

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Use Your Inside Voice

Reverend Victoria Safford

Sunday 2 December 2018

WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
328 MAPLE STREET MAHTOMEDI, MINNESOTA 55115
651.426.2369 vsafford@wbuuc.org

The first reading is from an email sent by someone who visited several UU congregations.

This wider question about “spirituality” in Unitarian Universalism tugs at me. I admire everything about the social ethics of UU’s. They seem to be on the side of everything I want to endorse; their tolerance makes me stretch and open; their gifts of self and service are almost unimaginably inclusive. Still, when I enter most UU churches I am not immediately mindful of spiritual space, nor of the silence necessary to hear the still, small voice. I am in the presence of good company, surely, of loving people greeting one another. But such an encounter could, in my experience, also conceivably occur at a concert, or a club, or a lecture, or a caucus of concerned citizens for any worthy cause.

I realize I was raised on Calvinist apocalypse. While doctrinally I could never again be comfortable there, I miss some of that spiritual intensity. I would like to come into a church to sit for a moment in silence, or to meditate on a passage printed in the bulletin, or to listen to music, or even softly sing. I would like to begin by not greeting my neighbors. By greeting something inside.

from Pico Iyer

Perhaps we wouldn’t need chapels or churches if our lives were already clear and calm. Buddha and Jesus and the saints never need to go to church; they carry one inside themselves. Chapels and churches are emergency rooms for the soul. They are the one place we can reliably go to find out who we are and what we should be doing with our lives – usually by finding all that we aren’t, and all that is greater than us, to which we can only give ourselves up. A chapel is where we hear something and nothing, our own breath and everyone else’s; a silence that is not the absence of noise, but the presence of something deeper: the depth beneath our thoughts. Emerson, who was a renowned speaker and a minister, said famously, “I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching.”

from Aldous Huxley

We apprehend the holy in the alternate voids and fullness of a cathedral;
 in the space that separates the salient features of a picture;
 in the living geometry of a flower, a seashell, an animal;
 in the pause and intervals between the notes of music, in their differences of tones and sonority;
 and finally, on the plane of conduct:
 in the love and gentleness,
 the confidence and humility,
 which give beauty to the relationships between human beings.

Use Your Inside Voice

In that same congregation where that woman was who wrote to me about the quiet church and sacred space and how glad she was to find it, how rare it is to find it, in that same congregation was a man who'd been there many years, not a noisy person but one who was pretty loud in his dislike of silence in the Sunday service. "That's not what we pay you for," he told me when we introduced a time of meditation every week - the briefest eye-blink of silent meditation, just as we have here; it's like a splinter of a plank of driftwood we can cling to in the turbulent wild waters of our crazy days and busy weeks, the slenderest sliver of quiet. "We're not paying you to not talk," he said, "I can be quiet by myself at home, or by turning down the volume," which he frequently did, on his hearing aid, if he didn't like the sermon or the choir or the announcements. Deliberate silence, shared silence, seemed to him a waste of time, and he sat each Sunday in the front row with three watches on his arm, all set to the time zones where his grown children were living. As the meditation began, he'd hold up his arm, tapping his wrist, timing the wasted seconds when nothing was spoken or heard or accomplished or solved or sung. After one minute he'd raise an eyebrow; after two minutes, he'd clear his throat or blow his nose or cough or accidentally drop his hymnal.

Silence is not the only way in. Meditation, reflection, contemplative prayer – they're not the only doors to the interior life, not the only way in to the hidden chambers of the heart, or the deep recesses of the mind where memories are kept in scattered drifts like dust beneath a bed, and conclusions are drawn and creative ideas incubated in the dark subconscious. Silence is not the only way in to the deepest core of your being, which strangely is the part of you that connects most authentically to everyone else and everything else and even to the holy. (It's so strange that we have to go inward in order to reach out with integrity, and clarity and courage and love, to others.) Silence is not the only way in to the soul, but it is *one* way. We practice it here to rest and to remember that we are more than the sum of our opinions and fears, our intentions and words and ideas. We breathe in and remember, even fleetingly as the air fills the lung, that we're embodied, we exist as bodies, made of air and water, fully mortal, only briefly here. We breathe in and acknowledge the body; we breathe out and remember the spirit, the spark, the light, the ember of divinity present at our birth and burning still, inside. Breathing in, breathing out, we come back to what we are – or at the very least, we let go of the reins for a single, blessed moment, let go of the will and the worry and the wanting, the endlessly wanting. For just a second, we just breathe, and to do so together is a holy communion.

A woman wrote to me, I would like to come into the church to sit for a moment in silence, or to meditate on a passage printed in the bulletin, or to listen to music, or even softly sing. Loving and large-hearted as they are, I would like to begin by not greeting my neighbors. By greeting something inside. For me it is a rare and needful thing.

