag when your arms and shoulders were already aching and knees buckling with the weight of tragedy and sadness of the last several months. It is a heavy, heavy loss and leaves a feeling of foreboding of what might lie ahead for women's rights, reproductive rights, and the continuing quest for justice and equality.

Justice Ginsburg was known and revered for her ability to keep on going, to stay committed, and with every new session and case to bring a renewed sense of principled commitment to protecting the rights of the most vulnerable.

We know that we are in a moment of reckoning on so many fronts as a society. I think we have all felt this for quite some time, and the reckoning on matters of racial injustice especially have burst forth with renewed urgency over the last few months.

The reckoning that is happening out there also has a lot to do with what is happening in here, inside each of us. I know for me it can be easier sometimes to point a finger out there at all that needs to change and be made new - all that needs to be torn down and rebuilt. But, placing ourselves in the focus of reflection and examination may not

always be a picnic, but it can bring more meaning into our lives and lay the groundwork for deeper transformations.

In a blog post entitled, “Owning Up to My Toxic Biases,” Parker Palmer quotes that famous line from Socrates, “The unexamined life is not worth living,” and adds a different twist, “...the unexamined life is a threat to others.”

Living our lives with examination and reflection requires a willingness to see those aspects of our self that might not always make us proud. Self-examination and self-reflection require an openness to what we might discover, and for this practice to be sustaining, I believe it asks us to love ourselves no matter what.

If we are willing to sit with ourselves honestly and lovingly, we not only live a worthy life but we also mitigate the harm we might do to others. We make more possible avenues for understanding, compassion, and healing.

I understand that with all the stresses of living through a pandemic plus the urgency with which you might be engaged in the work of social and environmental justice it may not feel like there’s space or time for pausing and reflecting. And, I believe that wisdom shows us time and again that these pauses are needed.

So, in your longing for something new this season, can you make space for reflection and examination?

Can you allow the setting sun to be your invitation into reflection and renewal?

Mark Nepo writes, “...when the tasks are done or have become too heavy to complete, we need to pause and perch atop our worries and concerns. So we can return to the world and do what needs to be done...”¹

My invitation to you is to pause, perch atop your worries and concerns, allow yourself that space so that you can then return, renewed and ready to do what needs to be done.

So may it be.

¹ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/fieldnotesonliving/2019/04/13/always-building-and-mending/>