

## What Is Yours (Not) to Do?

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### Spoken Meditation

As I've mentioned briefly before, I was accepted to be part of a new Wellness pilot program for UU Ministers called "Choose Health" that is part of a larger ongoing program for clergy at Duke University. The goal is to share best practices for managing stress, balancing work-life commitments, and integrating exercise, spiritual practices, and time-off into one's schedule. We're approximately two months into this six-month program, so I'll likely be sharing more about the program in the future. But the beginning of a new year — a traditional time for making changes and resolutions — seemed like a good time to share some of the insights I've had so far.

In particular, I've benefited from dialoging with some of my UU minister colleagues who are involved in the "Healthy At Every Size" movement. An essential point is that more important than focusing on weight is focusing first on working toward health, wellness, and self-worth.

And as many in our society consider health-related resolutions at this time of year, I invite you to hear the following Facebook post from writer Anne Lamotte (the same Anne Lamotte whose book *Help, Thanks, Wow* inspired my sermon a few weeks ago with that same title). As you listen to Lamotte's words, I invite you to reflect on the motivation that lies *underneath* any potential resolutions you have formulated or are considering for 2014. Are they motivated by the less helpful (and potentially harmful) sources such as guilt and shame or are they motivated by a desire for health, wellness, and self-compassion? I'm less interested in whether you agree with everything Lamotte has to say than in whether there is some truth for you in parts of her words as she struggles to articulate the truth of her experience. In the minute or so of silence that will follow this reading, I invite you to reflect on how this reading might inform your journey toward healing and wholeness. Lamotte writes:

We need to talk. I know you are planning to start a diet [January 1st]. I used to start diets, too. I hated to mention this to my then-therapist. She would say

cheerfully, “Oh, that's great, honey. How much weight are you hoping to gain?” I got rid of her sorry ass. No one talks to ME that way. Well, okay, maybe it was ten years later, after she had helped lead me back home, to myself, to radical self-care, gentle Self-Talk, to a jungly glade that had always existed deep inside me, but that I'd avoided by achieving, dieting, people-pleasing, multi-talking, and so on. Now when I decide to go on a diet, I say it to myself: “Great, honey. How much are you hoping to gain?” I was able to successfully put on weight on book tour by eating room service meals in a gobbly trance in 13 different hotels. So that was exhilarating... And then I accidentally forgot to starve myself in December, or to go back to the gym, which I've been meaning to do since I had a child, 24 years ago. So I am at least five pounds up--but praise be to God, I do not currently have a scale, because as I've said before, getting on a scale is like asking Dick Cheney to give you a sense of your own self-worth. I can still get my jeans on, for one reason: I wear forgiving pants. The world is too hard as it is, without letting your pants have an opinion on how you are doing. I struggle with enough self-esteem issues without letting my jeans get in on the act. So please join me in not starting a diet January 1st. It's really okay, though, to have (or pray for) an awakening around your body. It's okay to stop hitting the snooze button, and pay attention to what makes you feel great about yourself, one meal at a time. It's an inside job. If you are not okay with yourself at 185, you will not be okay at 150, or even 135. The self-respect and serenity you long for is not out there. It's within. I hate that. I resent that more than I can say. But it's true.... [Self-respect and serenity] is what we have longed for, our whole lives, and get to create, now, or or on [any New Year's Day].<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From Anne Lamott's Facebook page on Friday, December 27, 2013: <https://www.facebook.com/AnneLamott>.

## Sermon

As you may have read in my most recent column for our monthly newsletter, I was recently asked to preach a sermon for a group of UU ministers as part of the annual Harpers Ferry Ministerial Study Group. I ended the sermon with two quotes that many people told me afterward really resonated with them. I invite you to hear them now since they may be especially appropriate at the fresh start of a new calendar year.

The first quote is from the Roman Catholic monk Thomas Merton, who was both a *contemplative*, cloistered in a monastery, and an *activist*, heavily involved in corresponding and meeting in person with those at the forefront of creating social change in the 1960s. In his book, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he wrote a passage that may be particularly appropriate for Unitarian Universalists and other social progressives, who are committed to increasing social, economic, and environmental justice in this world. According to Merton,

**There is a pervasive form of modern violence to which the idealist...most easily succumbs: activism and over-work.** The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes [his or her] work.... because it kills the root of inner wisdom, which makes work fruitful. (86)

I find two parts of that quote particularly salient. First, that a social activist's admirable commitment to social justice can itself become disordered so that instead of creating more peace and justice, it unintentionally becomes a form of violence against one's own well being due to the stress of overcommitment. Moreover, the frenzy of activism that enacts violence against one's self, can even more tragically undercut the effect of activism on the societal level — in Merton's formulation, "because it kills the root of inner wisdom, which makes work fruitful." In other words, **overcommitment can lead us to do *many things* poorly instead of potentially a *few things* with excellence.**

