

SPIRITUAL FITNESS

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On July 15, 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered his “Divinity School Address” before the students and faculty of the Harvard Divinity School. Having been invited to speak by the graduating seniors, Emerson directed his words especially toward them, and he urged them to bring more soul into their work as religious leaders. Observing a lack of widespread interest in religious institutions, Emerson complained that “The soul is not preached.”¹ Observing little personal religious authenticity in the sermons he had heard recently, Emerson criticized preaching that “comes out of the memory, and not out of the soul.”² And observing the uninspiring formalism that was customary in the worship of some congregations, Emerson urged his listeners not to abandon these forms, but rather to “let the breath of new life be breathed by you through the forms already existing. . . . The remedy to their deformity is, first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul.”³

The emphasis that Emerson and other early Unitarians placed on nurturing the inward life and growth of religious sentiment remains strong with us today. The third of our seven Unitarian Universalist principles, for example, encourages us toward spiritual growth. This morning, I would like to invite our attention toward the importance of staying connected with what Emerson and others would call our soul. I would also like to invite our attention toward the notion of spiritual fitness.

I have here on the pulpit with me this morning a quilt that was made many years ago by my grandmother, my mother’s mother. A frugal woman, my grandmother made the patterns in this quilt from pieces of old clothing that had belonged to the people in her family. In this spirit, and in honor of Women’s History Month, my sermon this morning will draw from the writings of many different women. My contribution to this sermon will be primarily to order these materials from other people into a coherent pattern and then to sew it together.

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Divinity School Address,” in Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing, Emerson, Parker, edited by Conrad Wright (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 101.

² *Ibid.*, p. 105.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

In her book Gift from the Sea, published in 1955, Anne Morrow Lindbergh describes a personal struggle familiar to many people. She writes: “I want first of all . . . to be at peace with myself. I want a singleness of eye, a purity of intention, a central core to my life that will enable me to carry out [my] obligations and activities as well as I can. I want, in fact—to borrow from the language of the saints—to live ‘in grace’ as much of the time as possible. . . . By grace I mean an inner harmony, essentially spiritual, which can be translated into outward harmony. I am seeking perhaps what Socrates asked for in the prayer from the Phaedrus when he said, ‘May the outward and inward [person] be at one.’”⁴ “I mean to live a simple life . . . But I do not. . . . The life I have chosen as a wife and mother entrains a whole caravan of complications. . . . What a circus act we women perform every day of our lives. It puts a trapeze artist to shame . . . We run a tight rope daily, balancing a pile of books on the head. . . . This is not the life of simplicity but the life of multiplicity that the [sages] warn us of. It leads not to unification but to fragmentation. It does not bring grace; it destroys the soul.”⁵ Anne Morrow Lindbergh offers this provisional conclusion: “The problem . . . is more basically: How to remain whole in the midst of the distractions of life; how to remain balanced . . . how to remain strong . . . What is the answer? There is no easy answer, no complete answer. . . . I cannot shed my responsibilities. I cannot permanently inhabit a desert island. I cannot be a nun in the midst of family life. I would not want to be. The solution for me, surely, is neither in total renunciation of the world, nor in total acceptance of it. I must find a balance somewhere . . . a swinging of the pendulum between solitude and community, between retreat and return.”⁶

Many of us know that Elisabeth Kubler-Ross wrote about the process of grieving after a loved one has died. Perhaps because she worked close to death, she developed a deep appreciation for living well. In this passage, she advocates for attentiveness to one’s soul: “Whether you know it or not, one of the most important relationships in your life is with your Soul. Will you be kind and loving to your Soul, or will you be harsh and difficult? Many of us unknowingly damage our Souls with our negative attitudes and actions or by simple neglect. By making the relationship with your Soul an important part of your life, however, by honoring it in your daily routine, you give your life greater meaning and substance.”⁷

Psychiatrist and writer Jean Shinoda Bolen likewise lifts up the importance remaining connected to one’s soul: “We start by giving ourselves permission to be soulful, to take seriously this aspect of ourselves, our soul and our soul needs. You have the need and the right to spend part of your life caring for your soul. It is not easy. There are many obstacles. You have to resist the demands of the work-oriented, often defensive, element in your psyche that measures your life only in terms of output—how much you produce—not in terms of the quality of your life experiences. We live in a

⁴ Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Gift from the Sea (New York: Random House, 1955), pp. 23-24.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 25-27.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 29-30.

