

PRACTICING BEING HUMAN
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
March 1, 2015

OPENING WORDS *Come Into This Room* ~ Susan Maginn

Come into this room, weigh into this chair, breathe into this body, the very body that will be you, for better and for worse, in sickness and in health, till death do us part.

Come into this day, raise your gaze into this light, this one steadfast sun who watches over all growing beings, even you, even now.

Come into this heart, and break into the boundlessness of wild beauty, no beginning or ending in you, but flowing through like whitewater, reaching toward all that ever was and ever shall be.

Come, come, whoever you are. Whoever you are – with whatever doubts and convictions, with whatever hopes or fears...whatever your age, your energy level, or how you express yourself ...whatever your faith, whatever your heritage, whomever you love – you are welcome here.

Come, let us worship together.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Piggy Bunny* ~ Rachel Vail

A piglet named Liam wants to be...actually believes himself to be...the Easter Bunny. It takes a lot of practicing, and some help from his grandparents, to make others believe in him, too.

READING *The Transformative Power of Practice* (excerpts) ~Hg'ehte Maina and Staci Haines
<http://transform.transformativechange.org/2010/06/powerofpractice/>

MESSAGE *Practicing Being Human* ~ Rev. Stoneberg

There's a lovely poem called "A Note" by a poet whose name I probably won't pronounce correctly... Wislawa Szymborska... and it goes like this:

Life is the only way
to get covered in leaves,
catch your breath on the sand,
rise on wings;
to be a dog,
or stroke its warm fur;
to tell pain
from everything it's not;
to squeeze inside events,
dawdle in views,
to seek the least of all possible mistakes.
An extraordinary chance
to remember for a moment

a conversation held
with the lamp switched off;
and if only once
to stumble upon a stone,
end up soaked in one downpour or another,
mislay your keys in the grass;
and to follow a spark on the wind with your eyes;
and to keep on not knowing
something important.

This poem speaks to life...and how being alive is what makes it possible for us to have all manner of sensory experience...from crunching leaves to being drenched in the rain, from stroking a dog's fur to wondering in the darkness.

Maya Angelou, may she rest in peace, said: "Find a beautiful piece of art. If you fall in love with Van Gogh or Matisse or John Oliver Killens, or if you fall in love with the music of Coltrane, the music of Aretha Franklin, or the music of Chopin – find some beautiful art and admire it, and realize that that was created by human beings just like you, no more human, no less." Find art. Admire it. Recognize it is made by a human. Revel in what is possible.

Walt Whitman also expounded on the beautiful, in his words, "Why, who makes much of a miracle? As for me, I know of nothing else but miracles. Whether I walk the streets of Manhattan, or dart my sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky, or walk with naked feet along the beach just in the edge of the water, or stand under trees in woods...all these to me are unspeakably perfect miracles..."

Surely to be human, and to practice being human, is to bask in all of these incredible gifts of experience...of observation, of pleasure, of beauty, of love...and as well, to know pain, and sorrow, and despair.

Others have studied what it means to be human from the perspective of consciousness, concluding that it is our ability to think and to reason...to reflect on ourselves, to have perspective and to find meaning in our existence...that it is these abilities which make us unique as beings...that most characterize what it means to be human. And I cannot refute that. Surely, our consciousness is a great defining quality of our very human-ness.

But in choosing a topic for this service...this first service in a series on the theme of practice...with the specific topic of "Practicing Being Human," I was not thinking of any of these wondrous gifts...of feelings...of experiential, sensory, life...or of consciousness.

Rather, I was thinking about those things for which we hold such possibility...the places in which we can truly BE human, be humane, be the best humans that we can be...which is more a question of conscience and morality than of consciousness or sensory perception.

So, what are the qualities or values or behaviours that you would put at the top of a list of being the best human possible? Is there something universal, or is it different for each of us? (I'm going to give you a chance to share in a moment.)