Related to Merton's concern of activism and over-work, the second quote I shared in that sermon was from the book *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*:

Even when a need exists and we are well qualified to meet it, we are not necessarily called to respond to it. Something may seem logical for us to do, but that does not mean that [we are] call[ed] to do it.... Simply because a task or undertaking is good to do, does it mean that we are called to do it or that we should continue doing it? **To be doing good can be the greatest obstacle to doing something even better.**

The final line of that quote seems especially significant to me: "To be doing good can be the greatest obstacle to doing something even better."

As I learned in a class I took a few years ago on discernment, one of the most basic parts of practicing discernment is learning to choose good over evil. Although, in some of the most pressing social concerns of our day, good and evil can seem frustratingly intertwined, there is also often a clear difference we can learn to see between choosing, for example, wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony *versus* choosing wisdom, justice, generosity, persistence, peace, compassion, and humility. I'm playing here on the so-called Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Virtues from the Christian tradition, but I could just as easily have drawn from the Ten Qualities that lead to Buddhahood (generosity, renunciation, wisdom, strength, effort, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, equanimity) over the Ten Fetters (self-identity, doubt, clinging, craving, ill-will, attachment, comparison, restlessness, and ignorance).

Now, I'm not saying that it's always easy to choose good over evil. Instead, I'm saying that the quote we considered earlier that, "To be doing good can be the greatest obstacle to doing something even better," challenges us to see that **the subtle distinction of choosing the "best" over the good or better is often much more difficult than choosing good over evil.** Choosing the *best* — choosing what is most authentically ours to do, choosing the path, in Frederick Buechner's words, that is at that intersection "**where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet**" — that choice is a much harder discernment and commitment than simply choosing the good over the bad. And allowing ourselves to do a thousand good things can distract us from the more fulfilling and ultimately more productive choice of doing a few things

that we are most authentically gifted and able to do superlatively well. The question then becomes discerning “**What is authentically and life-givingly *mine* to do?**” and “**What is authentically *mine* *not* to do?**” — because both saying “yes” and saying “no” with intention are important spiritual practices.

That being said, allow me to add one more twist to the equation. What this perspective is calling us toward is more than being less busy. While, yes, on one level it is about avoiding too many distractions. As our Unitarian forbear Thoreau said in *Walden*:

Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. **Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!** I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb nail.

On the other hand, I believe we’re called to more than just simplicity and less busyness. We’re called to seek what some philosophers call “human flourishing,” what Jesus called the “abundant life.”

Let me give you an example. This summer, as part of the long process of coming into full fellowship with the Unitarian Universalist Association, I was required to complete a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education. That required driving to Rockville for a class twice a week for 10 weeks, which all total amounted to the equivalent of two-and-a-half 40-hour weeks stacked on top of my normal workload here at UUCF. And as you’ve heard me say before, I unfortunately found CPE to about “30% helpful and 100% required.” And I shared some of the insights I learned in that 30% of the program in a well-received sermon here back in November on “After Trauma & Loss: What (Not) To Say.” But my emphasis for this morning is the *opposite* of my point in that sermon. As grateful as I am for the 30% of the program that I found valuable, being required to spend the summer — my favorite season of the year — working overtime to complete a program that I found to 70% a waste of my time was extremely enervating. I almost always left the CPE classroom feeling drained of energy and sometimes resentful and angry. On one level, of course, I was aware, as the Buddha teaches, that I was contributing to my own suffering. But on another level, I was reacting to what felt like a legitimate waste of my time.

Fortunately, I forced myself to have an attitude adjustment about a third of the way through the program and again at the halfway point that helped me persevere.

But consider this comparison. Not long after CPE ended this summer, I found that in the fall, I had overcommitted myself (of my own choosing) for a brief period in a way I hadn't fully anticipated. For six weeks, starting in mid-October I was preaching here on Sunday mornings, teaching a class on "Banned Books of the Bible" at Frederick Community College on Mondays, and teaching "Building Your Own Theology" on Tuesdays here at UUCF. That was three major presentations I had to prepare each week in a row on top of my other responsibilities. But here's the important part. **I was *even busier* during that six week period this fall than during the 10-weeks I did this summer, but internally the two workloads could not have felt more differently.** Whereas CPE left me feeling disconnected, disgruntled, and drained of energy, the back-to-back-to-back preaching and teaching this fall left me tired, but in a good way — as in ready for a well-earned rest after good, fulfilling work.

