

WHAT IS

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READINGS

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.

"Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.

- Mt. 6:25-34 (Revised Standard Version translation)

When the mind is at peace,
the world too is at peace.
Nothing real, nothing absent.
Not holding on to reality,
not getting stuck in the void,
you are neither holy nor wise, just
an ordinary fellow who has completed his work.

My daily affairs are quite ordinary;
But I'm in total harmony with them.
I don't hold on to anything, don't reject anything:
Nowhere an obstacle or conflict.
Who cares about wealth and honor?
Even the poorest thing shines.
My miraculous power and spiritual activity:
Drawing water and carrying wood.

- Layman P'ang, Zen Master (c. 740-808 BCE)

"This Is Enough"

Sugar merchants, I have news: Joseph
has arrived from Egypt with the essence

of sweetness: a fruit cobbler that can
save your soul! Spirit wine. And if

there is something else you want, that
came too. Khidr through an open window.

Aphrodite singing *ghazals*. A sky with
gold streaks across. A stick that finds

water in a stone. Jesus sitting quietly
near the animals. Night so peaceful.

This is enough was always true. We
just haven't seen it: the hoopoe already

wears a tufted crown. Each ant is given
its elegant belt at birth. This is love

we feel pours through us like giveaway
song. The source of *now* is here!

- Jelaluddin Rumi (Coleman Barks, trans.)

"Lost"

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you,
If you leave it you may come back again, saying Here.
No two trees are the same to the Raven.
No two branches are the same to the Wren.
If what a tree or a bush does is lost to you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.

- David Wagoner

SERMON

(N.B. This sermon was originally preached in late January 2011 at First Unitarian in Shaker Heights OH. At Chautauqua, I adlibbed at a couple points to remove snow references and insert more summery ones. The following text retains the original references.)

Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself.

When the mind is at peace,
the world is at peace.

My miraculous power and spiritual activity:
drawing water and carrying wood.

This is enough is always true.

Wherever you are is called Here.

This is what is.

Oh, but were it that easy. It is not. And I bet every one of those folks I just quoted knew that. Carl Jung chimed in on it as well. In commenting on the accomplishment of the great Chinese spiritual masters, he noted that it simply had to do with developing the art of letting things happen in the soul/psyche. The problem, he noted, is that

Consciousness is forever interfering, helping, correcting, and negating, and never leaving the simple growth of the psychic process in peace.

And then he continues with a line that has stuck with me for years:

It would be simple enough, if only simplicity were not the most difficult of things.

Accepting what is
is *the* most difficult thing we have to do.

Ok, perhaps I should say that it is the most difficult thing *I* have to do. To stay in the moment, this moment; to be in the moment that is, *right now*, no matter what.

It is the no-matter-what part that trips me up, every time.

The last couple of days (in late January 2011) I was fortunate enough to be in Boston, on Beacon Hill, attending the annual Ministerial Settlement Representative seminar. I have been an MSR for about six years now (with just a couple more to go before my mandatory retirement) and I really enjoy it. As an MSR I am the designated person in our Ohio Meadville District who coaches congregations and

then mostly Search Committees through the process of selecting a new minister. So far, I have worked with eleven of our congregations, and pitched in with two outside of our District. It is good work, and one of the ways I give back to our faith and our Association of congregations because Lord knows MSRs do not get paid for this; there is more honor in the honorariums we do get than anything else.

But I am given the opportunity to go to Boston every so often as the meetings rotate back to our "Mecca."

The Unitarian Universalist Association's offices are on Beacon Hill, right next to the Massachusetts State House and across from Boston Common. Tough location, huh? And it is an easy place for me to be, an easy place to be in the moment with what is.

This year, I arrived the day after a snowstorm had roared through the city and dumped a good bit of snow everywhere. There was a beauty, though, to the narrow streets and brick sidewalks still choked with snow (although I imagine the owners of the cars socked in up and down those streets were having a difficult time getting into the beauty of that particular *awhat is*). I stood at the corner of Mt. Vernon and Walnut and looked down the hill toward the snow covered Common. Greens and red bows still adorned the quaint street lamps. Some doors still had wreathes hanging on them. It was one of those moments, one of those moments easy to get lost in, to be in, to be fully present in and to.

That was easy. And I suppose it is also easy whenever we find ourselves in the midst of such a moment to discount it, dismiss it for that very reason. But no, in fact it is a moment to learn, to reflect upon later about what it felt like, about how we lost ourselves in it, even if just for a while. It is a moment to learn how to do what is usually the most difficult of things to do, to live with what is moment to moment.

One of the ways of imagining this challenge to our awareness and attention is what the Buddhists call Monkey Mind. I love that image. It is so apt. It happens to us all. We try to concentrate, to focus, perhaps to meditate, to quiet the mind, to be silent, and all that seems to be happening is that our thoughts and feelings are jumping around like monkeys from tree to tree, not just evading but ignoring our attempts to concentrate, to focus.

Now the irony of it all is, that all those monkey thoughts are *what is*. All those distractions, thoughts, activities, to-do lists, projects, chores, and probably even that one thing you meant to remember yesterday but did not. There it is. In that moment, that is *what is*. And the wisdom of the ages says just to be still and observe.