For example, Eckhart Tolle said that "the arising of a unifying field of awareness between human beings is the most essential factor in relationships on the new earth." Being present and aware.

In a blog post, a guy named Greg in Colorado said this¹: "I can think of no better definition of what it means to be fully human than to learn to relate to oneself and others gently and with compassion." Gentle compassion.

At yesterday's SOUL concert, they did a song by Mahalia Jackson, *A City Called Heaven*, with the words, "I'm trying to make heaven my home." This could be a powerful way of living as best possible...living in ways that make of this earth a heaven.

Are either of these things...being present...being compassionate...at the top of your list? What thoughts do you have about what makes us fully human? (*pass mic*)

.....Whatever it is that you think it means to be most fully human, it is undeniable that just being...as humans...is an amazingly complex experience, laden with both challenges and potentialities.

Is practicing being human all about practicing getting better and better at being ourselves? I love the Piggy Bunny² story. Though written for children, it contains a nuanced, and more adult, exploration of how we are sometimes 'trapped' in bodies, in situations, in genders, in relationships, in patterns of behaviour, that do not express who we believe ourselves to be, or want ourselves to be. And this brings up an interesting distinction and question. When we are practicing being human, is our goal to uncover, that is, to live fully into, the person that we already are? Or, are we practicing in order to acquire or hone skills that we don't seem to have, in order to become someone, at least in some measure, that we currently are not?

Dale and Jim Ed on the Morning Show on Minnesota Public Radio used to sound a foghorn in advance of playing any Ethel Merman recordings, as a warning for those who would want to turn off their sets for the duration. I'd love to one day be able to blow a foghorn, which in shorthand would mean, here comes the big UU caveat/disclaimer about language and interpretation, a disclaimer that feels necessary in most every sermon!

(*Foghorn*)

Let me carefully acknowledge that an expectation that we need to improve can smack of "shoulds" and therefore might be interpreted as a belief that we are not okay as we are. An implication that we need to become someone we currently are not, might be met with

¹ <http://revolutions.blogspot.ca/2009/03/practice-of-being-human.html>

² Children's book by Rachel Vail. A piglet practices being the Easter Bunny because that is who he knows himself to be.

suspensions about promoting a lack of authenticity. If that's how it sounds to you, I'm sorry. Clearly, there are some hot buttons here; please don't get hung up on language.

(Sigh)

Disclaimer done. Received? Received well?

At the core, this is one of those REALLY BIG QUESTIONS; what is the nature of being human? Are we, at our core, perfect, and our life journey is one of uncovering, or discovering, that perfection? Or, are we balls of possibility...with an equal measure of potential good and evil...and our life journey is one of learning, growing, and making choices toward the good? These are two different views of humanity (and certainly not the only two possible.) Neither is right or wrong...they are simply a different way of seeing things. Ultimately it is your work to take the idea of practice, decide if it's an idea that can be of service to you, find the wording that works for you, layer it over your understanding of what it means to be human, and then do with it what you will. Your work is to be on a personal search for truth and meaning. YOUR truth. YOUR meaning.

With either of these worldviews...that we are beings just trying to be our most true (and already best) selves...or that we are beings with an inherent ability to become something more...or any other way of seeing our humanity...practice is a worthy endeavour. The reading that Ian shared earlier really resonated with me, in that it pointed out what a difference it can make if we are intentional about what we practice...if we are aware of what we are most committed to, to design practices to support those commitments...and well, then, to practice.

The authors, Maina and Haines, go on to say that intentionally practicing new things will make us more aware of our unintentional, default practices. An example they give, not included in today's reading, is that if you have a meditation practice...as I do...and you unintentionally, though consistently, let your mind wander...as I do...then what you are really practicing is 'mind wandering,' not 'meditation.' And, it isn't until one really practices 'meditation' that one is aware of how often one practices 'mind wandering.' Just this awareness has already, this week, helped me to better practice meditation.

The same is true for any practice.

