

In the Space Between Before and After

A Sermon Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Ellsworth on January 6, 2019 by Rev. Sara Hayman

When things in our lives are difficult, how do we help ourselves to see through to what may still be possible? How do we get better at responding versus reacting to challenges? How do we broaden our perspective and stay more open to possibilities? Drawing wisdom from the Buddhist practice of mindfulness, in this service we'll explore these questions and how we might be able to embrace new possibilities in our lives.

Readings

There are three brief readings today. The first is a slightly adapted passage from Kathleen Norris' book, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*.

Over the years, when I worked as an artist in elementary schools I made a deal with my students: first you get to make noise, *all* the noise you want, and when I lower my hand, you stop. I had to explain *silence* to the children. Silence meant breathing normally (not holding their breath), and sitting so still that they made no noise at all...

"We always had to try this more than once," writes Norris. "[Invariably,] a pencil would roll down someone's desk, or someone would shift in a seat. But in every case but one, over many years, I found that children were able to become so still that silence became a presence in the classroom.

Some kids loved it. Others weren't so sure. 'It's scary,' one fifth grader complained. 'Why?' I asked, and...he got right to the heart of it when he replied, 'It's like we're waiting for something – it's scary!'"

What interests me *most* is the way in which *making* silence liberated the imagination of so many children...

"Silence is me sleeping waiting to wake up," one student wrote.

"Silence is spiders spinning their webs," wrote another.

[And] in a tiny town in western North Dakota, another little girl offered *this* gem of spiritual wisdom: "Silence reminds me to take my soul with me wherever I go."

Our second reading is titled, “Spiritual Fitness,” and the author is unknown.

If you can start the day without caffeine,
If you can be cheerful, ignoring aches and pains,
If you can resist complaining and boring people with your troubles,
If you can understand when loved one’s are too busy to give you time,
If you can overlook when people take things out on you, when,
through no fault of yours something goes wrong,
If you can take criticism and blame without resentment...
Then you are probably a dog.

The last reading is a poem by Martha Postlewaite, titled “Clearing.”

Do not try to save
the whole world
or do anything grandiose.
Instead, create
a clearing
in the dense forest
of your life
and wait there
patiently,
until the song
that *is* your life
falls into your own cupped hands
and you recognize and greet it.
Only then will you know
how to give yourself
to this world
so worthy of rescue.

SERMON In the Space Between Before and After
Rev. Sara Hayman

I felt both excitement and dread when I got the email in August letting me know I’d made it off the WAIT LIST. If I still wanted it, I had a spot at the upcoming 10-Day Vipassana Meditation Retreat in Shelbourne Falls, MA.

Truth be told, I’ve known for years how useful and grounding having a silent meditation practice can be in my life. Over the last decade plus, in fits and starts, I’ve done it—I’ve sat in silence—and then for some reason or other, I’ve stopped doing it regularly.

I’ve gone to weekend retreats at places like the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, MA and also in Colorado when I was an Intern Minister there. On and off again, I’ve been good about going to the Quiet Day Offering at the Alcyon Center in Seal Cove on MDI—a gathering on the first Friday of each month when Joan Jordan-Grant and Kathryn Booth

open the doors of their retreat center and welcome anyone in for 3 hours of silence experienced in community, followed by a simple meal they make and share. I've lit candles in the morning and made a point to be quiet... And still, I've always, always struggled to muster and maintain the self-discipline and determination it takes to keep having such a daily practice for the long haul.

Has anyone here ever been to a 10-day Silent Meditation Retreat? It's not an insignificant commitment to make. When you get there, you hand over your car keys and your cellphone, as well as your I-pad or any other devices you have that could connect (or distract you) with the outside world. In this Vipassana course, you agree to not exercise, though walking outside on breaks is allowed, and to not write or journal or read anything.

You commit to showing up for the prescribed meditation periods that begin at 4:30am in the Great Hall and conclude each day at 9pm. (Thank goodness I had a single room!)

