

A Spiritual Toolbox for Vulnerable Times
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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Kamloops, BC
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(reading: # 483 by Wendell Berry- “When Despair...”)

That beautiful poem by Wendell Berry describes how we can cope with life’s unsettling worries through appreciating the beauty and peaceful rhythms of nature.

Many prophetic men and women have written words like these which offer strength, wisdom and enlightenment.

I don’t know about you, but there have been times in my life when I felt less than strong, or wise, or enlightened. Times when I felt utterly lost and vulnerable...when no amount of inspirational poetry could possibly have helped matters.

For average people, life is neither static nor predictable.

In my work as a hospital chaplain, I journeyed with thousands of people who were shaken by physical, emotional, and spiritual traumas that instilled anxiety, fear, and even existential angst.

Author, Anne Lamott asks, *“Where do we even begin in the presence of evil or catastrophe---dead or deeply lost children, a young wife’s melanoma, polar bears floating out to sea on scraps of ice? What is the point of it all when we experience the vortex of interminable depression or, conversely, when we recognize that time is tearing past us like giddy greyhounds?”*

Our spiritual theme this month is “Our Bodies.” You may be wondering, “what does spirituality have to do with limbs, and organs, hair, and human tissue?” In short, everything.

Jorge Ferrer, is a psychologist who’s written on the topic of a *Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality*. He says:

“Embodied spirituality views all human dimensions—body, heart, mind, and consciousness—as equal partners in bringing self, community, and world into a fuller alignment with the Mystery out of which everything arises.

Far from being an obstacle, this approach sees the engagement of the body and its vital/primary energies as crucial for not only a thorough spiritual transformation, but also the creative exploration of expanded forms of spiritual freedom.”¹

¹ <http://www.integralworld.net/ferrer2.html>

I find Ferrer's thinking, his ideas and philosophy quite beautiful and interesting to read about...this is an expansive concept he describes... but I get a little frustrated with this kind of "theory of everything" spirituality. What would a *Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality* look like in practical terms?

How do we make sense of our lives when our bodies betray us?...when eyes can't see well? When ears no longer allow us to hear the way we once could? When knees creak and backs groan? When viruses and cancers invade our organs, bringing their symptoms, discomfort, pain, and awful treatments?

How does one reconcile carrying 20, 30, or more extra (or too few) pounds of weight with body image?

How we project our corporal flesh and bone selves (like a storefront window), and how we *think we look*, are two factors that influence and determine mental health, how others treat us, and choices we end up making in life.

My entire adult life, I've claimed to be 5'2", but that would be an exaggeration, a fantasy... because no one wants to be 4'11" and $\frac{3}{4}$ unless they are 10 years old!

If I had grown up to look instead, like a quintessential supermodel, or a powerful athlete, would I still have the same personality I have today, the same interests, still be in the same profession? Have the same circle of friends?

Today, I encourage you to think of this Fellowship, our community, as a body...with its aches and pains, good days and tough days, a body that needs care, and is the embodiment of liberal religion and the Unitarian Universalist movement in Kamloops. What does it mean to be UU here, and now? What image do we reflect to others? What tools do we need to repair and tune up our collective body, our Fellowship. Where do we begin?

Anne Lamott wrote,

"One rarely knows where to begin the search for meaning, though by necessity, we can only start where we are."

So, let's begin where we are.

Any of you have a workshop at home, full of expensive tools in every size and variety? ... maybe you're more like me and keep a couple screwdrivers and a paint-stained hammer stashed in an old shoebox? Regardless, when something needs fixing or adjusting, we use whatever we have at our disposal.

Likewise, there is no singular, or ideal way out of personal struggle; there is no universal 'jaws of life' with which to extricate ourselves from the occasional wreckage of life, no one-size-fits-all solution for coping with daunting challenges that leave us feeling vulnerable.

In tough times and vulnerable moments, I think it's useful to have practical spiritual tools on hand.

I came up with a selection...an "A to Z" assortment of spiritual tools for coping in vulnerable times.

There are of course, many more tools than the 26 letters of the alphabet allows. So think of this a starter kit to which you add and subtract the tools you need and like to use.

As I name them, think about how each spiritual tool already functions in your life, or potentially could be added to your toolbox, as well as for the spiritual toolbox of this Fellowship.

Affirmations... we must take time to name and remind ourselves of the ways we are a good and worthy beings. Affirming ourselves and others, is a powerful way to enhance self-esteem, pride, and confidence; if we feel worthy of love and affection, and feel capable of showing love and compassion to others, we nurture a formidable resource that will help us through hard times. Anyone who has been in a leadership position will tell you that employees and volunteers and teams work that much harder, when you regularly take the time to affirm their work and effort.