⁷ Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, “Soul Gifts in Disguise,” in Handbook for the Soul, edited by Richard Carlson and Benjamin Shield (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1995), p. 135.

materialistic culture that emphasizes being productive. We get messages that something is wrong with spending time attending to the soul. To be a soulful person means to go against all the pervasive, prove-yourself values of our culture and instead treasure what is unique and internal and valuable in yourself and your own personal evolution.”⁸ Jean Shinoda Bolen notes that many people become more inwardly focused after experiencing something unfortunate. “But,” she writes, “you don’t have to wait for disaster. You can open yourself to the possibility of nourishing your soul, and you can make it a priority. Take careful stock of the ways you spend your life energy doing things that are not so nourishing. Often, in the middle adult years especially, people find that they have been busy being productive in some take-oriented way, some way in which their souls were excluded. The responsibilities of everyday life—taking the kids to school, paying the bills, doing the grocery shopping, all the stuff that life requires of mature adults—expand to fill the entire life. When you’re so consumed, you don’t have very many moments in which to experience the soul.”⁹ Jean Shinoda Bolen offers this encouragement: “When you recover or discover something that nourishes your soul and brings joy, care enough about yourself to make room for it in your life.”¹⁰

Psychologist and writer Marion Woodman offers two worthwhile observations. First: “If we fail to nourish our souls, they wither, and without soul, life ceases to have meaning. Life becomes boring; it has no dimension. Without soul, we have no ears to hear great music, no perception to understand poetry or dreams, no eyes to appreciate fine art. The creative process shrivels in the absence of continual dialogue with soul. And creativity is what makes life worth living.”¹¹

Second: “Women enhance my own sense of being woman. I think most women need this type of enhancement in order to experience their full identity as women. A woman’s identity is not complete so long as she depends on the approval of men. She needs to stand to her full stature in our own womanhood and so nurture her soul.”¹²

Cultural anthropologist and author Angeles Arrien brings a darker perspective to this discussion of soul, suggesting that we may find important guidance even in those moments when one feels estranged from one’s soul. She writes: “Sometimes, the soul is temporarily forgotten because of ego needs or stages. But even then, we always remember what once was, or feel what might be. That remembering or feeling is usually marked by pangs of separation, isolation, loneliness, and meaninglessness. Boredom, vulnerability, dissatisfaction, disorientation, and dis-integration of the mind/body connection are often signals, too, that a profound need must be addressed. When these feelings come up, we are standing at the soul’s gate. This is our opportunity to enter the realm of the soul. Many people mistakenly think of the gateway as a hole to be filled, not knowing it is an opportunity. And so they look for something to plug the hole, rather than going through the gate to reconnect with their souls. They fill this hole with

⁸ Jean Shinoda Bolen, “Windows of the Soul,” *ibid.*, p. 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹¹ Marion Woodman, “Soul Moments,” *ibid.*, p. 34

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

diversionary addictions that keep them looking outward for satisfaction. The answer, however, is never in ‘the outer.’”¹³

In her book Everyday Sacred, artist and author Sue Bender addresses the topic of spiritual growth in another way. She writes: “For as long as I can remember I have been listening to a harsh, critical voice inside me, but I’ve lived with it so long that I never really noticed the influence it was having on my life. I not only listened, I believed what this harsh judge was saying. The voice passes judgment on everything I do. ‘You’re not measuring up!’ the judge shouts. I’m never sure what I am supposed to measure up to, only that I never will. Nothing I do will ever be enough. ‘Don’t complain,’ the judge adds, ‘you have it easy.’ Judging myself harshly for having a harsh judge only makes matters worse. When I try to ignore it, the voice gets louder. I could have read all the books in the world about showing ‘loving kindness towards oneself,’ but I could do nothing to stop the voice of the judge. I felt a hunger that I didn’t understand and couldn’t satisfy.”¹⁴ Sue Bender illustrates her struggle with this story. “The day that I heard that [my previous book] Plain and Simple had made the New York Times best-seller list I happened to meet a good friend at the vegetable store. Glowing, I told her the remarkable news. It seemed like a miracle. ‘What number are you?’ she asked, her voice showing neither delight nor wonder. For a moment, I didn’t even know what she was asking. Then I realized she wanted to know what position I had on the list. That was one of those moments when everything stops and a space opens up. In that instant I could see that in this world nothing I did would ever be enough. . . . Even this achievement, far beyond anything I had ever expected or dreamed possible, could not silence that critical voice.”¹⁵ Sue Bender tells a story indicative of her own spiritual journey. She writes: “On a trip to New York my husband and I went to see the . . . Guggenheim Museum. The uncluttered long white exhibition space floated—a limitless expanse of calm and stillness. I was not prepared for the beauty of the white walls. And on the walls were white paintings. White walls, white paintings. . . . My heart was pounding. This was what a temple should feel like: a ‘temple of the soul.’ Many people moved around, looking. Were any of them as affected as I was? . . . Or were they bemused, trying to understand why anyone would bother to paint white pictures? . . . An ‘inner light’ radiated from the paintings. The space was silent—with that respectful, muffled silence of a cloister. The word purity came to mind. And immense. This was the ‘immensity within ourselves’ I had read about and hadn’t understood. ‘It doesn’t have to be so hard,’ I heard myself say—the judge nowhere present at that moment.”¹⁶ At the end of her book, Sue Bender writes: “Our imperfections are a gift, the very qualities that make us unique. If we can make the shift to see them that way—we can value ourselves . . . just as we are.”¹⁷

¹³ Angeles Arrien, “Gateway to the Soul,” *ibid.*, p. 176.