On the first evening you're there, you vow to keep Noble Silence for ten days, agreeing only to speak with the assistant teachers or the retreat managers if you need particular support or instructions or to address certain things. You are asked (and reminded again and again) to bring **STRONG DETERMINATION** to your meditation practice; however hard it is to sit there, to keep at it; to let go of all other contemplative practices you may know, and to focus on engaging the technique and instruction provided there—to sit in silence, to pay attention to your breath, to notice the sensations in your body, and, as the days go on, to become more practiced at not responding to those sensations, to instead observe them with more calm and equanimity within you, as they rise and fall away.

There's a great deal I could say about my 10-day Vipassana meditation experience. It was horrible, and at times, I hated it. I considered leaving early but my pride wouldn't let me. There were a few occasions I cried out of frustration and agitation—it's humbling to have to see what a crazy person I can become when dealing with the noises other people around me make in the meditation hall.

All of this is true, and...and, I am so, so glad and deeply grateful that I went—that I had this brutal and beautifully supported, instructive experience exactly one month before I returned back to this church community from my sabbatical.

I can't help but to think of Judy Wall Clement's words about the power of observing a 'pause'...the value of making space in our lives, however hard it may be to do, to more consciously experience a pause "between notes and pages, words and breaths, between thought and voice, between action and reaction;" how she knows [and I know, too] that in that momentary stillness we can choose to enter into, in that space between before and after, there is possibility; a myriad of paths that can be taken, [and] a dozen different versions of ourselves that we can bring to life."

Be still. Listen. What do you hear?, we asked our children. Center yourself, and dare to be quiet and silent. Pay attention to the world around you and notice what's going on inside you and you will become more self-aware, more comfortable with and less reactive toward your own thoughts and feelings; more able to live out of a grounded, and clearer seeing place within you...the part of you where your soul resides...

They are worthy instructions, are they not? To make and have a daily practice and appointment with stillness and silence? One that allows you, that challenges and helps you “to create a clearing in the dense forest of your life; [to do that so you might] wait there, patiently, until the song that is your life falls into your own cupped hands and you recognize and greet it.”

I love and honor these images and truths, the wisdom present in them, AND, I can't continue to preach this sermon without now also saying that it's been a challenge (and a struggle) for me to honor and keep my commitment to having the daily spiritual practice I know I need since returning from sabbatical, half an hour in the morning, and half an hour each evening, of sitting in silence, in my chair, in my office at home.

It's harder, of course, to make and keep and prioritize the time it takes to do this, to have a daily meditation practice, in the midst of my busy, everyday life, and yet I know it's a right and worthy discipline to keep struggling with establishing in my life.

Some of my inner work now as your minister is to more fully operationalizing the insights and self-awarenesses I arrived at while away: the knowing, like each of you, need to make space and time alone to be able to think, create and recharge. I need to be active in my body in order to be strong and feel nourished by my connection to the earth. And I need to be silent, to be still, regardless of how hard and humbling this is to do. I need to do this so I can get better at being and remaining present to what is— when it's hard and uncomfortable especially; more practiced at breathing through it all—the thoughts, feelings, sensations— that there can be more space inside me—in my heart, mind and soul— to be and feel more compassion, to experience (more of the time) a rooted and grounding sense of balance and equanimity from which I can more readily and intentionally choose how I will inhabit and live my life in each day.

The truth, of course, is that there are no magic fixes, no easy ways to grow and change and do our work to become better, more generous and loving people. There's nothing we can do that will immediately “make better,” once and for all, all of our anxieties, all of our habitual worries, our anger and sharp, fearful reactions, but here, in this faith

community, we remember that there is the possibility of spiritual growth and personal transformation that can and does happen (over time) when we bring ourselves to such worthy and challenging work.

How will you do it, I wonder? Where will you practice pausing in your day, and making and claiming space for silence, for listening within and without, for consciously taking a breath, or humbly counting to ten before you open your mouth and say any mean or careless thing you were just about to say?

