

Five Things You Need for the Journey

A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz
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UU Church of Annapolis, MD

The year was Fall 2011. The place was Nazareth, the Palestinian city in Israel. The task – was to climb up to the top of the city of Nazareth to walk what was called “The Jesus Trail.” An entrepreneurial couple had mapped out this hike that went through some of the places where Jesus was documented as having been – such as Nazareth, Cana, Capurnum and the Sea of Galilee. I had heard about the Jesus trail while exploring hikes in Israel and Palestine and knew I wanted to do it. Why? Because I saw myself as a spiritual person. Because I identify Jesus as one of my central spiritual teachers, Because I wanted to see the landscape which he saw. Although I knew that much had changed in 2000 plus years, I felt as many pilgrims do, that doing this hike would help me to understand myself, my faith, and my relationship to Jesus a bit better. And so, we began to climb the 200 steps to the top of the city of Nazareth.

The topic for this sermon was inspired by church member Bob Davis, who bought this sermon at last November’s fundraising auction. Bob gave me the choice of three really great topics; all of which I plan to do at sometime during my tenure with you. But the one that inspired me most for this season of our life together was his question: “What does it mean to be a religious and/or spiritual person?” Of course, for a minister that’s like feeding red meat to a dog, I was all about that! Because even though much happens here at this church and in other UU churches -, we build healthy institutions, we protest and fight against injustice, we care for our members – I see the central purpose of church is to grow and deepen our spiritual lives. So this morning I want to explore what it means for me, and maybe for you, to be a spiritual person, and to live a spiritual life?

As is the case with many UU’s, you may be saying to yourself, “can you define the term? What is a spiritual life?” Spirit in Hebrew is *ruah*, literally breath or wind. Think of it as the breath of life -as that which you cannot live without, but what you cannot see – you can only feel. A spiritual life is

that part of yourself that is intimately connected with your values, your ethics, and your understanding of what it means to live and move and have your being in the world. And, to take this metaphor of breath a bit farther – when you’re stressed, your breath very shallow; when you stop breathing you die. To enlarge your spiritual life, is to enlarge your capacity for love, for wisdom, for compassion, for deeper understanding of this life.

Many years ago now, while on a retreat, I heard a speaker contrast the five pillars of Islam with Five Pillars of his spiritual life and since then, I’ve adopted them as my own. There are five things he said, you need to bring with you on any spiritual journey and they are: daily practice; weekly worship; monthly service; annual retreat; and lifetime pilgrimage. These five things I want to explore with you today.

Let’s begin with daily practice. When I first encountered meditation, I thought it was the most torturous form of spiritual practice on the planet. “But my mind is so busy! I can’t sit still for a minute!” I complained to my spiritual director. “Yep,” she said, “you are no different than any other human being.” The purpose of a daily practice is to develop the discipline of inner silence and stillness which you can tap back into at any time. Why is that important to your spiritual life? Because with all the clamor surrounding us, you need to be able to be able to listen to your own voice – not the voice of your mother or your spouse or to hear the demands of your children; but your own unique voice. The best way to do that of course, is through silence. Whether its sitting zazen and counting your breath or finding a mantra or a word that you repeat or spending time in silence in nature, having something that you do everyday as a touchstone and as a gift to your spiritual life is an important part of spiritual practice.

Sitting still is not the only way, however, to develop a daily practice. There are many others – but I want to highlight one . I would commend to you the practice known in Judaism as avoiding Lashon Hara, which is translated as evil tongue or negative speech or gossip. In Judaism spreading rumors or gossip is considered to be a serious sin. I wondered why this was considered to be such a sin, but when I read further, I understood why. In

ancient Israel, they understood the fragility of keeping a relatively small and minority people intact. They stressed the health of the community above the fleeting pleasure or personal vindication that one gets from gossiping or spreading false rumors. In our modern society, we can hide our negative speech in comments on Facebook or in private email exchanges. What that does however, is to infect in a relatively healthy system, the poison of derogatory speech or even idle gossip. So, if sitting in meditation for 20 minutes a day seems too much of a daily spiritual discipline to take up, I challenge you to refrain from lashon hara, as it says in the Tanakh, to *keep thy tongue from evil* and on a daily basis to adopt habits that lead towards healthy relationships marked by direct communication. And if you are on other end of someone who is gossiping or spreading rumors, ask them to stop it. Tell them you cannot be party to gossip or rumor mongering, but instead, you would be willing to go with that individual to speak to someone who can address the concerns. And if the individual does not wish to do that, it's their problem and not yours.

How about Weekly Worship. That one's pretty easy, right? You're here aren't you, doing it right now? Well, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the 19th century Unitarian once wrote : *"A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will come out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping, we are becoming."* Even if you didn't come to church last week, Emerson would say that you spent time worshipping something! The church is here to give you a chance to worship the highest and the best that you know. Weekly worship is the main event of a church. Legally, if you do not have a worshipping community, you do not have a church. What is it then, that we as Unitarian Universalists worship? If we don't all fall to our knees in prayer to God or Allah; if we don't all bow to the Buddha way; if we don't kneel in the presence of the Holy, what do we worship? Unitarian Universalists long ago expanded our understanding of what it means to worship; and it is no less meaningful to worship the

mystery which is greater than our comprehension than it is to say we worship God.