For her it was, but for my friend with the three watches it was excruciating. He had been a scientist, a pragmatist, a lover of scheduled efficiency, complex problems with straightforward solutions. He was for a time the church treasurer, and for another time the chair of the social action committee: busy and task-oriented. He was also a lover of music – and when the organ filled that church with sound, or a string quartet or a single oboe pierced us, or a Gospel choir stomped and shook the house, he was in a kind of reverie. He had his own ways in to the life of

the spirit, as each one of us does. He knew how to get there, how to go deep, how to shut his eyes and let the music, and sometimes the words of the readings, wash over his brow and smooth out the tension. He was a person not afraid to cry in church, to let tears fall, and I wondered sometimes about those grown children in their far-off time zones, and his wife who'd died, and how he lived alone. He knew how to get there, how to go deep, and how to come back to us restored.

There are, within this hour that we share, a thousand ways to pray.

In the other hours, every day, we are driven to distraction by ten thousand large and little things, demanding things and enticing things, seductive, mind-numbing, dutiful things, night terrors and regrets, fears both justified and foolish, work things, play things, electronic things. It takes such discipline to be still, to be quiet, to listen to no sound. To be non-productive, ineffective, inefficient, slothful, prayerful, reverent, ready... for nothing.

When the house is clean, we say. When my desk is clear, bills paid, account balanced, my inbox empty, the decomposing jack-o'-lantern scraped from its puddle on the porch, the Christmas presents purchased, wrapped, hidden or mailed - then I'll take a cleansing breath, because then I will deserve it. Once I stop eating, start exercising, stop working, start working, then I will listen to the winter night, light my candles, pray my prayers, take a conscious breath. I'll get around to giving thanks, making amends, forgiving someone's trespasses, maybe starting with my own. I'll listen to my inside voice, and find the words to tell my children, tell my parents, tell my friend, how I love them. When everything's in order, perfect order, when everything's under control, my own control, I'll be ready. I'll be fully present to my life. The only trouble is, I may be very old by then, or dead.

I want to invite you into silence once again, to take a breath and settle into your space here, to close your eyes or keep them open. From Howard Thurman, 20th century African American theologian, come these words of meditation:

How good it is to center down!

To sit quietly and see one's self pass by!

The streets of our minds seethe with endless traffic;

While something deep within hungers and thirsts for the still moment and the resting lull.

With full intensity we seek, ere the quiet passes, a fresh sense of order in our living;

A direction, a strong sure purpose that will structure our confusion and bring meaning in our chaos.

We look at ourselves in this waiting moment—the kinds of people we are.

The questions persist: what are we doing with our lives?—what are the motives that order our days?

What is the end of our doings?

Where are we trying to go?

Where do we put the emphasis and where are our values focused?

Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?

To what am I true?

*Floating up through all of the jangling echoes of our turbulence, there is a sound of another kind—
A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear...*

For just a few moments, I invite you to sit with Thurman's question:

where is your treasure, and what do you love most?
What does the stillness of your heart make clear?

I have an old December memory, many decades old, that comes to me at this time of year, especially if there's snow. It's like an old Christmas card or treasured ornament: you hold it in your hand and it works like a time machine, transporting you back to a universe so far from where you are right now, and yet so familiar you can feel the scratchy wool and smell the mothball mittens. In this memory, my father and I are all bundled up, and together, after supper, late at night (probably about 6:30), we're going for a walk outside, just the two of us, without my mother or my brothers. I am maybe five or six years old, and we are going to look at the holiday lights in our neighborhood. It's magical. Everything is silent because of the snow on the ground and the snow shawling down, and silent also because of my hat and earmuffs and scarf. There are no cars, so we walk down the middle of the street, a wide white corridor with no other footprints, and colored lights all the way down, on both sides. Every house was like a silent diorama, with a Christmas tree or menorah in the window, and people moving their living rooms or kitchens, playing the piano, watching TV, like life-size dolls in dollhouses. It was absolutely silent except for the scrunching of my jacket and snow-pants, which I only noticed when we stopped to eat snow or count the plastic reindeer on a rooftop. When we stopped, we stood in a frozen ocean of quiet. We went hand in hand, very tall and very small, not talking, for miles and miles, hours and hours, all the way around our block. (It probably took about half an hour.)

All these years later, all this life later, when I feel myself being swept into the vortex of holiday expectations, the stress and noise and jangling, cheesy music everywhere, and white-knuckle driving, and the requisite worry about money and family and losses and love, whether I look for it or not, this memory return to me, not just the snapshot image, but the visceral traces of wonder I felt as a child that night; the deepest dark, the coldest cold, the thickest snow, my father fully present (which at other times he really wasn't), the snug houses, the enchanted lights, and silence.

This is a memory of a very simple thing – a walk round the block after dinner. I don't really know if it happened just once or many times, but I do know that it set in me a longing in December that has nothing to do with holiday frenzy, nothing whatsoever to do with shopping or theology, and if I can remember to remember it, this memory, and dwell inside it, it centers me and anchors me, and reminds me that what I love at this time of year and what I need is a cold night, very dark, a little snow, and maybe someone to go walking with.

