

Balancing Act
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

from *The Wise Heart* by Jack Kornfeld read by Turner

If we want to act wisely in the world, the first step is to quiet the mind. If our actions are born from anger, grasping, fear, and aggression, they will perpetuate the problems. How many revolutions have overthrown oppressive regimes, to then turn around and become the new oppressors? Only when our own minds and hearts are peaceful can we expect peace to come through the actions we take.

To understand this integration of inner and outer, we can again look at the life of Gandhi. Even during the most turbulent years, when he was dismantling the British Empire's control of India, Gandhi spent one day a week in silence. He meditated so that he could act from the principles of interdependence, not bringing harm to himself or another. No matter how pressing and urgent the political situation, the day he spent in silence allowed him to quiet his mind and listen to the purest intentions of his heart.

If you want to live a life of balance, start now. Turn off the news, meditate, turn on Mozart, walk through the trees or the mountains, and begin to make yourself a zone of peace.

The quieting of our mind is a political act. The world does not need more oil or energy or food. It needs less greed, less hatred, less ignorance. Through meditation and inner transformation, we can learn to make our own hearts a place of peace and integrity.... It is our inner nobility and steadiness that we must call on in our personal and collective difficulties.

Matthew 6:9-13 (translated by Thomas Moore)

When you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your father who can't be seen. Then your father, seeing what is done privately, will reward you. When you pray, don't go on and on like the heathens. They think they'll be heard because of the number of words they use. Don't be like them. Your father knows what you want before you ask for it. Pray this way:

Our father in the sky,
May your name be held sacred,
May your dream be fully realized
on earth, the way it is above.
Provide us with the bread we need today
And forgive anything we owe you,
just as we forgive anyone who owes us.
Keep us from going wrong,
And save us from losing our souls.

Sermon

You may have heard the line that if you can keep your head, while all around you are losing theirs... you may not have a clue as to what is going on!

This said – in fact we really do appreciate having around us those who can maintain a steady focus on what needs to be done in a crisis situation of one sort or another. And not only steady focus, which can become single-minded or even destructive, but grounded, centered, cooperative focus.

I think of my father. As many of you know he was a surgeon, with vascular surgery as his specialty. This meant that he would sometimes get calls in the middle of the night to come to the hospital to repair a ruptured aortic aneurysm. I looked it up the other day – clearly there is no time to lose in such a situation. But neither can you rush in without proper care, the long hand washing before surgery, quick yet thorough review of the medical record and presenting symptoms.

Then... sometimes these surgeries would last for five hours.

Five hours of careful attention, working with a team, a life hanging in the balance.

How did my father, or how does any surgeon, do this?

Training, practiced focus, teamwork. All easy enough to say. Not easy to do. Yet possible. We see it. Happens every day.

Yet for the purposes of my message today, the question is broader: How did my father, or any surgeon, or how do any of us sustain a balanced overall life, a balance in the midst of focused activity, sometimes in the midst of emergency and crisis, sometimes just in the midst of a day that has a to-do list already too long, then supplemented by whatever else comes along?

As I reflect on my father's life, what I saw is that outside the operating room, Dad simply knew how to relax, how to have a good time, how to enjoy family and friends or a hard-fought (but in the end inconsequential) tennis match or ping pong game, or his painting. And he had a great sense of humor and loved to tell a good story.

This said, he was, interestingly, also not always nearly as focused in the rest of his life as in the operating room – notorious for forgetfulness. Almost as if the strings of the violin could not remain taught enough for performance all the time – sometimes they had to go slack.

I don't know how intentional Dad was about maintaining this balance; but as we observed it he did it pretty darn well. He somehow knew intuitively when to take things with utmost seriousness of focused purpose and when to relax, when to realize about many other things that one ought not to be too serious or even too focused.

We have other examples before us on the larger scale of human history.

In this regard, it seems to me that it is more than coincidental that some of the most transformative leaders in human history – transformative towards the good, towards peace and justice and compassion – spent regular time in meditation or prayer, in retreat of one sort or another from their daily outward responsibilities.

Mohammed retreated to his cave, where he received what he understood to be the revelations we know as the Quran.

The Buddha sat under a tree for as long as it took to become enlightened; and then throughout the next forty years of his career teaching the Eightfold Path to liberation from suffering, spent extended time on retreat and in meditation.

Jesus frequently, the Gospels tell us, went aside to pray, and he left for us instructions for simple prayer, the instructions we heard this morning including what we have come to know as the Lord's Prayer.

In our own era, we have the example of Gandhi (as we heard in the reading) taking a day each week for meditation, regardless of how turbulent the political situation was at any given time.

We have the example of Martin Luther King, a minister as well as civil rights leader, a man of both prayer and activism.

And the Dalai Lama, active in the world teaching and leading the Tibetan people, who meditates and reads and reflects for hours each morning – often, we are told, adding time to his meditations if he knows he has a particularly full schedule ahead. There's an example for you!

More mundanely, but also importantly, it is more than okay with me to know that our presidents spend time on the golf course or basketball court or running or on vacation somewhere beautiful away from the White House. And if they also meditate or pray, all the better.

Because none always to the proverbial grindstone can dull the mind and harden the heart. Neither one of which we want in our leaders.

Well... what about us? You and me?

It hardly needs naming that we live in turbulent times; and as Americans are living through a particularly turbulent and often disturbing presidential election campaign.

