

2U Worship 6 June 2010

“Spiritual Fitness”

© Rev. Rudra Dundzila, Second Unitarian Church

Me

Let me tell you about Orion. He’s a big, muscular guy. An ex-football player, and an ex-marine. He’s a body builder now. He looks like an Arnold Schwarzenegger type. He manages a lumber yard in Virginia. He’s pretty fit.

Last weekend was Orion’s 30th birthday. He was celebrating it by going on a yoga vacation.

We both attended a retreat for yoga teachers and advanced practitioners. It was at Easton Mountain, a Gay spiritual center in the Adirondacks near Albany, NY.

The first session was an intense warm up routine. Lots of stretching, in many different ways, to get the muscles warm and limber. With a deep focus on breathing, and bio-feedback. Yoga is meditation in postures.

Orion knocked his back out. It hurt him the rest of the weekend. He dropped out of the program, eventually taking vicadin. His back was so stiff, and hurt so much.

I felt sorry for him.

I asked him how he prepared for the yoga retreat.

He didn’t. He hadn’t practiced yoga in 3 years. He thought he could just pick it up again.

I think that was the foot ball player or the body builder talking.

The retreat had very clear preparation steps. We were to detoxify our bodies for two weeks. And we were to practice as much yoga as possible. Daily. At home, with DVDs, or in yoga classes.

Orion did none of this. And he suffered the consequences for it.

You

You’re probably thinking something like, “I’d never do something like that!” A whole weekend yoga boot camp. Forget it.

OK, I’m the yoga freak here.

But I know you’ve been through similar situations.

Think back to your college days, or high school.

You’ve got your final exam tomorrow. How do you study for it?

Well, best practices say study a few hours each day, over several weeks.

But how do you study for the exam?

You pull an all nighter, cramming for the test. You fall asleep around 3 or 4 am. The next morning you wake up, drink a pot of coffee, and hope for the best.

That is, if you wake up in time for the test. I once had a student sleep through his final because he pulled an all nighter studying.

Some of you are triathletes or marathon runners.

How to you prepare? Do you wake up the morning of the Chicago marathon, and decide over breakfast at McDonald’s, I think I’ll run the marathon today.

NO.

You plan ahead and start practicing months in advance. You need to get ready.

God

Our religious traditions are filled with stories like this.
Spirituality does not happen over night. It requires practice.

We heard the Taoist tale of K'ing the woodcutter. And how he prepared for his sacred task of carving a bell stand. It was no ordinary bell stand, but an elaborate one for a temple.

In the Jewish tradition, Miriam is the sister of Moses. She is the only woman in the Tanakh, Hebrew Scriptures, named a prophet or a prophetess.

When the Hebrews escape from Egypt, she leads the people in celebration. She sings and dances in victory. It's "The Song of Miriam." She inspires the Hebrews, and they rejoice with her. These are her spiritual practices. Our choirs still do this today.

In Christianity, we have John the Baptist. He eats locusts and honey, and lives in the desert with his renegade band of followers. He wanders from town to town, preaching the coming of the Messiah. And he baptizes people, that is, washes away their sins. That's his spiritual practice.

Let's face it. As Unitarian Universalists, this guy would probably not appeal to our religious sensibilities.

Islam has Mohammed. He learns Judaism and Christianity from his fellow merchants. He rejects the idolatry of his people. He begins to worship the one God.

He goes to the caves outside Mecca to meditate in solitude and silence. There, his revelations begin. That's his spiritual practice.

India gives the world Gandhi.

He's a corporate lawyer. A graduate of British education in India and England. A very proper gentleman.

But he believes in human rights, and he fights for equality.

He organizes all kinds of boycotts, and protests, and marches in South Africa and in India. He breaks unjust laws. He opposes segregation, Apartheid, discrimination, excessive taxation, mistreatment of the poor and underprivileged, and especially the British occupation of India.

But he also realizes that he needs to prepare himself. He needs to become a different person, so he could effectively transform the world. From this realization, comes his teaching, "to be the change we want to see in the world."

"To be the change we want to see in the world." That is the essence of spiritual fitness.

As a child, he grows in up a religious family with Hindu devotionals. As an adult, he examines the religion of his youth. And explores other ones as well. Sound familiar?

