



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Growing in Spirit”

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Centering Thoughts

*The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young,
but to stir up their own.* Rev. William Ellery Channing

The spiritual life does not remove us from the world, but leads us deeper into it.
Henri J. M. Nouwen

*Our [UU] religious education nurtures both roots and wings; the roots of community and
shared values, and the wings of the free mind and creative spirit.* Rev. Patricia Hoerl

*The great awareness comes slowly, piece by piece. The path of spiritual growth
is a path of lifelong learning.* M. Scott Peck

Sermon

I love the first quote in the order of service from the Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing about stirring up young minds. This may be more appropriate for a *New Yorker* magazine illustration, but an image comes to *my* mind of our heads opened up by a hinge with someone stirring what lies within using a giant spoon. If you haven't already, would you please open up your heads for a little stirring this morning? Thank you!

Channing expressed this idea in an 1837 lecture he delivered in London titled, “The Sunday School.” In the following excerpt / please note Channing refers to all students by male pronouns. As I read it, I invite you to hear it more inclusively.

The great end is to awaken the soul of the pupil, to bring his understanding, conscience and heart into earnest, vigorous action on religious and moral truth, to excite and cherish in him Spiritual Life. . . . The great end in religious instruction is, not to stamp *our* minds irresistibly on the young, but to stir up their own; not to make them see with our eyes, but to look enquiringly and steadily with their own; not to give them a definite amount of knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of truth; not to form an outward regularity, but to

touch inward springs; not to burden the memory, but to quicken and strengthen the power of thought; not to bind them by ineradicable prejudices to our particular sect or peculiar notions, but to prepare them for impartial, conscientious judging of whatever subjects may ... be offered to their decision; not to impose religion upon them in the form of arbitrary rules, which rest on no foundation but our own word and will, but to awaken the conscience, the moral discernment, so that they may discern and approve for themselves what is everlastingly right and good... [Also see *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnal, #652]

Almost two hundred years later we're still trying to stir up minds and awaken souls. We still hope to inspire a love of truth and to strengthen an individual's power of thought "so that they may discern and approve *for themselves* what is everlastingly right and good." Our Unitarian Universalist 4th Principle, found on the back of your order of service, echoes this. It affirms a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

I believe the search for truth and meaning lies at the heart of what it means to grow spiritually. The search for truth and meaning forms the path we walk upon each day. The search for truth and meaning has no proscribed destination because no creed or doctrine uniformly directs Unitarian Universalists. The search for truth and meaning must be responsible, indicating an ethical standard bounded by the other six Principles, as well as personal accountability for our chosen beliefs and actions. The search for truth and meaning is an active journey of discovery that allows us to examine the world and our place in it. The search does not occur without our active attention.

Our physical bodies change and grow over the years. But we change in less visible ways, too. When we graduate, marry, divorce, start a new job, face a challenging medical diagnosis, take steps to recover from addiction, and other, similar activities, we know we're changing.

But in the course of our daily lives when we encounter new ideas, new places, and new people, we don't always notice we may be changing some part of ourselves. But who we are inside – our psychological, emotional, ethical, and spiritual nature – changes as a result of all that we encounter on our life journeys. That's spiritual growth.

I underwent huge changes when I attended seminary. That environment fostered deep reflection and reconsideration of my beliefs. Fellow students and I challenged each other to make connections between our beliefs and our actions. Like a child's pencil game, I connected dots between my view that the cosmos exists due to a happy set of unguided chemical and physical reactions, to my belief that my life is also the result of a happy set of circumstances, and that makes me no better than anyone else, therefore I shouldn't be any more privileged than anyone else. That connected series of dots makes me work for equality and justice in the larger world.

My spiritual growth during seminary was intentional and all-consuming. In our own way, we try to create similar opportunities here with our different activities.

The word spirit comes from the Latin *spiritus*, for respiration, inspiration, and breath. Your spirit gives you life. When I refer to our spirit, I mean all those intangible pieces of personality,

attitude, and beliefs which together define each of us. If I ask, “How is it with your spirit,” I’m asking how it is with your life, your sense of happiness or purposefulness.

Like our 4th Principle, Channing wants to awaken our spiritual lives by demanding we seek truth and meaning.

I want to awaken your spiritual lives, too. And I think we seek truth and meaning and grow spiritually by paying attention to our lives.

