Navigating Life

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Sufi poet Rumi writes: “There are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground, there are a thousand ways to go home again.”

One of the true gifts of this spiritual community is the acknowledgement that many paths lead to enlightenment, that there is no one right path. Each path has the potential of opening us again to the world – if we are open the possibility of being surprised, and to the larger surprise of finding wholeness.

Case in point: early Friday morning, I’m driving to the Panera in Findlay. (I often hang out there and write.) The separate parts of the sermon are vying for my attention like my children sometimes did when they were little. I’m distracted and trying to make sense and order out of what feels like chaos.

Passing an expansive soybean field to my left, I notice how the plants are shifting from their dark green of August to a golden yellow. It’s September in Ohio, so that’s pretty normal. Lovely, but normal. I can’t put my finger on it, but something is different.

Of course, I’m driving so I can’t look more than a second. I push my attention back to the road. No oncoming traffic. I looked again at the field. Still something is off, but I’m unclear what it is.

I push my attention back to the road again. Still, no oncoming traffic. Back again to the field. Something just doesn’t look right. Then I get it.

Hundreds of long, black, gracefully curved necks and heads are sticking up above the soy beans. Just their heads and necks, not a body nor wing in sight. Hundreds of pointy beaks and graceful necks all pointing west. I’d never seen anything like it before. Geese in the sky? Yes. Hundreds of geese in a field? Never before. Perhaps the geese stopped to feed and rest before continuing on their flight south. Whatever the reason, their presence Friday morning was an unexpected gift.

By the time I was driving back home, they had flown on. The soybean field returned to its normal state of gold, with no hint of the geese ever having been there. (Though I suspect a farmer could tell..) . I smiled to myself and was deeply grateful for catching that brief moment of magic.

There is something about flocks of geese flying south for the winter. The large “V”s of geese in flight. The occasional “V” within a “V”. The lead goose pulling ahead for a while, then slipping back and allowing the next in line to move forward.

It speaks of discipline, well-practiced order, of burdens and journeys shared, of seasons changing with the turning of the earth, of life in all its ups and downs reminding us that we are alive and have a place. I confess that I cannot see geese flying south without hearing the words of Mary Oliver whispering on the wind:

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert,
repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours,
and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun
and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese,
high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese,
harsh and exciting --
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Seeing the geese in the field Friday morning
brought home the importance of paying attention
to the little things every day that connect to all
that outside of my small world, not just the issues
that are most pressing today. It is all too easy to
get distracted by everyday demands and forget,
or to put it off until tomorrow or the next day. It
is too easy to get lost in the day to day, and not
even realize it.

Seeing those geese was one of a thousand ways
to kneel and kiss the ground, it was one of a
thousand ways to come home. There are a
thousand more; some known simply as spiritual
practices.

For my money, part of the attraction of any
spiritual practice is what it demands, beginning
with stopping what we’re doing to pay attention
regularly. A spiritual practice can help us find
our way when we are feeling adrift or lost. It can
help us navigate our way through this life.

I can hear the rumblings that spiritual practice
takes too long to get good at it, or there isn’t time,
but hear me out. It could be that we are already
doing it, and merely need to be more intentional.

When Unitarian Universalists get talking about
spiritual practice, it is likely that many different
topics are suggested – from running to
gardening, from swimming laps to sipping tea on
the porch. In a larger context such a conversation might be phrased something like “I’m not really religious, but I feel different, I feel spiritual when I ….” To an untrained ear, the conversation might sound like a spiritual practice can be whatever it is we want to be. But that’s not quite the case. There is a difference.

When asked once about the difference between
spiritual practice and a hobby one might dabble in, Rev. Scott Alexander answered with this: “The answer is intentionality, regularity, and depth. Whether it is sitting Zen, doing charitable giving, working with a spiritual director, or tending your relationship with loved ones, what shapes your efforts into an everyday spiritual practice is your commitment to making the activity a regular and significant part of your life.” (Everyday Spiritual Practice, Scott Alexander.)

Intentionality, regularity and depth.

When framed by intentionality, regularity and depth, running and quilting can be very real spiritual practices, as can making dinner, washing the dinner dishes, painting or refinishing furniture. If we take that at face value, our rituals of knitting, weeding, nightly prayers, dancing, baking bread, walking the dog, practicing Bach, driving to Ann Arbor to drop off Styrofoam -- if done regularly and with intention have the capacity to guide us, to open locked doors, helping to unravel questions that haunt us. They are spiritual practices.

Take a moment, and think about what consumes
most of your day. Then think about what it is that feeds your very soul. Think about how long it took to get to the point where you weren’t going through the motions or trying too hard, and knew it fed your soul.