Gandhi develops his deep spiritual practices gradually, over his life time. He experiments a lot. And he sticks with the practices that work for him. It's trial and error.

He meditates every morning.

He prays.

He studies scriptures: Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Jain, and Jewish, all the religions. He even translates the Bhagavad Gita.

He eats a vegetarian diet, and even tries a Fruitarian one.

He controls his sexuality, sometimes to the chagrin of his wife.

He keeps a day of silence once a week. Silence.

He weaves his own clothing out of Indian homespun cotton. And wears very simple Indian peasant clothes: a dhoti and a shawl.

He journals, daily. And he writes articles, letters, and edits a newspaper.

He takes long fasts. To purify himself, and to protest social ills.

And when factions would argue at a meeting, he'd do one of two things. He'd suddenly declare that it was time for prayer.

Or, he would serve tea to everyone. He would break class barriers and take on the role of a servant. Jesus washes feet. Gandhi serves tea.

Seekers would come to Gandhi's ashram. They have great plans, and huge ideas. They want to organize all sorts of protests, and marches, and actions.

Gandhi tells them to spin and weave their own clothing first.

BUT, BUT, BUT they try to respond.

And then clean the toilets, Gandhi says.

That blows their bubbles. He's teaching them patience and humility.

Gandhi's spiritual work empowers him. His gumption for social justice comes from his inner spiritual work. His struggles for human rights and equality is effective only because of his spiritual preparation. His spiritual fitness. He calls himself a spiritual warrior.

Gandhi is an example for us. We need to "be the change we want to see in the world."

You

You know as well as I do that spiritual practice is a challenge. It takes time to find the right one. And then things get in the way, and you forget about it.

But with repetition, it becomes easier.

It becomes your second nature.

The practice sustains you.

It kicks in, when you need it most. Like when you find yourself stressed out, worried, spinning out of control. Bills, shopping, work, guests, you name it.

And suddenly you remember the practice. And it calms you down.

A mother once told me her teen son had locked himself in the bathroom. Teens sometimes need their privacy, you know. After a while, mom knocked on the door. She got a gruff answer, "Ma, I'm all right. Leave me alone."

After a long while, she knocked again. There was no answer.

She could not open the door. She panicked. She forgot how to unlock a bathroom door. She could not get to her son, to see what was going on with him.

And she worried: how could she lift him? He was bigger than her.

Her mind raced. Was it drugs? Or alcohol? Or, heaven forbid, suicide? Did he drown in the bathtub? Or electrocute himself? Or something else? She was going crazy.

She called 911. The paramedics took care of everything.

In the ambulance she realized, she needed to let go. Her son was in capable hands. She could do nothing to help. And she remembered the meditative breath, her meditative breath. The breath that calmed her down. Breathing, she could care for him without obsessing, without driving herself crazy.

As it turned out, he had gone into insulin shock. All-knowing and all-powerful teen that he was, he had not taken his insulin that day. Or maybe for a few days. He felt fine, so he felt did not need his meds.

As religious seekers, the challenge for you is finding a spiritual practice that works for you. And sticking with it.

What is your spiritual practice?

What do you do to center and ground yourself?

What inner work gives you inspiration and energy to do your outer work?

Is it meditation? Knitting? Gardening? Biking, or jogging? Walking along the lake front?

Take moment to think about this, and jot down notes on the slip of paper provided.

We

As a congregation, we are here to help each other. One of our goals is spirituality. Let's read the words on the cover of our OOS together: 2U "is a vibrant community that inspires you to develop your own spiritual path and live our your values in the world."

We share spiritual practices together in worship. Worship is the core life of a congregation. We pray, we sing, and we seek inspiration together. That is a spiritual practice.

We have small group ministries, with check-in, a spiritual reading, and personal reflection about the reading. That is a spiritual practice.

We have children's and adult faith development programs. We learn spiritual practices, grapple with life's tough questions, and find ways to serve the world for the common good. That is a spiritual practice.

Then, we go out into our neighborhood to make it a better place for all. The Lakeview Action Coalition, The Night Ministry, the Jane Adams Senior Caucus, the Society for Urban Renewal. These are some venues for our outward spiritual expression.

We nurture ourselves, then we serve the world.

sLike Gandhi said, we need to "be the change we want to see in the world."