

Spiritual Practices
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There's an old Hasidic tale about a village Rabbi who was known to pray for an hour every single morning. Once he was asked, "But, Rabbi, what about times when there's trouble in the village, and you're too busy, what then? Surely you cut back to a half hour, or even fifteen minutes?" "Oh, no," said the Rabbi, "when I'm really busy, I pray for TWO hours every day."

If you're looking around at the state of the world, or at the levels of anxiety and stress many of us are carrying these days, you might think we're probably in a two-hour prayer situation.

I won't spend our time this morning trying to convince you of the value of spiritual practices. Most of us have read studies, articles or books that tell us consistently that regular practices like mindfulness meditation, yoga, or contemplative prayer have measurable benefits in our lives, from reducing our levels of stress chemicals to easing our sense of loneliness, helplessness, and despair in difficult times. Grounding ourselves regularly in our most profoundly held values sustains and strengthens us for the rigors of living, and helps us to guide our choices and actions in response to what the world brings us.

Most of my conversations with people about whether they have a spiritual practice aren't about whether it's worthwhile. Most people say something along the lines of: "I know I should probably do meditation or something, but I've just never been able to manage it. I don't have time for that kind of thing," they'll say a little wistfully. Or, "I can't sit still for five minutes, let alone thirty." Or, "I just can't stay focused. I get too distracted, my mind wanders, the kids are too noisy or too needy, I like being busy, I can't get past all the religious language . . ." There are any number of reasons why a regular spiritual practice seems out of reach for a lot of us. Yet we know that it has power to enrich our experience of our own life. It can be frustrating.

In a collection of essays edited by Scott Alexander called *Everyday Spiritual Practices*, Kathleen McTigue, who is now the leader of the Unitarian Universalist College of Social Justice, offers my absolute favorite description of this dilemma. She says, "I recently learned that a colleague of mine begins every day with up to an hour of meditation and yoga. A newspaper article about her began with a photo of her lying on a mat in a yoga position, the clean lines of her hardwood floor stretching out on either side and giving a sense of visual calmness and order along with the calmness and order implied by her discipline. This is not a snapshot of my life," McTigue goes on.

"In fact the longer I looked at the picture and tried to project myself into it, the more amusing it started to look to me. Because if the photo had been of me, I would have been surrounded by a monstrous clutter of toys, overdue library books, unwashed laundry, children's crayons and

drawings, and dirty dishes. There would have to be at least one child crying in the background or yelling at a sibling, and a cat nudging my face to be fed. And I, of course, would not be lying there in meditation, profound or otherwise, but would be snoring.”

Scott Alexander’s collection offers an antidote to the idea that a spiritual discipline always means something that’s evolved over hundreds or thousands of years as a formal part of some religious tradition, practiced with a consistent daily rigor over years in order to realize its full benefits. Instead, he says, a spiritual practice is “any activity or attitude in which you can regularly and intentionally engage, and which significantly deepens the quality of your relationship with the miracle of life both within and beyond you.” All it takes, for Alexander, to make the difference between a spiritual *hobby* that we dabble in and a spiritual *practice* are *intentionality, regularity, and depth.*

Some of the writers in the collection do have traditional, rigorous spiritual disciplines that demand study and long-term practice, like silent contemplative prayer, tai chi, sitting *zazen* meditation, and yoga. But others are far more eclectic and less structured. For Kathleen McTigue, the solution to the hunger for spiritual depth and connection in the midst of a frenetic time of life was a practice she calls “listening to our lives.” Each evening, “in the brief, peaceful moments between turning out the light and falling asleep,” she says, “I think back on the events of the day and ask the question, ‘Where was God in this day?’ It’s a question that can be asked in a dozen different theological voices, and if God language fails to resonate, then we might ask merely, ‘Where today did I really hear the language of my life?’” By asking this question daily over an extended period of time, McTigue says, she learned to listen more deeply to “the life I really lead, to avoid the trap of longing for some illusory growth that might come in the contemplative life I have not chosen.”

What McTigue and several of the other contributors to *Everyday Spiritual Practice* invite us to do is to reframe our idea of what a spiritual practice might look like, grounding it not in what we *think* such a practice *ought* to be, but in the real life that we live every day.

McTigue tells a story from the Christian monastic tradition about a saintly monk named Brother Bruno, who is at prayer one night when the loud croaking of a bullfrog interrupts his concentration. He tries to ignore it, but that just makes things worse, and finally he sticks his head out the window and shouts, “Quiet! I’m at my prayers!” Silence falls, but as he tries to settle back down he’s now even more disturbed by the idea that God must find the sound of the frogs and other creatures pleasing, maybe even more pleasing than Brother Bruno’s prayers. Who is he to demand that it stop? Finally he goes to the window again and says, “Please sing!” and as the living fabric of sounds reweaves itself, he is astonished by how beautiful it is to him. Now he really understands what prayer means, and his own prayer is far more harmonious.