In the quiet, we remember what we are, which is not perfect, but wholly human (in both senses of the word, *wholly/holy*). The whole motion of Advent in the Christian calendar as half the world goes dark, is toward remembering and waiting, not for a single, exceptional, mythical child, but for the quiet conviction, the silent confession, that each life within all life is a gift. Each life, including your own. For that conviction to take root, to find words to give voice to that confession, you have to be willing to travel through darkness and silence. You have to be willing to wait.

Now is the time, there is no other time, for listening and breathing, to open your hands and let go of whatever it is that you're clenching too tightly. To let go, and let come, all that's beyond your control.

For a few moments again, we'll hold silence together. These words come from Theodore Roethke:

*It was beginning winter,
An in-between time,
The landscape still partly brown:
The bones of weeds kept swinging in the wind,
Above the blue snow.*

*It was beginning winter,
The light moved slowly over the frozen field,
Over the dry seed-crowns,
The beautiful surviving bones
Swinging in the wind.*

*Light traveled over the wide field;
Stayed.
The weeds stopped swinging.
The mind moved, not alone,
Through the clear air, in the silence.*

*Was it light?
Was it light within?
Was it light within light?
Stillness becoming alive,
Yet still?*

*A lively understandable spirit once entertained you.
It will come again. Be still. Wait.*

What are you waiting for in December?

*We apprehend the holy
 In the alternate voids and fullness of a cathedral;
 In the space that separates the salient features of a picture;
 In the living geometry of a flower, a sea shell, an animal;
 In the pause and intervals between the notes of music...
 And finally, on the plane of conduct,
 in the love and gentleness,
 the confidence and humility,
 Which give beauty to the relationships between human beings.*

Silence is a spiritual practice and an ethical decision.

We apprehend the holy in the spaces and the emptiness, the intervals, interstices, and pauses; it's also where our own most true and honest voice resounds, long before we're ready for prime time. We also know, and need constant reminding, that the only way to hear another person, the only way to behold and honor and acknowledge the worth and dignity and beauty of another person, the living holy scripture that is another human being, to bless their truth, their voice, their experience, is to shut up and let them talk, to make space to amplify all the stories, all the words, that are not our own.

Silence is a spiritual practice and an ethical requirement.

This weekend marks the 30th anniversary of World AIDS Day, and I've been wondering how our theme of silence this month clatters and clashes against the great rallying cry of the movement to make visible and loud the devastations of HIV, especially for communities which at times have had no voice at all. That cry, coined first by gay men in the 1980's and now resounding all over the world, is

SILENCE = DEATH.

Silence is a spiritual practice and an ethical requirement, but only when balanced by speaking. We go within (in meditation, contemplation, prayer) in order to come out, to bring to full volume, full courage, full love the power and integrity and force of our conviction. *Use your inside voice.* Find your truth in listening, to your heart, to your God, to the stories shared by other people, their testimony landing on your spirit like a holy offering. We share quiet here to let that all sink in, and then encourage one another to use the full strength of our inside voices to bless the world, heal it and transform it. Silence is a practice, not a permanent condition. There's a time for silence and for breaking silence; for waiting, and for sounding the alarm, for proclaiming why we can't wait, why we won't be silent anymore.

One of you sent an email this week, that was beautiful and poignant and I asked if I could share it. This email is the counter-weight, the counterbalance, to the one from the woman who loves quiet, because both are right and true:

Dear Victoria,

I am sorry to bother you with this, but I am not a social media person, so don't know how to find out this information for myself. With shock and horror I see our President has chosen to order US military forces to use tear gas on the people in the 'caravan' that are arriving on our borders. I cannot sit idly by and do nothing. Where can I join a protest march? Where and to whom do I voice my anger that this sort of illegal, unethical, and inhumane action is taking place?

I just keep thinking of the saying that goes something like-bad things happen, because good people do not stand up and object to them. That is how I feel now, and no response to this means we as people and Americans are ok with those actions, and nothing could be further from the truth. I guess it also brings to mind another saying this one by Dr. King, which goes "When you are right you cannot be too radical, when you are wrong, you cannot be too conservative." I have decided this is where I become a radical. In hope that enough of us will stand up and demand this be stopped,

Jim Hohn

That's the sound of the inside voice rising and building to become the song of the soul. That's what it means to give voice to the spirit. We go within in order to come out. Breathing in and breathing out, even for a fleeting moment in the middle of a Sunday, or any day, we listen for the breath of God, the breath of life and conscience. We restore the soul, and then repair the world.

We restore the soul, and then repair the world, over and over, again and again, around and around, without ceasing. We are here to pray without ceasing.

From Howard Thurman:

*What are we doing with our lives?
 What are the motives that order our days?
 What is the end of our doings?
 Where are we trying to go?
 Where do we put the emphasis and where are our values focused?
 Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?
 To what am I true?*

*Floating up through all of the jangling echoes of our turbulence,
 there is a sound of another kind—
 a deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear...*