

THE PRACTICE GAP

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If faith is believing in something when there's a rational reason to believe and also when there's not, by the time I had finally made my way to my first Unitarian Universalist church I had truly lost my faith. I hadn't lost interest in church or religious community, but certainly all the rest: God, redemption, healing, the power to heal, maybe even love. What continued to draw me to church on Sundays is a mystery to me, a mystery grounded in habit and instinct.

Growing up, my life was rooted in twice-a-week church attendance and daily devotional readings. I think one reason we didn't have a lot of conflict in our church (aside from how best to cut the grass around our lawn sign), was that we were so busy praying. When we were confused, we prayed, as we did when we were ill, or angry, or grateful. Each of these states was a prompt to connect with God on an ongoing basis. Prayer was the heart of spiritual practice; it shaped how we understood ourselves as spiritual practitioners—how to grow, how to be in relationship with each other, how to understand the divine presence in our lives.

Studying scripture, attending church gatherings or camps, and engaging with others were additional means to become better spiritual practitioners of faith. Even the parochial college I attended had a daily "Quiet Hour" built into its schedule to accommodate reflection and scripture study. It gave us something to do with our spiritual lives beyond just thinking about them. While the practice of faith shaped my life, I was, like so many potential Unitarian Universalists, theologically adrift, and when this drifting faith in the Christian message finally petered out, the local Unitarian Universalist church was there to catch me. How many others have our churches, societies, fellowships, and congregations likewise caught?

My first reaction to joining a Unitarian Universalist church was not uncharacteristic for many of our newcomers. I thought: "Wow, it's like

college, a community center, and religious fellowship all wrapped up in one, and I never have to graduate and leave!" After college I sincerely missed having intellectual stimulation in my life, and here was an organization that could fill in that gap each Sunday. There was music, too, and coffee!

Church became first, intellectual; second, communal; third, something religious—in that inverted order of importance. I could use the excuse that it was the late 1980s and a strange time in my life, or that I was still young and didn't know better, or that I was "just where I needed to be," but really I think this inversion was a failure of the church itself to present richer ground in which I might plant the seeds of new faith.

It was the church that failed to challenge my priorities as I went through the newcomer class, where all that stood between me and the membership book was a class in Unitarian history and a potluck welcome dinner. It was the church that failed to challenge my notion that I was there for myself and not for others, for it was three years before I was asked to do anything other than sit in a pew and think. It was the church that failed to nudge me, once it had presumably healed the wounds left over from my religious upbringing, back into a life of spiritual practice and renewal.

FALLING INTO THE GAP

Getting our religious priorities straight demands that we face the gap we've allowed to develop in the spiritual life of many of our churches. I didn't fully realize the large gap in my own spiritual life until I had enrolled in seminary. I had enjoyed church up to that point and was satisfied with its being "good enough." Yet I was called into religious life partly because I was hungry for more. Then, during my first year of seminary, as I stretched myself personally and spiritually, I found myself falling down a lot. I realized I didn't have an embodied spiritual practice, such as the prayer practice of my youth, on which to rest my burdens when they felt like more than I could handle. I was falling into the practice gap, that space between one's zone of comfort and the suffering that is inevitable when you're pushing the boundaries of your existing framework of spiritual reference.

As I fell into the practice gap, I finally decided to sit down. Then I sat some more. I had long been attracted to Buddhist theology, so I began going to Buddhist sanghas looking not for answers but for an anchor. Sadly, I didn't even consider looking for an answer at my own congregation—a fact I realized only recently. What kept me from searching for a deeper spiritual life in my own church?

My spiritual life deepened concurrently in seminary, where I trained for the ministry, and in my sangha, where I found a teacher who helped me develop a sitting practice and relearn that a spiritual life needs space for the spirit to enter. The gap I had fallen into, I realized, was the same gap through which I might allow the spirit to come back into my life. Don't ask me to define what that looks like or how it works. That's a trap in which Unitarian Universalists love to become ensnared. I can say only that there are realities to our existence beyond words—realities that appear only vaguely rational to human sensibilities. That's what it means to experience something through embodied practice. Words are of the mind; the body can tap into another range of natural experience if we have the patience to listen. This space is experienced through prayer or any number of meditation, yogic, or spiritual disciplines. And it takes work!