Breath... in times of crisis, trauma, or stress, our bodies go into overdrive; hormones stimulate a flight or fight response, increase blood pressure, heart rate, and can cause one to get shaky, dizzy, nauseous, sweaty, dry mouthed, to hyperventilate, and so on. Some of that energy can be defused by simply stopping to breathe deeply and regularly. Taking a few extra breaths can also create a buffer—time to keep us from speaking hurtful and regrettable words.

Creativity...for some people, troubling emotions can be tempered, processed, and eased through a creative, reflective process. Painting, sculpting, gardening, carpentry, whichever medium calls. Co-creation is dynamic, relational act that process theologians suggest is a medium by which we experience deepest sacred meaning.

Dedication...making a commitment, showing up, and following through...dedication is a way of declaring one's allegiance, love, and hopes for something beyond oneself. Through discernment (another "D") we reflect and choose, and stand by that to which we have committed. To achieve balance in our lives, to be able to honour the commitments we make, we must mindfully limit the commitments we choose, say "no" to opportunities and demands calling us in 1000 other directions.

Exercise... walking, hiking, swimming...physical exercise helps dissipate nervous energy, and relieves the stressed body. Exercise increases our capacity for mental focus, making it easier to problem solve, and to reflect on solutions and choices available to us. Some UU churches are using a triad model for their RE programs in which children move through three learning/experience areas each Sunday: mind (thinking), body (moving), and spirit (feeling).

Forgiveness... some people internalize anger and hostile feelings; we can spend a lot of time and mental energy by replaying tracks of past encounters and frustrating relationships... I should have done this, or could have said this or would have done that...

By intentionally letting go of anger, frustration, and hostile emotions about ourselves, other people, and situations we have no control over anyway, we clear space that allows a gentler, more compassionate, loving approach.

Gratitude... If you can name one or more things every day that you are grateful for, you will exponentially combat encroaching feelings of despair and hopelessness.

If everyday, we name *something, or someone*, that has brought us comfort or contentment ... simple things like recalling a stranger's smile, admiring the view from your balcony, hearing the sweet birdsong, or receiving an unexpected phone call from an old friend. It is impossible to feel grateful and sorry for oneself in the same moment.

Hospitality... sadness and deep loneliness often cause us to build a wall of social isolation. One way to push back is to invite a friend or two into your life, if only for a cup of coffee.

The act of welcoming others into our home and serving them food or drink is an age-old spiritual practice that reflects generosity and caring. It also forces us out of our ratty bathrobes and own dark headspaces. There is no better way to build relationship than over a shared meal. If UU churches all stopped the practice of coffee hour, our movement would probably collapse.

Intentionality/ mindfulness--- awareness. Taking time to notice our environment is to invite awe and beauty into our lives. We need sometimes to drop our frenzied multi-tasking ways, and for a while, devote our senses to a single, silent action or activity.

Journaling...writing about one's deep thoughts, questions, hopes, disappointments is a spiritual reflective process. Even making a pros and cons list can help us identify options, choices, and make decisions. Regular journaling offers a bonus -- a record of personal progress, maturation, and spiritual growth, not to mention a source to help clarify facts and details that fade as memory dims.

Kindness... doing kind acts for other beings, volunteering, serving people in need can help relieve the narrow focus we have on our own lives and vulnerabilities... Practicing empathy, or putting ourselves in another person's shoes, without judging, diagnosing or trying to "fix" them, reflects how we desire to be treated ourselves.

Labyrinth, prayer, meditation, chanting, and other practices are a way to reflect inner spirituality. For some, these practices are mediums by which to connect to "God", "goddess", or "the sacred". Humanists might identify with Unitarian theologian, James Luther Adams' claim that God is *"the ultimate commanding, sustaining reality which transforms all existence"*

Music... The power of music to transport, to lift up, or get us dancing...earns it a place as a primary spiritual tool. Whether you make music, or revel in the sound of others singing or playing instruments, music is a pathway that connects body and spirit. For some, music helps in achieving transcendent states. For others, music expresses personal values and emotions. Music is also a way to document and reflect on social justice issues.

Nature... our interaction, and interconnection in that great web of all existence...walking in the forest, paddling a canoe, or chaining oneself to a tree as an action for earth justice against pillagers of the planet...these are variations on one spiritual tool.

Others... reaching out to other people...to friends, reconnecting with family, and recognizing when we need support and doing something about it, whether it's joining a support group or going to a reputable professional.