Brother Bruno has experienced what another writer in the collection, Edwin Lynn, calls a “sacred moment”—a moment when you suddenly become aware that the everyday, ordinary reality you’re seeing, hearing, or experiencing is more than the sum of its visible parts, when you

suddenly realize that this moment you're experiencing is holy, because it's a moment of connection with the deep source of all meaning. Finding such moments, actively looking for them each day, is Lynn's spiritual practice. It's one of mine, too; it's a good practice for someone like me who's rather extraverted and attuned to the sensory experiences of any given moment.

One of my own daily sacred moments is when I reach the top of the Baum Bridge between Roanoke Island and the beach every day (more than once, most days). I glimpse the view across the Sound to the marshes, the Oregon Inlet Bridge, the Bodie Island Light and a glimmer of ocean. It's electric for me; it touches my soul every single time in all its countless, constantly changing details, like Nellie's experience of the ocean. It reminds me daily of the vastness of life that flows through me.

I had a more rare experience of that kind of sacred moment a few weeks ago when we had the lunar eclipse they called the "blood moon." I had read earlier that day that if you set a camera on the moon aimed back at the Earth, what you would see in that moment would be the Earth entirely surrounded by a brilliant red halo—the sum of all the sunrises and sunsets happening on Earth right then. That's the reason for the red color of the moon at the height of the eclipse. Watching it that night, I was intensely aware that I was looking out at the reflection of the sun rising or setting all around the Earth behind me. Suddenly, just for a moment, I knew that I was the Earth, seeing myself in the mirror of the moon.

To make an intentional practice of moments like that is to slowly build a sense of ourselves as deeply rooted in the timeless, living immensity of the planet, the Universe, the all-encompassing reality in which we all live and move and have our being.

If you're moved by words as much as by mysterious moments of feeling transcendent, reading might be a daily spiritual discipline for you. Susan Ritchie and Laurel Hallman each offer a reading practice. Hallman's involves committing poems to memory one at a time over an extended period, and reflecting deeply for a few minutes each day on what any of the poets in your gathered company might have to offer for whatever is happening in your life at the time. Ritchie describes a deep reading of one short passage of scripture, poetry, or inspired prose each day, allowing a single word or phrase from the reading to play over and over again in your mind, offering up hints of meaning as you hold your life's moments in the light of whatever words called your attention. My own daily practice of reading a poem, a prayer, or a meditative reflection every morning is similar to Ritchie's—you've seen some of the fruits of my practice in the "quotes of the week" I'm moved to share with you in the email announcements each week.

There are more, many more everyday practices that can serve to significantly deepen the quality of our relationship with the miracle of life both within and beyond ourselves, in Scott Alexander's words—as many as there are people to imagine what practice might arise in the context of their own lives. Just in his collection alone, there are practices around food, such as artful cooking, intentionally making food to share, or deliberately savoring one meal every day;

practices around relationships with partners, children, and others; embodied practices like walking, exercise, and martial arts.

There are lifestyle practices like voluntary simplicity, purposeful financial giving, or keeping a Sabbath day every week free from work, chores, and shopping; creative practices like art, quilting, gardening, and writing poetry; and practices around social justice that allow our work of service, advocacy, or activism to arise from our sense of the Sacred and to have a transforming effect on our lives.

There is, for me, a distinctively Unitarian Universalist quality to this eclectic gathering of simple and complex, traditional and off-beat personal spiritual disciplines. It's closely in keeping with our way of doing theology: an infinity of paths, as many as there are human beings, but all intended to tap into the One deep, abiding current of life and connection that breathes through everything that exists. Many windows, one light, as Forrest Church says.

What about you; what might YOUR everyday spiritual practice be? Do you maintain one of the ancient classic disciplines in your own life? Do you have something that you do regularly and intentionally that deepens YOUR sense of connection with the life that moves within, among, and beyond us all? Do you have a habit, a custom, a favorite activity that could develop into a spiritual practice if you gave it the dignity and attention it deserves—the dignity and attention that *you* deserve? If you don't, I invite you to take to heart the advice of Pema Chodron, and offer yourself a little compassion, not judgment—and then to consider the possibility of trying something on.

If you'd like to talk more about this, I'll stay after the service for a while today; it would be good to hear if you've been thinking of something like an everyday spiritual practice in your own life. If you'd like to go deeper together, I'll be hosting a morning for spiritual conversation and shared practice in March, as it says in your Order of Service.

Whatever your own practice, may it ground and sustain you through the turbulent times we're living in; may it anchor your spirit in the deep wellspring of compassion and creative power that is the home of our soul.

So may it be.