My own experience of spiritual insufficiency is not unique among Unitarian Universalists. Others in our congregations are also falling into the practice gap, and instead of coming together in love with common tools or even vocabulary at our disposal, we leave those falling the hardest to act out their difficulties in our communities of faith. Resistance to spiritual growth, for example, is a critical part of the growth process. Bodies and hearts ache, and the mind can rationalize a thousand reasons not to have faith. Currently, however, most of our institutions respond not with remedies, but with platitudes (such as our Seven Principles) and “liberty” clauses, which are seen not as the beginning of a search for personal and institutional truth and meaning, but as the end. The practice gap is therefore more than a personal issue—it is the missing piece in our wider movement today. It is an institutional challenge.

Consider almost every other religious trend, denomination, or community. Adherents pray, meditate, chant, walk, whirl, kneel, eat, or engage in any number of other embodied practices. There are countless Unitarian Universalists who practice their faith in these ways, too. The difference is that these practices are peripheral, even extracurricular for most UUs. Congregations may celebrate a spiritual practice or two during the occasional “pagan Sunday” or other “special service”—but not as liturgy or embodied ritual. It's true that there's probably not a single spiritual practice that is going to catch fire throughout our denomination, coast to coast, but each congregation could engage in a search for a practice its members could do together.

One of the questions on the congregational records that churches send out to prospective ministers asks: “What is your congregation's dominant

theology?" A survey usually reveals some kind of answer. What if another question asked: "What is the dominant spiritual practice employed by your congregation?" Does the difficulty in offering such practices stem from disagreement on the meaning behind them? Probably, but that is a flimsy excuse. Each of the practices I've identified is richly nuanced and accessible by different paths. Each one offers many, many paths to transcendence.

Prayers, for example, can be contemplative, meditative, written, spoken, silent, mystical, petitionary, and thankful. How many other different types of prayer are there? How many meditation techniques? People walk, bow, stand, prostrate themselves, sit. There are different ways of keeping kosher, maintaining a Sabbath, making a pilgrimage, showing reverence, engaging in the Five Pillars. We need not agree on the details of spiritual practice to engage in one practice and to share the journey. On some level, we know this. Consider how many theologies we reason our way through on any given Sunday!

If all is holy, everything legitimate, all ways equal, what could possibly be wrong with our utter openness to all directions? Nothing. Nothing, I think, is wrong with the openness. It is the failure to move down one path or another that limits our effectiveness. If we were doing things more effectively, our churches would be overflowing with people being healed of their hurts. If we were doing things more effectively, we would be helping a greater number of people outside our church than inside. If we were doing things more effectively, our saving message would travel to the farthest reaches. The truth is, most of our churches aren't growing. Our social actions are often composed of a handful of truly active people who invite the rest to come along for the ride. Our spirituality groups, when and where they exist, often become closed circles that don't project a message of inclusion. Our message isn't getting out.

It may be a stretch to make a connection between fixing all these wrongs and developing common spiritual practices, but I'm here to stretch. I believe that through spiritual practice the connection between the personal and the institutional comes into focus.

THE HUNGER

If I didn't see a hunger for spiritual practice in our congregations, I wouldn't be writing this. I'd probably be called to serve the Divine in some other capacity, because it is our hunger for spiritual practice that motivates a large part of my ministry. You can see our hunger in many places. First is

the fascination that many Unitarian Universalists have with Buddhism. The path that the Buddha laid out is not one of dogma and creed, although some cultures certainly took it in that direction later on. At its core, Buddhism is non-dogmatic: a practical method to minimize the suffering that arises whenever humans cling to desire. I believe that's why Buddhism resonates so deeply with us: early Buddhism was non-theocentric and laid out a clear path to liberation.