¹⁴ Sue Bender, Everyday Sacred: A Woman’s Journey Home (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), p. ix.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

Each of these women has something worthwhile to say about spiritual growth. In accord with the third principle of our Unitarian Universalist covenant, which encourages us toward spiritual growth, we can appreciate what these women offer. Yet we may have reservations as well. Someone may ask, “Just what is a soul anyway? What scientific evidence do you have about souls?” Another may say, “If spiritual growth means finding meaning in white paintings, maybe I’ll try something else.” Another may say, “I hope these people are happier as a result of reconnecting with their souls, but it sounds rather self-indulgent to me.” Yet another may say, “When do these people get to the part of their spiritual journey that has them working for peace and justice?”

Spiritual growth that is both soul-deep and committed to this world would seem to be most desirable, and this is what the English writer Evelyn Underhill presents in her book Practical Mysticism. Evelyn Underhill lived from 1875 to 1941. In 1921, she served as Lecturer on the Philosophy of Religion at Manchester College, Oxford, a Unitarian theological school. Practical Mysticism was published in 1915, at the beginning of the First World War. In this book, Evelyn Underhill writes about the mystical path, using illustrations from several different religious traditions.

She says that the first step of the mystical path is learning to perceive the world more accurately, without reference to ideas which reflect principally one’s own narrow interests. She writes: “The coloured scene at which you look so trustfully owes, in fact, much of its character to the activities of the seer: to that process of thought—concept—cogitation, from which Keats prayed with so great an ardour to escape, when he exclaimed in words which will seem to you, according to the temper of your mind, either an invitation to the higher laziness or one of the most profound aspirations of the soul. ‘O for a life of sensations rather than thoughts!’ He felt—as all the poets have felt with him—that another, lovelier world, tinted with unimaginable wonders, alive with ultimate music, awaited those who could free themselves from the fetters of the mind, lay down the shuttle and the weaver’s comb, and reach out beyond the conceptual image to intuitive contact with the Thing [itself].”¹⁸

Evelyn Underhill claims that this disinterested perception of the world then allows an individual to interact with the world in a more focused and disciplined way. She writes: “We hear much of the mystical temperament, the mystical vision. The mystical character is far more important: and its chief ingredients are courage, singleness of heart, and self-control.”¹⁹

Evelyn Underhill summarizes the mystical path in this way: “So it is through and by these two great changes in your attitude toward things—first, the change of attention, which enables you to perceive a truer universe; next, the deliberate rearrangement of your ideas, energies, and desires in harmony with that which you have seen—that a progressive uniformity of life and experience is secured to you, and you are defended against the dangers of an indolent and useless mysticity.”²⁰

Here Evelyn Underhill parts company with those who will not rise above a self-indulgent spirituality, for she claims that the proper purpose or end of the mystical path is to become engaged with the world with a disciplined compassion that transcends self-

¹⁸ Evelyn Underhill, Practical Mysticism (Columbus, Ohio: Ariel Press), p. 39.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 90.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 100

interest. She writes: “Mystics are artists; and the stuff in which they work is most often human life. They want to heal the disharmony [between the world as it is now and the world as it could be]; and since, in the white-hot radiance of that faith, hope, and charity which burns in them, they discern such a reconciliation to be possible, they are able to work for it with a singleness of purpose and an invincible optimism denied to other [people].”

We might call this spiritual fitness—the condition of having a deeply energizing spiritual life, and at the same time having an inclusive loyalty to the world as a whole.

We may or may not choose to follow Evelyn Underhill on the mystical path, even with the understanding that its purpose is a deep ethical commitment. But we can surely join her in appreciating the personal qualities of courage, self-control, vision, service, and wide compassion that the mystical journey promises.

This morning, we have heard from several religious thinkers and writers who are women. Each in her own way, these women have encouraged their readers or listeners to have a deeper connection with their soul, to pursue spiritual growth, and, at least in the case of Evelyn Underhill, to turn this spirituality back toward compassionate service to the world. May we find something in these ideas and images and stories that will encourage each of us toward deeper spiritual growth.

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