In her ‘Happy New Year’ email to colleagues, UU minister Meg Riley of Minnesota said that this year, she’s re-starting her spiritual practice of stepping outside her front door every day, no matter what the weather, and grounding herself on her own two feet and declaring out loud: “This is the day I have been given. I will choose to show up for it!” She’s doing this, she said, to remind herself that she’s able (just like we’re each able) to make daily choices about claiming her life. Doing that, she writes, helps to shift everything she does just a wee bit more in the direction of all that she hopes is possible.

Possibility, after all, requires openness, showing up, a willingness to try something new, knowing we will struggle and fail along the way. To inhabit “the space between before and after,” is to live more consciously in the here and now of our lives, with awareness in this present moment which is the one we are lucky enough to have.

Perhaps you’ll make a point to PAUSE before you get up and out of bed in the morning and do as a friend of mine does: she starts her day by reciting aloud, to herself, her most beloved Mary Oliver poem, this one she now knows by heart—as an anchor that helps steady and shape her entry into each day:

Hello, sun in my face.
Hello, you who made this morning
and spread it over the fields
and into the faces of the tulips...
and into the windows, of, even, the
miserable and the crotchety—

Best Preacher that ever was,
dear star that just happens
to be where you are in the universe,
to keep us from ever-darkness,
to ease us with warm touching,
to hold us in the great hands of light—
good morning, good morning, good morning.

Watch now how I start the day
in happiness, in kindness.

Maybe before you eat a meal at your table, you'll make a point to pause and be silent a while, to take the hands of the ones gathered there with you. and when you're moved to do so, you might say a word—connect—or speak aloud the truth that's on your heart: I am here and so grateful. I am nourished by this food and your love. Maybe, you, too, will set your alarm clock a little earlier than absolutely necessary each day, and you'll get up and bring yourself—however sleepy or grouchy or disinterested you are—to the chair you set up in your room, and you'll click on the timer on your phone or you'll glance at the clock, then you'll close your eyes for fifteen, or twenty or thirty minutes? Maybe the whole hour you're hoping to build back up to? And you'll breath normally; focus your mind on your breath, and come back to your breath when your mind wanders.

I make no promises that this will be fun—it isn't much fun in my life, but I can say that showing up to do it makes a difference. Sitting in silence does help loosen the tight, too often anxious grip I otherwise try to hold on life; sitting in silence is help me, to see and feel that there are broader perspectives to the everyday challenges and hardships we will all, at some point or other, have to face. Whatever sensations we experience, we can come to believe, through the truth of our own lived experience, that they will rise and fall away if we can but manage to be and stay present to what is. Although we have very little control over what happens in life, we can do more to shape how I respond, how experiences impact, for better or worse our heart and mind; how we, too, can be learn to be more like the dog in the reading on Spiritual Fitness, the one who can start the day without caffeine, and resist complaining and boring people with his troubles; and take criticism and blame without resentment...

Driving home from the Vipassana Meditation Retreat on Sunday, September 16th, my sister called and wanted to know how it went? I couldn't really talk in that moment or answer her right away—I was choked up and struggling to speak. "It was horrible," I said, laughing and crying and breathing, my nose dripping onto the phone as I said these uneloquent, surprising things: "It was horrible, and perfect and unbelievable... And I'm just so grateful for all the time I've had on sabbatical with you, with mom, with our family, with myself. I think I know myself a little better now.

Coming out of that horrible, perfect experience, I see more clearly that something significant shifted and opened up in me; something let go and revealed to me more fully the tender, grateful heart I'm so glad to know I have nestle into the center of my being; the part of me that wants to be stronger and more awake, more of the time.

In the days and weeks and new year ahead, as we each reflect on what's possible in our lives, I hope you, too, carve out the space and time you need to more fully and generously inhabit your days. May you, too, know it's possible to live with more calm and equanimity, with a clearer and focused mind, with a heart and mind that can grow stronger and better about staying open and present, not fleeing or freezing up when things are hard or uncomfortable. It is an honor and a great gift in my life to walk this way of ministry with you.

Amen and blessed be.