Stand still.

But this does not always mean to do nothing. It is not all navel-gazing. Buddhism suggests several things to do to deal with our monkey minds. Meditation and mindfulness are at the top of the list, of course, but they take it to the streets, as it were, as well. One may practice compassion, a feeling-with all of Life. One may practice understanding, having an open mind and heart that encourage insight and reason. And one may practice thankfulness, holding an appreciation for all of Life. Such practices get us out of ourselves and engaged with our world and others, with the *what* is that surrounds us always, the present moment. And as Pema Chodron has written, "The present moment is the perfect teacher."

Now we can be awfully hard on ourselves about this, when we mess up, get distracted for hours on end, forget. At least I can. But the key to it, or so it seems to me, is not to adopt some form of rigid discipline, and it is certainly not to beat ourselves up about it. If it were then I would just forget it all right now and move on to something else. The key to it is to be gentle with yourself. One Master (Sheng-yen) once wrote:

Be soft in your practice. Think of the method as a fine silvery stream, not a raging waterfall. Follow the stream, have faith in its course. It will go its own way, meandering here, trickling there. It will find the grooves, the cracks, the crevices. Just follow it. Never let it out of your sight. It will take you.

As John O'Donohue wrote in his poem, *Fluent*,

*I would love to live
Like a river flows,
Carried by the surprise
Of its own unfolding.*

And I think that is very nice and Taoist and "Zenny" and wonderful until I remember that this does not apply only to feel-good kinds of things. It applies to everything else as well. It applies when things are difficult and troublesome. About which Jelaluddin Rumi has the audacity to say:

Learn the alchemy true human beings know: the moment you accept what troubles you've been given, the door will open. Welcome difficulty as a familiar comrade.
(C. Barks, trans.)

All of a sudden this mindfulness thing, being present to *what is*, becomes what I would rather avoid.

When a loved one is in pain, I am suppose to stay in the moment, that kind of moment? To be in that moment, present to what is?

Well, yes. In fact, in this instance it could be the greatest gift I could give at such a point. To be present to another's pain, struggle, difficulty - to be fully *there* with them, accepting what is - not necessarily resigning myself to some imagined (or

even predicted) end, but simply, profoundly, being there with *what is*. Something happens, says Rumi, when we do that. A door opens, a way appears - perhaps not the way you might ideally like - but a way of being, fully and completely. No better gift can be given to another in such a moment, and no better gift can we give ourselves when Life's more painful times come upon us.

Attending to *what is* is not resignation or passivity. It is not saying, "Oh well, there's nothing I can do about it so I might as well accept it." It is not that. It is being fully present and attentive, open to *what is*, no matter what.

This is a profoundly spiritual way of life. It is a way of living that sees the sacred in all that is, in everything. Thomas Moore has written that one of our most important abilities is to develop "the capacity to see the sacred in the ordinary and the mundane." To see the sacred in the everyday-ness of Life.

The sacred is in great art and music, poetry and literature; it is in the great architecture of cathedrals and synagogues and mosques. It is also in the beauty of the forest and wood, the flower and the bee hovering just above it, the contours of the Earth and the wonders of the sky. But the sacred is not limited to these things, these places, these events. As Layman P'ang said:

My miraculous power and spiritual activity: drawing water and carrying wood.

Doing the dishes, the laundry, the daily chores; attending to our loved ones, our family, our friends, ourselves; shoveling snow, traipsing through it to the market; entering fully our joys and being completely with our pains; being with *what is*, no matter what. The spiritual is not necessarily always some grand and glorious experience, some moment that bowls you over. Sometimes it is just being kind to yourself when whatever you are struggling with seems to be getting the best of you. Sometimes it is just being with others when they need someone else to share whatever joy or pain has come to them. Sometimes it is just being present in the world with all its beauty and tragedy, all the wonder and all the idiocy.

When our minds are thus at peace, it does not mean everything will be magically better. The (perhaps) disappointing news is that spirituality, seeing the sacred in everything, does not automatically make anything all better. It does not take away pain and disappointment, trouble or hardship. But it can deepen our experience and connect us with the Spirit of Life that pervades all that is. Our spirituality will be found in our ordinary being and our ordinary lives. It will be found through *what is*.

I have carried an image with me for some time now that represents and reminds me of this difficult simplicity. It is a cup, a chalice if you will. There is no flame; there is no consecrated wine in it. It looks empty.

But I understand this chalice as the human soul, my soul, whose body rises on its stem to a cup, a vessel, open as it is to the larger Life of the Spirit, that can hold

some small part of that Life, at least for a while - just hold it, let it be. And I understand spirituality, then, as paying attention to what is in the cup, in the vessel: being aware of it. In my better moments, then, ego rests at its still point in relation to All That Is, and understands that it is lived more that it lives.

And I imagine we are each vessels of some shape and form, holding what we can, trying not to tip over. And I think to be gentle, compassionate and understanding. And to be thankful that I even have this opportunity at all.

Stand still.

Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.

This is enough *is always true.*

Be neither holy nor wise, just an ordinary person who has completed his work.

At least for the moment.