

## MARCH 2020 Monthly Theme



# ATTENTION

*the practice of centering*

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*The intention of the themed year is to help Unitarian Universalists build a robust spiritual and ethical vocabulary. The themes are points of departure for religious liberals seeking to think, speak and act theologically, prophetically and prayerfully. The themes reclaim religious language, casting old terms in a new key to deepen spiritual grounding and sharpen moral reasoning. More at: [wbuuc.org/themes](http://wbuuc.org/themes) or sign up for a circle at [wbuuc.org/classes](http://wbuuc.org/classes).*

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## QUESTIONS

Consider how a practice of attention and centering might have relevance to the people you encounter throughout your day.

What would happen if more people noticed what it was that they were giving their attention to?

Does our attention create our reality?

How could you shape your attention?

Is focus our true source of power and creativity?

Do you have a centering practice? If so, what is it?

## QUOTATIONS

Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language...Go into yourself and see how deep the place is from which your life flows. -- Rainer Maria Rilke

All the way to heaven is heaven. --St Catherine of Siena, 1347-1380

A life without a quiet center becomes destructive. --Henry Nouwen

There is no why. We are. Life is beyond reason. --George Lucas

It's trial and error to find what works for you, but listen deeply to your body to see what gives you more vitality and makes you more connected to yourself and others, and feel free to adapt or change anything. I love music, so I listen to music while I'm more present with myself. Some would tell me that's not meditation, but they're wrong. Trust your body and psyche more and more and that's how you'll gain your power. It's a process of un-brainwashing yourself. --Helen Weng, neuroscientist and Mindfulness practitioner

This above all --to thine own self be true. And it must follow as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man. (Polonius, Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 3, William Shakespeare)

"Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt." – William Shakespeare

"Instructions for living a life.

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it."

— Mary Oliver, excerpted from "Sometimes"

"It is quite possible that an animal has spoken to me and that I didn't catch the remark because I wasn't paying attention."

— E.B. White, Charlotte's Web

"Always be on the lookout for the presence of wonder."

— E.B. White

"There's a center of quietness within which has to be known and held. If you lose that center, you are in tension and begin to fall apart." – Joseph Campbell

"Within you, there's a stillness and a sanctuary to which you can retreat at anytime and be yourself." – Hermann Hesse

## POETRY

### **Blackbirds**

by Julie Cadwallader-Staub

I am 52 years old, and have spent  
truly the better part  
of my life out-of-doors  
but yesterday I heard a new sound above my head  
a rustling, ruffling quietness in the spring air

and when I turned my face upward  
I saw a flock of blackbirds  
rounding a curve I didn't know was there  
and the sound was simply all those wings  
just feathers against air, against gravity  
and such a beautiful winning  
the whole flock taking a long, wide turn  
as if of one body and one mind.

How do they do that?

Oh if we lived only in human society  
with its cruelty and fear  
its apathy and exhaustion  
what a puny existence that would be

but instead we live and move and have our being  
here, in this curving and soaring world  
so that when, every now and then, mercy and tenderness triumph in our lives  
and when, even more rarely, we manage to unite and move together  
toward a common good,

we can think to ourselves:  
ah yes, this is how it's meant to be.

## **Found**

by Frederick Buechner

From *Lecture To A Book of The Month Club*

Maybe it's all utterly meaningless.  
Maybe it's all unutterably meaningful.  
If you want to know which,  
pay attention to  
what it means to be truly human  
in a world that half the time  
we're in love with  
and half the time  
scares the hell out of us...  
The unexpected sound of your name on somebody's lips.  
The good dream.  
The strange coincidence.  
The moment that brings tears to your eyes.  
The person who brings life to your life.  
Even the smallest events hold the greatest clues.

## **The Guest House**

by Rumi

Translation by Coleman Barks

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.  
A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.  
Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.  
The dark thought, the shame, the malice.  
Meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.  
Be grateful for whatever comes.  
Because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

## The Last Thing

by Ada Limón

From *The Carrying* (Milkweed Editions, 2018)

First there was the blue wing  
of a scraggly loud jay tucked  
into the shrubs. Then the bluish-  
black moth drunkenly tripping  
from blade to blade. Then  
the quiet that came roaring  
in like the R. J. Corman over  
Broadway near the RV shop.  
These are the last three things  
that happened. Not in the universe,  
but here, in the basin of my mind,  
where I'm always making a list  
for you, recording the day's minor  
urchins: silvery dust mote, pistachio  
shell, the dog eating a sugar  
snap pea. It's going to rain soon,  
close clouds bloated above us,  
the air like a net about to release  
all the caught fishes, a storm  
siren in the distance. I know  
you don't always understand,  
but let me point to the first  
wet drops landing on the stones,  
the noise like fingers drumming  
the skin. I can't help it. I will  
never get over making everything  
such a big deal.