If we don’t take time to reflect on our lives, on how we feel and react to what happens in our lives, I believe we become sleepwalkers. It is no coincidence that many religions name the finding of truth as an awakening or enlightenment, even seeing the light. You don’t see the light if you’re asleep.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the engaged Buddhist, speaks of mindfulness for this conscious effort to be aware of our lives. M. Scott Peck calls it attentiveness. Parker Palmer advises we listen to our lives. All these expressions indicate activity, not passivity. Stirring our minds is an intentional action.

I wonder sometimes if you think sitting in a pew on Sunday allows you to be a passive recipient of the day’s message, and that as soon as you walk out the door you’ll forget it entirely. It’s not because of pride that I want you to remember and engage with what’s been offered. I want to stimulate your thinking about your life. What happens on Sunday morning is called a liturgy because it means the *work of the people*. Sunday may be a day of rest, but not from spiritual work.

A stirred mind can make meaning out of what it encounters. Your stirred mind may settle on a truth uniquely your own. I don’t expect or particularly want my truths to be your truths. When I say, for example, I don’t believe in a supernatural divine force at work in the world, I hope you’ll reflect on my truth, let it rattle around in your open mind for a bit, then either you keep it, reject it, continue to ponder on it, or take some piece of it for your own truth. And I expect to do the same with the truths you share with me.

I hope in some small way at least that you feel inspired here, that we breathe life into your journey so that you become more mindful and reflective. For if you and I are not alert, we might miss moments of grace, evidence of the divine, a gift of beauty, a connection with another, or other spirit-filled moments. But don’t limit yourself to only pausing and reflecting here. If you feel irritated because someone cut ahead of you in the grocery line, for example, reflect on what might have caused your irritation.

Is it that you’re in a hurry and this person slows you down? Then ask why you’re in a hurry. Are you trying to do too much? Could you have planned better so that you weren’t in a hurry and could feel more generous to someone else? Or could the irritation be caused by a sense of fairness that the line-cutter has violated? Or that you’ve followed the rules and others flaunt them? What does that tell you about the meaning of chaos and order in your life? Must others abide by your rules of courtesy and fairness? Can you let go of your anger, knowing you won’t be the cause of such discourtesy—or because you might need to cut in line yourself some day. Even

something as little as this can be a moment for reflection that might help you lead a better, less stress-filled life.

It may take practice to become more aware. If you feel bombarded by stimuli, you may shut down your awareness as a method of self-preservation. But shutting down isn't self-preservation, it's dying to all that life offers. Fortunately, it's not all or nothing.

Choose one thing to focus on. For example, when you're in a conversation with someone, if you focus on what that person is saying you'll quiet the monkey-mind, all that stuff you can't sort out. Focusing this way could teach you how to manage multiple demands on your attention.

To help you seek truth and meaning for your lives, we're using the theme "Stepping Forward Together" to help us focus on our spiritual journeys. We know where we've come from, what steps we've taken to reach this moment. But an infinite number of pathways lie before us. Each step forward takes us into a mystery that only becomes clear in hindsight.

Our Director of Religious Education, Morgan Watson, begins her sabbatical tomorrow. Like the Sabbath which falls on the seventh day, a sabbatical is an extended Sabbath rest she'll take in her seventh year of service to UUFA. Next year I'll take a sabbatical in my seventh year. These breaks from life's usual routines allow for a time of rest and renewal of one's spirit. In Jewish or Christian contexts, on the Sabbath day one reconnects to God and gives thanks for God's blessings. Whether Morgan reconnects with the divine or not, she'll say when she returns. But I know she'll encounter new ideas, new insights, and new wisdom on her journey and she will grow spiritually. We'll journey along our own spiritual paths during her absence and we'll share reports when she returns in January.

In closing, let me share another quote, this from Brian Tracy, a contemporary self-development guru. He says, "Develop an attitude of gratitude, and give thanks for everything that happens to you, knowing that every step forward is a step toward achieving something bigger and better than your current situation." This is our hope. No matter where we are on our spiritual journeys, even if the path seems bumpy and rough, if we are together on the journey, we will get there better than if we were alone.

Let us step forward together into the mystery of our lives and grow our spirits this year.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Describe a time when you received new wisdom or insight from a personal experience.
2. What have been other significant milestones in your spiritual journey or growth?
3. What personal life lesson most guides your moral or ethical behavior? Please share.
4. In what way may you have been a guide or teacher for another person's spiritual, religious, ethical, or emotional growth? What did that experience teach *you*?