One term that comes to mind to describe the difference is what Marx called "Alienated Labor." Marx meant a lot by that term, including the negative consequences of workers not being in control of the means of production. But for this morning, that term "**Alienated Labor**" **also points toward work that we're forced to do that does not employ our autonomy, creativity, and gifts — and that leaves us feeling enervated instead of energized.**

To connect this dynamic back to the question of what is yours to do (and not to do) in this new year, one of my favorite metaphors for discernment is swimming with or against the current of a river. I've found over and over the past few years that resolutions that are too far outside my wheelhouse (such as, for me, completing that CPE unit this summer or taking guitar lessons) feel like I'm swimming in a river against the current: no matter how much effort I exert and how hard I swim, I make little or no progress, and end up frustrated and exhausted. But with other projects that comparatively require much more work (such as my preaching/teaching load this fall, completing a doctoral degree, or finishing a triathlon) feel like I'm swimming *with* the current. I can feel myself moving rapidly, even if it is a long swim. And in the end, I'm left more invigorated than exhausted.

And since this Sunday is "Twelfth Night," the 12th Day of Christmas in the Christian

tradition, allow me to give me one further example. Christmas importantly commemorates the birth of Jesus, but one of the reasons that I was drawn to transfer from Liberal Christianity to Unitarian Universalism is that I think **it is unhelpful to focus our religious and spiritual life too much on the life of one, male historical individual.** Instead, I see Jesus as one among many prophetic figures who should inspire us. Moreover, I think that the historical Jesus would agree with me that, in the end, the point is not imitating the life of any one individual, it is building what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the Beloved Community.

Said differently, I think that Rabbi Jesus would agree with the old Hasidic story that Rabbi Zusya told on his deathbed. He said, “In the world to come I shall not be asked, ‘Why were you not Moses?’ I shall be asked, ‘Why were you not Zusya?’”<sup>2</sup> So, in this new year, the question is more than “Why are you not more like Moses or Miriam, Jesus or Gandhi, Buddha or MLK.” The question is who are *you*? Why are you not fully yourself? z“Where [does] *your* deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet”? What is most authentically *yours* to do? Not just the many “good” things to do, which can be a distraction, but the “best” — those activities, practices, people, place, and things, which help make manifest your best, most superlative self. What is *yours* to do in 2014? And what is your *not* to do?

## **Fire Communion**

As you continue to reflect on what is your to do (and *not* to do) in this new year, I invite you to consider two different ritual responses that are part of a tradition in Unitarian Universalism called Fire Communion. At the front of the sanctuary, there are tables with paper, pens, and votive candles. **If there is something that you feel called to say “no” to or *let go of*, I invite you in a few moments to come forward and write a word or phrase on a slip of paper that is symbolic of what you feel called to let go.** Then I invite you light the slip of paper on fire and drop it in the bowl in the center of the table. To be clear, this ritual of burning a slip of paper does not necessary mean that the process of “letting go” is complete. But I invite you to see this ritual as an important gesture — perhaps one step among many — of your

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<sup>2</sup> The Hasidic tale is from Martin Buber, The Way of Man According to the Teaching of Hasidism, 16-17.

intention to continue the process of letting go of a part of your life that in the past has been life-negating for you.

**You are also invited to light a votive candle to symbolize something that you want to do, affirm, or say “yes” to in the new year.** As the music begins playing in a few moments, you are invited to come forward as you feel led to do either or both of these rituals.

To help with your discernment, I will leave you with a series of question that we were given as part of the “Choose Health” pilot program I mentioned during the spoken meditation. We were asked to reflect on what is authentically ours to do in regard to seven areas. May these questions help prompt your discernment of what to let go of and what to affirm in this new year:

- **Physical Wellness:** When or how do you feel physically alive, your body skillfully engaged? What would you like to do to feel this way more often?
- **Emotional Wellness:** When or how do you feel emotionally engaged? Let yourself dream about something that would add more joy to your life.
- **Intellectual Wellness:** When or how does your mind feel energized, buzzing with electric vitality?
- **Financial Wellness:** What would help you feel more comfortable with your finances?
- **Social Wellness:** When or how do you feel connected to those you love and value?
- **Vocational Wellness:** When or how do you feel fulfilled and optimistic in your work?
- **Spiritual Wellness:** What makes you fully alive? [and connected to what we UUs call the Interdependent Web of All Existence]

As you feel led, come forward to write a word or phrase on a slip of paper that is symbolic of what you feel called to let go. And light a votive candle to symbolize something that you want to *say “yes” to* in the new year.