

Layers of Mindfulness
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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(text from live-streamed worship)

Call to Worship

So good to be gathered together on this new day,
wherever and whoever we are:

Gathered for worship –
May this time help to remind us of who we most deeply and truly are,
 each of us part and parcel of the family of life,
 each of our lives intertwined with all life,
 each of us moved to help and heal in whatever ways we are able.
May this time offer comfort if comfort we need,
 strength if strength we need,
 inspiration if inspiration we need.

Lighting of the Flaming Chalice

I light the flaming chalice of our free faith, symbol of Unitarian Universalism, linking us to all those who light a chalice this morning, reminding us of our gathered strength and resolve, reminding us of the values we share... values and qualities of kindness and compassion, of understanding and respect, of the quest for justice and peace, grounded in love.

Meditation and Prayer

May we now pause, slow down, breathe into this moment, become more fully awake to this moment we share in spirit... more mindful... of...

The sounds around us...
The feeling of our body, sitting, standing, lying down...
The heat of the day... the cooling fan...

Mindful too... of whatever this day has brought to us, whatever measure of joy or sorrow, ease or challenge...

Mindful too... of whatever our dear ones, neighbors, and friends may be facing this day, these days...

Mindful too... of the struggles in our nation and in the world... in the midst of pandemic... in the midst of risings for justice...

All this, even as we just sit in this moment, sacred moment, wherever we are on this dear earth, spinning galaxy, expanding universe...

As our prayers arise for the safety and health of all beings... as our prayers arise of gratitude for all those helping this to be so... prayers from the silence of our hearts to the God of our hearts, the wellspring of our love...

Reading

Two brief selections from the writing of the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, having to do with his central practice of mindfulness:

Mindfulness is the energy of being aware and awake to the present moment. It is the continuous practice of touching life deeply in every moment of daily life. To be mindful is to be truly alive, present, and at one with those around you and with what you are doing. We bring our body and mind into harmony while we wash the dishes, drive the car, or take our morning shower.

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The practice of Touching the Earth is to return to the earth, to our roots, to our ancestors, and to recognize that we are not alone but connected to a whole stream of spiritual and blood ancestors. We are their continuation and, with them, will continue into the future generations. We touch the earth to let go of the idea that we are separate and to remind us that we are the earth and part of life.

Message “Layers of Mindfulness”

Among the cartoons taped to my bookshelf above my desk is one that pictures a man sitting cross-legged on a mat talking on a phone, saying: “Can I call you back, Ed? I’m in the moment here.”

I like this cartoon. I don’t think it is making fun of meditation or mindfulness – rather, it’s very cleverly poking fun at what might be a common misunderstanding of meditation and mindfulness.

You see, as I look at the cartoon I wonder: why might Ed be calling? Might be a business matter which could be dealt with some other time – or it might actually require urgent attention.

But it might be something personal, and here is Ed is reaching out for some support or help, and he is being put off by his friend who needs to be “in the moment” for a while longer.

So the question posed by the cartoon has to do with what, after all, it means to be “in the moment”. Is it to escape from something we might call the rest of life? Or is it an entry into all of life? Fully present to whatever the moment brings. In this case, a call from Ed.

Thich Nhat Hanh is very clear on this matter, as you heard a few moments ago. Mindfulness, he teaches, is a practice for whatever we are doing every moment of the day. For Ed’s friend it should have meant giving full presence to Ed... in the moment.

Now, my first experience with meditation was a long time ago in college. I was taking a class on Buddhism, and the professor had invited a Buddhist monk from Thailand to campus to teach us meditation.

We sat on a carpeted floor, legs crossed – and as I recall, the only initial instruction was to pay attention to our breath. Then the monk said something like, “now we will sit for a while”.

So we sat for about thirty minutes.

He rang a bell. Then he said maybe you began to notice pain in your knees as we sat. Well, if you experience pain, he said, just watch the pain.

Then we sat for another thirty minutes or so.

And I watched the pain, which was considerable.

First lesson – meditation is *not* an escape! Rather, we are invited to be mindful of the moment as it is, pleasing sensations and not-so-pleasing sensations. Maybe a phone call from Ed.

These days my usual meditation is still on the breath, often with the addition during some of my meditation time of the words of the Prayer of St. Francis or the Buddhist verse on compassion... for oneself, for one's dear ones, for all beings, even the beings that seem to be troublesome. Mindful – and heartfull (if that's a word) of... everyone!

Not an escape from others, but an embrace of others, entry into the fullness of life... including whatever challenges, personal or global, we may face. Present for it all.

Jeff Zaleski, editor of the journal "Parabola", puts it quite simply and clearly: "It is only by being present to the moment, here and now, that we can fully embrace this precious life and one another." Paradoxically, you see, being in the moment fully takes us out of ourselves.

Present to this moment, this many-layered moment:

Which includes not only awareness of our immediate surroundings – here and now – and awareness of how our bodies feel right here, right now... but also our awareness of whatever joys may be lifting our spirits here and now... or of any sorrows weighing us down here and now...

And... includes our awareness of the political and social situations in our nation and on the planet here and now...

And includes our awareness of history that has brought us to this moment in time in our nation and on the planet... awareness of the past... here and now...

And includes re-minding ourselves, becoming more fully aware of our place on this rolling earth, and earth's place spinning around the sun at the edge of this galaxy, one among billions, all part of this miraculous, mysterious, expanding universe amidst the unimaginable expanse of time.

Yes, layers upon layers of mindfulness... maybe not all at once! But all there at one time or another.

And none of this is to say that sometimes we don't need to sometimes "gaze vacantly into the distance without really thinking of anything specific" – which is the definition, I've learned, of a Japanese word "boketto". (Maybe, paradoxically, this is another form of mindfulness...)

And this too, like all the rest, leading not away from life, not escaping from life, and not always easy (whether because of sore knees or sore spirits in the face of challenge and sorrow) but in any case entering life more fully, more awake... more, not less, engaged... more able to say "yes!" to life, to one another, to our shared life with all its joys, sorrows, challenges, in the midst of the miracle and mystery of this still and ever unfolding universe – as Thich Nhat Hanh reminded us, recognizing and feeling...

...that we are not alone but connected to a whole stream of spiritual and blood ancestors. We are their continuation and, with them, will continue into the future generations.

So may it be.