Contemplative prayer is another practice that could catch on with UUs, although many in our churches associate prayer with baggage-laden Christian practices. Still, I am working with Buddhist practice, so I am most qualified to offer an example from Buddhism.

Take as an example the practice of *satipatthana*—realization of mindfulness—as an example. Through the cultivation of *sati* (or mindfulness, including ethical conduct, liberality, and the laws of nature) we foster an awareness of the present moment that allows us to recollect our lives, inducing a mind characterized by collectedness and the absence of distraction. Cultivating *sati* leads to a breadth of focus, even what is called a “boundless” state of mind. There is it: a path, a destination, and a goal, all in one.

One of the more popular hymns in our new supplement reads, “We are going, heaven knows where we are going, but we know within.” The opposite is precisely the problem: we don't know where we're going and we don't know what signs will tell us when we get there. “There is no there, there,” as I've heard it said. In my life spiritual practice has been an antidote to this fuzziness. In practice one finds clarity, and when my suffering is diminished I experience that clarity as Truth. Goal, path, and discipline are all wrapped into one. Likewise, I believe that our faith, if brought into fuller being through the inclusion of spiritual practices, might offer the world a saving grace the like of which has never been offered.

How would we do this? Since we are theologically pluralistic, our approach to spiritual practice could likewise be pluralistic. We could easily incorporate in our services a significant amount of time for prayer, for example. (And many of us are doing so.) I have found that newcomers don't run screaming from prayer. They expect a little prayer in a church and are moved in a positive way by our manner of praying—in the same way that our mode of preaching is distinctive from that in other Protestant churches. Or we could work toward longer silences in our services instead of the less-than-a-minute gaps we sometimes call “meditation.” What would a good five-or ten-minute leap into silence look like for us on a Sunday morning?

We can begin to promote spiritual practice immediately by encouraging the work already being done by our spirituality small groups such as our Christian affinity groups, Buddhist study groups, and Pagan circles, and by creating additional groups based on a model of small-group ministry. By instituting and supporting curious and intentional exploration of communal practices—in the same mode of intentional exploration we have applied to our theologies—our faith might become not only liberal and affirming, but also irresistible and powerful.

Whatever the methods we apply, a next step for Unitarian Universalism is to include in our Sunday gatherings an emphasis on practice. Just as a reasoned faith liberates minds, an embodied faith will liberate the souls entering our doors, souls hungry for what we have to offer.

THE TRAPS

With hunger must come caution, for desire of any kind—even for spiritual practice—is fraught with danger. To eat is nourishing and sustaining. Gluttony can kill you. To strive for excellence is noble. Ambition and greed destroy lives. I don't need to go through the other seven "deadlies" to make my point about life in the here and now: that if we're hungry for spiritual practices that nourish and sustain our lives, we must also watch where we're headed.

The religious scholar and Zen teacher David Loy notes that Western culture is so interested in clinging to something permanent that we cling to the only thing we can: consumerism. We approach spiritual practice the way we approach products, looking for immediate results and believing that more is better. Aside from the temptation to model our church programs after consumer models (which is a different essay), the consumer model when applied to spiritual practice is especially dangerous to our spiritual well-being.

In *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa points out that walking a spiritual path is a subtle process. A spiritual discipline can cut through our confusion, uncover the awakened mind. When it is crowded or controlled by ego, however, it can allow us to deceive ourselves, to begin thinking we are developing spiritually when instead we're merely strengthening our egocentricity. Ego can convert anything to its own use—to the point that, as Trungpa says, we can wind up in the middle of a spiritual junkyard, surrounded by all the pretty practices we've encountered on our spiritual journey, and fed by none of them.

The antidote to this confusion: learning to cherish the most precious pieces of what our journey reveals, to be more discriminating and mindful. How do we know what to cherish? By listening to our instincts, hearing a call, and jumping into the practice gap. We humans cling tightly to our ego-driven understandings, afraid of the empty space before us, afraid we'll find nothing to anchor ourselves as we drift toward an unfixd destination. It takes courage to get lost and simply trust that we'll be found.