Pilgrimage... long and arduous like walking the Camino de Santiago trail in Spain, or a simple, intentional, focused walk in a neighbourhood park, pilgrimage is a methodical journeying of significance in search of moral or existential guidance.

It can be useful to have times for collective “pilgrimage” in the form of congregational or leadership retreats or similar occasions when a community intentionally seeks new directions or rejuvenation.

Questions... the poet, Rilke told us to, “*love the questions themselves*” and “*live the questions now.*” Unitarian Universalism is a religion with no creed, and makes no absolute Truth claims. However, we *are* called to wrestle and explore questions...to consider diverse perspectives... to struggle together... to make informed decisions and take action through a democratic process.

Revelry...fun for fun’s sake. Playing for the joy of it, not for competition or production or accomplishment.

Research reveals that revelry is one of the characteristics observed in all breakthrough congregations which experience significant rapid growth.

Silence...when cell phones, computers, or other electronic screens go dark and quiet... when there is no talking, texting, tweeting...no music, televisions, or noisy appliances... only then, can we be aware of the beating of our own hearts and drawing of breath...we create space for the universe to unfold.

Theology... part of the spiritual journey is discerning our beliefs. As Unitarian Universalists, we are quick to lift up our pluralistic openness, although we don’t do a lot of deep exploring of where we fall on the spectrum of belief. How do you make sense of evil deeds, atrocities, and suffering in the world, in light of UU principles about inherent worth and dignity, equality, and radical inclusivity? Do you even have an “elevator speech” prepared, a clear response when someone asks, “What is Unitarian Universalism?” or “What do Unitarians believe?”

Unitarian Universalist community... I believe religion and faith are supposed to make us better people who live better lives, and Unitarian Universalism can do just that.

In our UU communities, members and friends come seeking different things...companionship, meaning, inspiration, purpose, support, laughter, commitment, music, knowledge, guidance...a place to belong.

Values... How can we live our faith in a way that aligns with our values and principles? It’s not always easy, especially when we encounter dissonant situations, diverse worldviews, and conflicting ideologies.

Instead of digging-in, being polarized and isolated with our liberal views, and rejecting or minimizing whatever we do not believe or whomever we don’t agree with...what if we met others in the space between our divergent views and perspectives? A place that, theologian Henry Nelson Wieman claims is “*where creative interchange happens, and true transformation becomes possible.*”

Wisdom...of elders, prophets, and strangers... the Buddha is thought to have said, *when the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear.* What would it mean for you to be ready when your teacher appears? What will your teacher look like? Are you limiting yourself with preconceived ideas of who those teachers must be, or how they should look or sound like?

Xenophobia.... the letter ‘x’ doesn’t bring many spiritual tools to mind...but the word *xenophobia*, meaning: hatred or fear of persons of a different nationality or ethnicity than one's own, can be a reminder: as Unitarian Universalists we are quick to condemn xenophobia, and the prejudices, bigotry, racism and other isms that oppress groups of people.

Let the word *xenophobia* remind us about the privilege we hold by virtue of our skin colour, cultural roots, religious identity, economic status, education, age, ability, gender identity, or sexual preference...we

cannot alter the facts of our privilege, but we *can* strive to be more aware of it, and try to understand and combat the role our privilege plays in perpetuating oppressive systems.

Yoga... a Hindu method of learning that includes exercises, breathing sequences and meditation. Yoga is designed to aid in enlightenment. In the West, many practice the exercise component of yoga as an aid to healthy living.

Yoga, Tai chi, Qi gong, and other Eastern-influenced movement and body posture practices can be help condition us for coping with vulnerable times.

Z...for zealots, a word from the Greek meaning “*to be enthusiastic*” that has evolved to refer to extreme radical religious groups or individuals. So, I close this alphabet of spiritual tools, with *zealot*, because even though zebras are wonderful spiritual guides, they are rarely available here in Kamloops.

The word *zealot* can remind us what not to become... we learn to pace ourselves, striving for balance and moderation, appreciating that no single path or spiritual tool is in itself **the** answer.

Dr. Martin Luther King once wrote about Mother Pollard, an elderly African American woman who participated in the 10-year bus boycott in Montgomery Alabama during the 1950’s and 60’s. Having walked great distances each day for several weeks, Mother Pollard was asked if she was tired. She answered with simple profundity, “*My feets is tired, but my soul is rested*”.

No matter how tired we are, how troubled and vulnerable we feel, how long the journey ahead, there are many spiritual tools to cushion the impact, and help us push through to better days and the hope of returning light.

May we discover the spiritual tools we are suited to, so that for a time, we will rest in the grace of the world, and be free.

May it be so, and Amen.