Now, we will each make our choices as to who to support up and down the ballot. Yet at the same time, I expect I speak for all of us when I affirm that we also desire to somehow live lives of balance and a measure of peace in the midst of it all: in the midst of global worries, politics, not to mention our own personal concerns and challenges – which can sometimes loom pretty large indeed.

So – how do *we* do this – carry out this balancing act of inner and outer, of nurturing an inward calm as we live our active outward lives with focus and perseverance?

It is actually not so hard. What it mostly requires is the determination, the commitment, to take the time – even a little time here and there – to nurture the spirit, to relax our minds and open our hearts. Doesn't always have to be some formal practice of meditation or prayer – though of course it might.

In the reading Jack Kornfield made quite simple suggestions. As we heard:

If you want to live a life of balance, start now. Turn off the news, meditate, turn on Mozart, walk through the trees or the mountains, and begin to make yourself a zone of peace.

And Kornfield goes on to say this is not only for our own personal benefit, but ripples out into the world. It is political as well as personal.

And such things don't take long. Look, I've been as wrapped up in the presidential campaign as the next person, wondering anxiously what the next piece of news will be or what the latest polls say; but sometimes when driving from here to there or preparing a meal I simply force myself to turn off the news and put on some music, or

just be present to whatever is around me – the changing leaves or the tap, tap of my kitchen knife as I prepare a salad.

Now, it's not that we have an inner or contemplative life here... and an outer active life over here. We have one life, which includes both, in one measure or another – different for each of us, each of us of differing temperaments. When it comes to this point, Quaker writer, teacher, and activist Parker Palmer coined a phrase I love: “Divided no more”.

I want to quote him at length:

Rightly understood, contemplation and action are standard features of ordinary, everyday life. Our contemplative action may be raising a child, making things with wood, delivering mail, managing a company, operating a computer, volunteering to feed the hungry, writing a book. Our active contemplation may involve staring out a window, reading a book, thinking long and hard, grieving a painful loss. Whatever our action, it can express and help shape our soul and our world. Whatever our contemplation, it can help us see the reality behind the veils. Contemplation and action are not high skills or specialties for the virtuoso few. They are the warp and weft of human life, the interwoven threads that form the fabric of who we are...

from “The Active Life” by Parker J. Palmer

From another perspective but along a related line, some of you are I expect familiar with the writings of management guru Steven Covey. Among his recommendations for living a balanced life is this: Have one calendar, one datebook, that includes everything from your work commitments to your volunteering to your family time to your personal time, including making “appointments” for things like meditation or a walk or just staring out the window. “Divided no more.” One life.

With all good intentions of course, sometimes life gets the better of us, and we find ourselves frayed at the edges, off balance.

Poet David Whyte recounts a personal incident along these lines. He had been working for a non-profit of some sort, work that was high pressured and stressed – given that non-profits are so often under-funded and under-staffed. On one particular high stress day he rushed to an afternoon staff meeting and said anxiously to the gathered group, “Where’s David?”

He then tells us that he was the only David working there at the time.

He knew it was time to go home for the day.

We can't always do that. But it is important, imperative we might say, to notice when we barely even know where we are or that we are. And then to take even a brief look out the window, just for a few minutes, or to look up as we walk from house to car or car to house or workplace and notice the clouds and the colors. Doesn't take long even just to take a few deep breaths, become a little more present.

Similarly, we need to have some self-awareness as to when it is time to stop whatever we are doing or working on so intensely. Old Ship member Bird Webster, who lived to be over 100, once share this bit of practical wisdom from her years growing up in and living in Maine. During blueberry picking season, the mantra was “when the berries

get small, stop picking.” We would do well to notice when the berries of our work are getting small, and it is time to stop and refresh, one way or another.

Well, drawing toward a close, here is a simple meditation practice from the Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein. I heard about this in last week’s interview by “On Being” host Krista Tippett with the writer Mary Carr. Tippett said that she once had taken a few days of meditation training with Sylvia Boorstein, and one of Boorstein’s teachings was to simply notice the quiet serenity of your mind.

At this, both Krista Tippet and Mary Carr laughed! Like, what quiet serenity is that?

But the point is this: Serene mind, peaceful mind is not something to achieve. It is something already there... once we allow the chatter of thinking to slow down, particularly if we have the intention to notice this deep sea of serenity beneath the waves of thoughts and worries.

So – let’s take a moment now to notice the peaceful serenity of our minds. Just assume it is there. The thinking, thinking, thinking and worrying, worrying, worrying may continue – but see if you can’t detect at least a glimpse of something deeper and peaceful at the same time.... which just might offer a measure of renewal to your soul and spirit...

My message then is simple – not always easy, as with so many things, but maybe helpful to think of it as simple.

This balance I'm talking about today will look different for each of us, some of us more naturally active, some more naturally contemplative, some finding the balance through a regular practice of meditation or prayer, others finding it through less structured means – the walk, the music, the game, the book... or just turning off the news... (which generally won't change much from hour to hour, but surely can throw us off balance unnecessarily).

For yes, we ought be informed enough as citizens. But the cup of information and so-called news and opinions and anger out there, not to mention the cup of our personal commitments and concerns, can so easily overflow, making it way harder to maintain our inward peace, the peace we can bring to the world as we go about our daily lives – ourselves a zone of peace.

May it be so.

May we in whatever way find a measure of serene mind, peaceful spirit... and *be* that for others wherever we go.

So may it be.