

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“Learning as a Spiritual Practice”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore June 7, 2009

Sermon

Unitarian Universalists are deeply committed to learning. We love to read. Loving books is an almost universal UU characteristic. Just about every UU congregation has at least one book club or book discussion group. We have the Walker Book Club that meets monthly. My wife Philomena organizes the Spirituality Book Group. We'll have an Adult Education Class centered around a book or an author as I've done with Ken Wilber and Integral Philosophy.

And when we're not reading, we prefer educational entertainment. I'm sure many of us like watching PBS because the shows often are instructive. Historical shows like Ken Burns series on the Civil War, the Shakers and the Lewis & Clark Expedition or biographies of Mark Twain or famous Unitarian Frank Lloyd Wright. Many of us enjoy keeping up with the latest scientific developments on shows like Nature and NOVA. We track and like to discuss discoveries in the fields of biology, medicine, psychology, cosmology and neurobiology just to name a few. We thirst to know and understand the world around us.

Today, I'd like to talk about a specific type of learning that has a focused purpose: personal and spiritual growth. This has a different purpose than knowing and understanding the larger world around us. The purpose of personal and spiritual growth is to know and understand the interior world within us.

This kind of learning is an invitation to three kinds of expansion. The foundation of any personal or spiritual growth is expanding one's sensitivity. We are constantly affected inwardly by what is happening around us. A vague discomfort seeing a frown on another's face, a tight muscle in the shoulder, a stray feeling of bloating in the abdomen, a quiet sense of peace after a pleasant telephone conversation, these experiences often operate below our level of conscious awareness. Through various practices such as mindfulness meditation, one can increase one's capacity to notice and consequently increase one's sense of connectivity.

The second expansion that can grow in parallel with sensitivity is growing the skillful ability to respond to what is noticed. Dealing with a rude clerk in a store can churn up all kinds of emotions, many of them unskillful and harmful if acted upon. Awareness of exactly what is happening inside and knowing what actions are helpful and which are harmful can give us the insight to skillfully deal with a situation.

Which leads to the third expansion, the expansion of our response-ability. Expanding one's inner awareness in parallel with developing one's capacity for skillful response, emboldens us to take positive, constructive action for the good of the whole. When we encounter racism or sexism, we'll recognize it for what it is, have the skillful words and actions in our mind, and act to bring healing rather than shame and justice rather than revenge.

Thus, the goal of inwardly directed learning is to expand one's ability to be of service to life.

This kind of learning is quite different from the traditional approach. The traditional approach sees learning as an activity for children to form them into productive members of society. What is lacking in them is something called “maturity.” Children are seen as having

a deficit in maturity that must be filled through education. Once they graduate from formal schooling their learning is complete.

Philosopher of Education, John Dewey, didn't believe in the concept of maturity. He saw infants as richly endowed with the capacity to shape and control their environment even though they appear helpless. From the beginning of life till the end, Dewey perceived growth as a lifelong endeavor with no endpoint.

Not that growth MUST continue throughout our lifetime. Many of us are ready to stop growing when our body reaches a stable size in our twenties. Dewey asked the question, what drives growth? What motivates people to grow and change? I found his answer extremely interesting. Dewey hypothesized the two key factors in growth are dependency and plasticity.

Infants are very dependent and they don't like it. They strive intently to master speech so they can ask for what they want. They can't wait to get up on their feet so they can go where they want. I remember my intense desire to learn to ride a bike, develop my strength, learn to drive, master computer programming and initiate intimate relationships. I disliked being dependent and wanted to be in control of my own life as soon as possible. Striving for independence is a powerful human motivator for growth.

Dewey understood plasticity as our capacity to develop skills (the word he used was habits) through experience. Our neural networks in our brains literally are shaped and reshaped by what we practice over and over again. Mastering skills allow us to change the world around us rather than be forced to submit and accommodate to our environment. And when our environment changes, our plasticity shapes our ability to learn from experience, and grow and respond.

What profoundly interferes with our growth is a high level of comfort and independence. As I've mentioned, we are deeply driven to avoid dependence and many of us here today are quite skilled people who have developed a significant level of independence. We have set up our lives very responsibly to care for our families and partners. And once we get there, we want to stay there. We want to build a wall around our compound and put sentinels at the doors for protection. Our plasticity can rigidify over the years. We resist encountering our limitations and dependencies. They make us uncomfortable. Better to avoid them if we can.

Hungarian born psychiatrist and emeritus professor Thomas Stephen Szasz (pronounced Sass) wrote:

Every act of conscious learning requires the willingness to suffer an injury to one's self-esteem. That is why young children, before they are aware of their own self-importance, learn so easily; and why older persons, especially if vain or important, cannot learn at all.

If you find yourself in the position of being independent and pretty comfortable with what you know and where you are in your life and you're intrigued by the possibility of doing some inner learning but not yet sure how to get started or stimulate the work you're already doing, here are a few suggestions.

One way to stimulate your inner growth and development is to increase your dependence. I met our refugee family from Iraq at the airport on Monday. They hardly speak English and have been forced by their circumstances to become dependent on our congregation and social

services. I was impressed by their eagerness to learn English and get established here. Their dependence is strongly motivating their desire to learn.

Another way to strip away the illusion of independence is through beginning or developing a regular spiritual practice. Come join me Sunday mornings at 9:00am for meditation. Try one of the many forms of physical discipline like Yoga, Pilates, running, swimming that can become a spiritual practice. A spiritual practice expands one's inner and outer sensitivity and skills in a way that results in growth and development.

One critical component of spiritual practice that many Unitarian Universalists forget (or ignore) is the need for a disciplined relationship to stimulate and encourage our growth and development. The Hindu has a guru, the Zen Buddhist has a sensei or teacher, the Jew has a rabbi, the Catholic has a priest, the athlete has a trainer, the musician has an instructor. Whether you choose to use me to fill that role, or a therapist, or a counselor, or a coach, or a mentor, we all need someone to check in with to guide and advise us, to point out our patterns of avoidance and resistance and to recognize our growth and development. If we want to commit ourselves to lifelong growth and development, we need someone to hold us accountable to our commitment.

The last way I'll mention to stimulate our growth and development is to spend time with children. The freshness and enthusiasm of their passion for learning is infectious. Leah Purcell wrote in her column this month, "Children are curious, free-spirited, and spontaneous. They are naturally empathetic and are comfortable with silence. Who wouldn't want more of that?" If you've lost your connection to experiencing life through their eyes, teaching religious education classes will reawaken it.

In a child's sense of awe and wonder at a world they are just now discovering, we can find again access to the growth and development that will strengthen the meaning and purpose in our lives. I close with an excerpt from the essay, Education, by Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoted by John Dewey as a summary of his educational philosophy:

Respect the child. Be not too much his parent. Trespass not on his solitude. But I hear the outcry which replies to this suggestion: Would you verily throw up the reins of public and private discipline; would you leave the young child to the mad career of his own passions and whimsies, and call this anarchy a respect for the child's nature? I answer, Respect the child, respect him to the end, but also respect yourself ... keep his nature and arm it with knowledge in every direction in which it points.

Let learning how to kindle our own and each other's inner light be the holy work of this congregation.

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