**Apply Within**  
by Susie Kassem, poet/philosopher

You once told me  
You wanted to find  
Yourself in the world -  
And I told you to  
First apply within,  
To discover the world  
within you.

You once told me  
You wanted to save  
The world from all its wars -  
And I told you to  
First save yourself  
From the world,  
And all the wars  
You put yourself  
Through.

**A Center**  
by Ha Jin

You must hold your quiet center,  
where you do what only you can do.  
If others call you a maniac or a fool,  
just let them wag their tongues.  
If some praise your perseverance,  
don't feel too happy about it—  
only solitude is a lasting friend.

You must hold your distant center.  
Don't move even if earth and heaven quake.  
If others think you are insignificant,  
that's because you haven't held on long enough.  
As long as you stay put year after year,  
eventually you will find a world  
beginning to revolve around you.

## READINGS & EXCERPTS

Huxley's Reminder Birds

February 7, 2011

By Dr. Jonathan Rowson

In English, attention is something we are asked to pay, as if it were a scarce resource, like money. 'Pay attention!' is also a negative injunction, like paying your taxes. But attention is not really scarce, and when practised, rather than paid, it is positive and rewarding. As positive psychologist, Csikszentmihalyi once said: 'Where attention goes, energy flows.'

The challenge is that we live in an increasingly distracting world, and need a method to make our attention, the touchstone of consciousness, more readily available to us. The challenge is that the speed of the world and the nature of our technology makes it difficult to make best use of this precious resource, which is a core component of mindfulness. John Teasdale captured the centrality of this point as follows:

"Mindfulness is a habit, it's something the more one does, the more likely one is to be in that mode with less and less effort... it's a skill that can be learned. It's accessing something we already have. Mindfulness isn't difficult. What's difficult is to remember to be mindful"

So how can we remember?

Aldous Huxley is most famous for his dystopic novel *Brave New World*, but his final novel, *Island*, presents a more utopian vision of the future, in which attention plays a central role. Indeed, perhaps the defining quality of the island Huxley imagined was the mindfulness of its inhabitants.

The writer Borges once described Utopia as "a Greek word, which means 'there is no such place'" and Huxley's utopian vision honours that idea. The island, Pala, struggles to guard its beauty, simplicity and integrity from incursions from the world outside, and though I don't want to give away the ending, it was Utopian in the Borgesian sense.

My abiding memory of Pala is the role played by the mynahs on the island, birds that are known for their capacity to imitate. The following two extracts are separated by several pages, but serve to show the role of 'reminder birds' on the island, as seen through the eyes of a cynical journalist, Will Farnaby:

["Attention", a voice began to call, and it was as though an oboe had suddenly become articulate. "Attention", it repeated in the same high, nasal monotone. "Attention" (...)

"Is that your bird?" Will asked.

She shook her head.

Mynahs are like the electric light", she said. "They don't belong to anybody."

Why does he say those things?

“Because somebody taught him”, she answered patiently...

But why did they teach him those things? Why ‘Attention’? Why ‘Here and now’?

“Well ...” She searched for the right words in which to explain the self-evident to this strange imbecile. “That’s what you always forget, isn’t it? I mean, you forget to pay attention to what’s happening. And that’s the same as not being here and now.”

“And the mynahs fly about reminding you—is that it?”

She nodded. That, of course, was it. There was a silence.]

The book is warmly recommended, but the key question for now is how we can create ‘reminder birds’ of our own.

Jules Evans, who writes a wonderful blog on the politics of well-being recently indicated that technology might play a role, and I wouldn’t be surprised if there was already a mindfulness ‘app’ out there. I am trying to conceive of something more visceral and direct, but can’t quite picture it.

We don’t live on Pala, and mynahs are not always there when you need them, so what would a 21st century reminder bird look like? Who or what will remind us to be mindful?

## **Mindfulness Training for Syrian Refugee Aid Workers**

Full article [here](https://www.mindful.org/mindfulness-training-syrian-refugee-aid-workers/) at <https://www.mindful.org/mindfulness-training-syrian-refugee-aid-workers/>

Twenty-five humanitarian aid workers sat with their eyes closed, bringing a kind awareness to their breath, body, emotions, and thoughts at a hotel by the Dead Sea in Jordan. Learning to bring greater awareness, balance and connection to our life and work is hard enough for any of us, but how much more challenging for a group learning these skills just 350 miles from Aleppo.

They had recently arrived from the frontlines of the Syrian refugee crisis—Lebanon, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and centers in Jordan—to take part in a contemplative-based resilience (CBR) training for aid workers.