Malcolm Gladwell in his book Outliers, put forth the idea that it takes 10,000 hours to become
proficient at just about anything – piano, violin, golf, running marathons, teaching, writing, baking, preaching. (The rough math on that is three hours a day, every day, for nine years.) To be good, takes time and effort. Gladwell writes: “Practice isn’t the thing you do once you’re good. It’s the thing you do that makes you good.”

I am not suggesting that each of our spiritual practices will demand 10,000 hours of our time to master. Few of us that kind of time available. What I am suggesting remembering what we were taught years ago in school: good things take time to learn how to do well, that practice is necessary to get beyond the fumbling beginner stage.

We live in such a fast paced world, one that too often promotes immediate gratification and success. But spiritual practices take time. If we release expectations of initial perfection and let ourselves grow into it, our skills will improve as we learn new patterns and rhythms. Commitment and dedication over the long run make the difference. Some spiritual practices come more easily, others take months or years to get so that we’re comfortable.

I’d hoped to have a labyrinth out back this afternoon, but rain this week forced a delay. I’ll do what I can to get it up yet this fall, for in my experience walking a labyrinth is one of the simplest of spiritual practices. It demands that we walk with intention – not too fast, not thinking too hard about it, allowing the path to guide us. A labyrinth opens us up and allows for the possibility of answers coming forth from within. I’ll let you know when it’s ready.

Spiritual directors will sometimes ask we listen for the inner voice to guide us. Depending on the teacher and the tradition, some directors refer to as the voice of God or the Goddess, all that is holy, or even the voice of reason, or our own heart. More important than the label, is the process of listening, of making room to hear.

Our lives are full. They are busy. Often they are noisy and disorganized. They are full of loved ones with needs and obligations to fulfill. Setting aside a regular time during the day for meditation can feel more like a burden than a gift. There are alternatives.

Rev. Kathleen McTigue asks herself at bedtime, “Where today did I really hear the language of my life?” She writes that “the question puts a sheen of attentiveness and care on even the most mundane dimensions of the day. It give us a way to cradle the moments of the day just lived and see them again before they’re too far away, to notice the regrets and failings as well as the joys.”

She continues, “This simple query has a long reach, and it accomplishes much more than a retrospective look. To fall asleep with the question “Where in this day did I really hear the language of my life?” moves us every day a little nearer to awakening with the question “Where today will I really hear the language of my life? Where today will I find God? The calm eye of attention, the deeper wisdom of mindfulness begin to seep in as they do with any spiritual discipline faithfully practiced.” (Everyday Spirituality: Scott Alexander, ed)

McTigue asks a good question for each of us. Where do you hear the language of your life? Do you hear it in your family, your work, your creative endeavors, in friends? Do you hear it in the whirl of the ocean or the call of the wild geese? There are a myriad of ways to hear it.

Over the years, I have sung with a 200 voice choir that fed my soul in a way nothing has before or since. Every Monday night, between September and May, for 15 years, between 7 and 9 pm, I heard the language of my life with ultimate clarity. Rehearsals were challenging vocally and physically, and required unflaing attendance. It was regular, consistent and pushed me spiritually as well as musically, it was indeed a spiritual practice.
Since then, I’ve tried running and roller blading to fill the space. Running came close; roller blading was faster and more fun. Both opened me and kept me in shape – an added bonus. Creating garden art has good potential, but feels more like an artistic endeavor than a spiritual practice. I’m having better success with cooking, but there seem residual side effects that need to be dealt with before I completely blow up.

There is something about McTigue’s questions that call to me in the “Hey, I could do that” sort of way. Her suggestion of looking for the language of my life is simple enough to be manageable on a daily basis – certainly several times a week minimally. It requires no special equipment or clothing purchase. There are no membership or registration fees. No massive time commitment or books to read. Since, I go to bed every night, it is possible that I could learn to reflect on where I heard the language of my life – if even for just a moment or two before sleep.

The inherent challenge is deceptively simple, but manageable. I begin with looking for those moments and encounters where the language of my life was present during the day. Eventually, I may grow in awareness to a place where I remember to look for them during the day, learning to better recognize them in the moment. It is intentional, regular and has depth. I can do that.

A spiritual practice need not be excruciatingly difficult to transform us. We know that often it is the simple activities that make the greatest impact.

We’re on the cusp of a new church year, full of hope, enthusiasm, plans, dreams and goals. I would like to invite each of you to join me for a month, maybe two – that would get us up to Thanksgiving. Join me in learning to ask “Where did I hear the language of my life today?” “Where did I hear or experience the holy?” Join me in listening, and be open to the possibility of what we might hear.

For me, on Friday, it was hundreds of geese resting in that soybean field in Hancock County. They called me back and reminded me of my place in this world. Yesterday, I was reminded by a brief conversation with a dear friend. Today, we’ll have to see. The rest of the day is yet unwritten and I do not yet know what there will be to hear.

May we each find a way to listen to our lives, listen for the language of our life that can and will help us navigate the rest of our days.

So may it be.

Amen