My experience tells me that it will take a lifetime to develop and cherish just one or two of the beautiful practices that emerge. Therefore, the point of offering spiritual practice is not to have members dabble with this, and mix and match that. The point is to support people in exploring intentionally a variety of spiritual practices within the church structure, so that the search itself becomes a communal activity.

WE'VE TRIED THIS, HAVEN'T WE?

Unitarian Universalism has already introduced unique practices into our communities of faith. One of these is “joys and sorrows,” which can allow a faith community to hold its members' lives in powerful and affirming ways. The sharing of joys and sorrows can draw people tightly into each other's lives. However, many congregations have found that “joys and sorrows” doesn't work well beyond a certain point in a congregation's growth. Many congregations develop a beloved practice of detailed sharing, only to have to abandon it as they grow into a mid-or large-sized church. In a large church, there are just too many people to accommodate within a reasonable amount of time. In any case, joys and sorrows can leave visitors scratching their heads about the reverent meaning of what seems to be a social practice.

Small-group ministry is another practice that UU congregations have embraced. Small ministry groups, or covenant groups, allow members to hold each other's lives—through the practice of cultivated silence, active listening, and nonjudgmental interaction—in a way that most of us do not experience anywhere else in our lives. In most groups, a set of rules and a covenant help participants cultivate a practice that eventually becomes second nature. All constituent partners in a covenant group program—the groups, the individuals in them, and the institutions in which they are embedded—benefit from the interactions that begin and end with the spiritual practice of small-group ministry. In this way, small-group ministry transforms both congregations and individual lives.

Small-group ministry works especially well as a congregation grows in

membership. In fact, if everyone in a Unitarian Universalist congregation were involved in small-group ministry, I might never have written this article: that's how powerful I believe the practice to be. On the other hand, I don't expect that everyone in our movement will someday be involved in small-group ministry. Given our pluralism, it just isn't going to appeal to everyone.

Our pluralism is the main reason I am advocating a shift in emphasis for our movement rather than a prescription for everyone's growth. No one spiritual practice is ever going to work for all of us. But a shift in emphasis, a focus on spiritual practice, can enlarge the potential of our churches and transform individual lives. Unitarian Universalists and Unitarian Universalist institutions everywhere should be looking into their lives for those threads that pull them into deeper meaning with existence—with others and with the spirit that grounds our being. If we're not doing that, then we're feeding the mind, but not the soul. And if the business of the church is saving souls (not from damnation but from the many pits and fissures into which our lives can drop), then we ought to be about our job.

PRACTICE WITH REASON

I came into Unitarian Universalism wanting, among other things, more embodied spirituality in my life. It did such a great job at nurturing those "other things"—such as providing a foundation of faith for my son and empowering me in my personal search for truth and meaning—that I didn't leave. I stayed to carve out a space for embodied practice in this faith that grounds me in so many other ways. It grounds me in its affirmation of the inherent worth of the individual. It grounds me in its affirmation of our connection to each other, without dogma, without creed, without oppressive restrictions. I am afraid, however, that many won't stick around unless our movement embarks on a clearer path toward including spiritual practice in our congregational life. Practice is a way to integrate reason and heart, intellect with inner knowing, personal freedom with the journey we share. This book you hold in your hand is about two things: saving Unitarian Universalism and sharing its redemptive message with every spiritually hungry person who is in need of what we offer. When our religion finds its voice and people come flocking to our doors, what do we offer them?

We welcome the kinds of questions that hold a seeker's attention for a time, and spiritual practice is a way to offer people practical tools to find answers that work in their lives, answers that lead to healing, redemption,

and liberation. We offer action and reflection, and spiritual practice adds to that engagement a richer path toward transformation for those who seek to live better lives, lives that matter, lives that are more clearly aimed toward healing and gratitude. This is a world of crushing speed and dehumanizing forces. I believe in the power of spiritual practice to be salve and antidote to those forces. I have come to rest my faith in practice. As a church, as a denomination, as individuals, I pray we will cultivate a similar commitment to practice, which we can then share with all who need it.