If, like Eckhart Tolle, you want to practice being fully present, the practice of that will at first really rub up against all of the times you check out. You'll become more aware of when you aren't very present.

If, like Greg in Colorado, you want to practice gently relating to yourself and others with compassion, the practice of that will make you more aware of the times when you are less than gentle, or other than compassionate.

If like Mahalia Jackson, you want to just make heaven your home, you might practice particular ways of treating the earth, or surrounding yourself with beauty

If like...*examples from congregation...*

The article goes on to say that with practice, we begin to actually embody new ways of being. Through the repetition that is practice, we are transformed...to be more in alignment with our true selves, or to be the people we want to be. We are what we practice.

One more thing. There is, I believe, a very important role for community, especially spiritual community, to play in our practice of being human. It was the Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams who once said something like, "Church is where we practice being human."

In a similar vein, a colleague tells the story³ of once having a conversation with an Orthodox Rabbi about what Unitarian Universalism is, and what we believe and honour. After her description he smirked and said, "Isn't that kind of idealistic?" To which she replied, "Isn't that the point of religion? To call us back to our highest calling?" The rabbi smiled and responded, "Point taken."

Our third principle encourages, even requires (?), us to support one another in our spiritual growth. What better indication of spiritual growth than the process of practicing our highest held values and commitments. So here, in a supportive religious community, we get to practice being the humans we want to be. The reality is that we won't get it right every time. It will feel risky. We will fall back on default behaviours or practices that we are trying to rid ourselves of. We will probably insult or hurt someone, or at least step on some toes, in the process.

But if we truly embrace this as a place of practice, perhaps we will all be more forgiving, and gentler with ourselves and with each other, because we understand the incredible value, and challenge, of practice. If we claim this is such a place, we would see that practice is a process of trying and failing and trying again...as we try to practice our principles, to practice our values, to practice our highest held visions of what can be.

In fact, our proposed Covenant of Right Relations is meant to be a communal expression of commitments that we are willing to make to one another...commitments of how we will practice being in relationship, being in community. On March 29 after the service, we're going to have an initial "Big Circle Conversation" about that covenant...a conversation in which we begin by exploring how we each are, or want to be, in relationship with this community.

Unitarian Universalism is a tradition that has long lived its insistence on the goodness of the human soul, and affirmed a belief that we each have inherent potential to grow and improve. Whatever words you use, however best expressed, I think each of us has some kind of longing, a longing that can be heartbreaking, to show up in the world, and to be in relationships, in different ways...deeper, better, higher ways...than we currently are and do.

³ <http://www.uuannapolis.org/uncategorized/practice-being-human-cl>

We long to be more like who we truly believe ourselves to be, or are able to be, at our core...at our most fully human. Practice is, or can be, a way to address that longing; to transform us...not into someone different, or someone quantitatively better...but rather, in the practice of carefully chosen behaviours that align with our values, toward an embodiment of the human we believe to be our true and authentically best self.

May our UFP community be a place where we can practice practicing... in a communal dance of becoming and unfolding...supporting one another...affirming always that we are, whoever we are, at our deepest core...worthy and beloved...and capable of transformation.

I so believe in you. Amen.

CLOSING WORDS

~ Clarissa Pinkolas Estes

These are the words of Clarissa Pinkolas Estes, written at the time of the turn of the millennium, now more than fifteen years ago, but they are timeless.

We were made for these times. Yes. For years, we have been learning, practicing, been in training for and just waiting to meet on this exact plain of engagement.

What is needed for dramatic change is an accumulation of acts, adding, adding to, adding more, continuing. We know that it does not take everyone on Earth to bring justice and peace, but only a small, determined group who will not give up during the first, second, or hundredth gale.

I cannot tell you often enough that we are definitely the leaders we have been waiting for, and that we have been raised since childhood for this time precisely.

May this knowledge inspire you in this time of returning warmth and light. Go in peace.