The responsibilities of aid workers in the Syrian crisis are extensive and challenging, including providing medical treatment to those injured, delivering food and shelter to displaced people and those in need, providing legal support, and ensuring that donor funds are spent responsibly and accounted for. They do all of this while being targets themselves, as evidenced by the horrific aerial bombing attack on a UN aid convoy in Syria in mid-September that killed twenty aid workers unloading food at a warehouse.

*While the demands placed on aid workers has increased, humanitarian workers have themselves become targets in ways that were almost unknown a generation ago.*

About two-thirds of participants in the training were from Middle East nations and working in the region, and Arabic was their first language; the other third were from Europe or North America and working in the region. Over four days they explored practices of meditation, mindful movement, and ways of understanding and responding to stress that might provide them with valuable tools when they go back into their humanitarian roles.

### Trauma and Aid Work

The CBR program was created to respond to the growing challenges facing aid workers today. There are now more than 60 million refugees and displaced people around the world—the highest number since World War II. But levels of support for the estimated 250,000 aid workers have not kept pace, and more and more is being asked of those working in the humanitarian field.

While the demands placed on aid workers has increased, humanitarian workers have themselves become targets in ways that were almost unknown a generation ago: attacks on aid workers grew from 41 in the year 2000 to 190 in 2014, and in that time 3,000 aid workers were killed, injured, or kidnapped.

As a result of these stresses and pressures of work, a growing number of aid workers are experiencing mental health issues: 79% of participants in a Guardian survey of 754 aid staff said they had experienced such conditions, including anxiety, depression, panic attacks, PTSD, and alcoholism. And one international medical aid organization reported that one-third of its staff drop out after just one assignment. At the same time, psychological and social support for aid workers, while often well-intentioned, is widely seen as inadequate.

The bottom line is that more aid workers are experiencing trauma and other mental health conditions, and leaving the field earlier. Aid groups are operating less efficiently with increased costs and higher turnover. And beneficiaries are receiving lower quality care because of high staff turnover, and aid workers who are less-experienced and over-stressed.

### Guilt, Shame, Stress, and Mindfulness

The director of the CBR program, Emmett Fitzgerald, knows the problem from both sides. As an aid worker in Haiti, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Nepal, he helped manage the response to major emergencies. But, after months of assisting the post-earthquake response in Haiti he had a moment where he knew the stress had gotten to him: After sitting at a nine-minute traffic light, ruminating on how he would be late for a group meeting with a domineering boss, he blew up in anger at a young child begging for food money. This was a wake-up call: “Who have I become?” he wondered. A year later, he was participating in a CBR training led by Sharon Salzberg and others in Cork, Ireland.

Participants in the Jordan training shared stressors like Emmett’s, including security risks and emergencies, high workload, extensive travel often in difficult conditions, separation from

friends and family, instability of funding for projects. All of this on top of the work challenges faced in other fields: such as an overwhelming number of emails, work/life balance, and difficult colleagues, bosses, and staff. One woman, who had worked for six years for a large aid NGO, also spoke of the feeling of helplessness that some aid workers experience—faced with the gap between the dire needs of the populations they serve and what they are able to provide. This can lead to feelings of guilt and shame for their relative privilege and their inability to do more.

“We believe there is a moral and ethical argument for these kinds of support—as well as a bottom-line justification. Programs like CBR can help organizations reduce medical and insurance costs, minimize the loss of staff and institutional knowledge, and lower recruitment costs. And while in the business world these savings might go to an owner or shareholders, in the humanitarian field they can go to support the enormous needs of refugees and displaced people. We believe it is a winning formula all round.”

A key insight that all areas of the CBR program seek to reinforce is that the way we meet our stressors and the difficulties of life is an important determinant of our suffering and our happiness. Many participants take away with them Viktor Frankl’s powerful reminder: “Between the stimulus and the response is a space. In that space lies our ability to choose. In our ability to choose lies our growth and our freedom.” Aid workers leave the program with intentions and practices to support themselves and their colleagues in their challenging and essential work.

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***CBR trainings have taken place in Ireland, the United States, Rwanda, and Jordan. Four more trainings are planned in Jordan for 2017 to facilitate support and accessibility for refugee aid workers in the Middle East region. To learn more about the CBR program, visit [the Garrison Institute website](http://www.garrisoninstitute.org). To make a donation to support the program and make it more widely available for aid workers, visit: <http://www.changingaidwork.org>***

## **MUSIC**

### **Song:**

Come and find the quiet centre  
In the crowded life we lead  
Find the room for hope to enter  
Find the frame where we are freed  
Clear the chaos and the clutter  
Clear our eyes that we can see  
All the things that really matter  
Be at peace and simply be