Although you can and some certainly do, worship in places other than in church, I'm the minister of a church, so that's where I want to focus now. We gather together each week not as a club, not as a social justice organization, but to and to embrace the fact that revelation is not sealed; in other words, we understand that the mystery and complexity of life is worthy of our contemplation

We gather in worship for intellectual stimulation to be sure, but that's not all worship is. It is the yearning and the striving to breath deeply the fullness of this life. Weekly worship is, for many Unitarian Universalists, their primary spiritual practice. You show up, regardless of who is preaching or what's on the Sunday morning marquee. You show up and you put up, with your ministers changing beloved parts of your service; or the typo on the power point slide or the miscue by one participant or another. You do this because some part of you knows you need to tap into a Source of Life that is greater than yourself. I often say that when I see you all streaming into worship on Sunday morning, especially those of you who have had to get up and get your children dressed and come to church --it's all I can do to stop myself from bowing down in gratitude and thanks.

The third pillar is **monthly service.** All religious traditions encourage some form of service. From the Quran, sura 3:111 it reads "O people of Islam, you are the best people ever raised for the good of humankind because you have been raised to serve others...you will remain the best as long as you are service minded, promote good and promote the welfare of society." Jesus' example of being present with, helping and healing others, especially those in marginalized communities, has provided a long history of service as one of the cornerstones of Christian life. There are many ways of providing service, such as raising children and caring for an ill or disabled or differently-abled loved one. These are the kinds of secret service that are not named, but they are a spiritual practice nonetheless.

For Unitarian Universalists, service, especially within the context of social justice has in some ways, become the primary way we express our values. Every church I've served has had

disagreements on various programs, worship innovations, music, governance, but no one argues about the importance of providing service to those in need and speaking out and acting on behalf of social justice. What I have seen argument over is which social justice program should take priority in a congregation's life – and the vying for resources and the minister and other lay leaders time and attention. Which is more important – immigrants or those living in public housing? Changing legislation that would impact the environment or cooking meals for those who are hungry? Of course, the answer is, they are all important, and they all need our attention.

Some churches are addressing this tension by asking the congregation to focus on no more than three to five social justice initiatives per year, which are voted on by the congregation at the annual meeting. The purpose is not to diminish the importance of other social justice initiatives, but to provide a focused attention and resources on a few instead of many. Earlier in my ministry here I said that this church has a culture of saying “yes” particularly to social justice initiatives. It's impressive and laudable. And yet at the same time, saying yes to too many causes can cause compassion paralysis.

When we look at the wider world around us, honestly, sometimes it feels like things are so broken that they will never be fixed. I am increasingly convinced that unless we address climate change now, our planet will be uninhabitable. I believe that our current administration's behavior and decisions are devastating to the fragile institution of democracy. I fear the changes that are being made now will make the world a less safe and less hospitable place for my yet to born grandchildren. And yet, this is where reading history can provide an important counter narrative. I'm reading a book called *These Truths* by Jill Lepore; an epic analysis of American history. Although she does not stint from documenting the horrors of slavery and the ways in which racism is embedded in our culture; nor does she neglect the systems of patriarchy which relegated women as second class citizens, you can also see how the storms of justice and righteous action have laid bare essential truths about this

country. As a result of those storms, laying bare these realities - the nation changed.

When I get discouraged about the state of affairs in this country and around the globe, I also take inspiration where I can get it. The choir song “The Storm is Passing Over” and the first line of the original text is: “O courage my soul and let us journey on. For the night is dark and I am far from home. Thanks be to God, the morning light appears. The storm is passing over...”

Choir: The Storm is Passing Over

The fourth thing you need to for your spiritual journey is an **Annual Retreat**. An annual retreat is not like a vacation. When you go on vacation, the intent or focus is generally different. Maybe you want to relax on the beach and do nothing; or do some adventure hiking, or explore nature. That's all good. But an annual retreat is time you set aside to be by yourself, if possible, to reflect on spiritual questions – like “how goes it with my spirit?” or “what is the state of my soul?” or “how can I enlarge my capacity for wisdom, compassion and patience?” The poet David Whyte wrote a series of questions, some of which I've used as the basis for an annual retreat. He calls them “Ten Questions which have no right to go away,” Some examples include questions like: “Am I harvesting from this year's season of life?” or “Where is the temple of my adult aloneness? Or “How can I drink from the deep well of things as they are?” These kinds of questions help to shape an annual retreat that can deepen you on your spiritual path. Many religious traditions offer retreat opportunities for private or group retreats., and our UU conference centers offer such opportunities as well.

Of course, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the church has an annual retreat too. Held about two hours away from Annapolis, it's a multigenerational opportunity for members and friends of this congregation to make community and to play together. While it's not a classic spiritual retreat, I hope that many consider attending because you all work really hard at church. Honestly, you do.

The amount of time and energy poured into teaching children and leading worship and crafting governance and by-laws and preparing for the search committee and the April 7th congregational

meeting – you all deserve a break. A rest. Some time to just play and to hang out with each other and to remember why you're here and why you have chosen this particular community at this particular time in your life. In the midst of all the to-dos, and in the challenges of trying to create community together, we can forget why we like each other – why for many of us – *this is our chosen family of faith*. Although we may argue amongst ourselves, and some of us may act out in ways we regret later, this community is where we have made some of the deepest friendships of our lives; and it deserves our love. We love best when we're rested and have an opportunity to play.

Lifetime Pilgrimage. The last of the five pillars of a spiritual life – is lifetime pilgrimage. When we think of lifetime pilgrimage, we may often imagine ourselves going somewhere special. For example, about 200,000 pilgrims a year walk the Camino de Santiago in France and northwest Spain. The Camino, also named as “The Way” is not just one path, but a network of paths, like a river system, small brooks join together to make streams, and the streams join together to make rivers, and the rivers join together to make the French part of the Camino. I've had several colleagues hike the Camino and all of them talk about how the people they met along the way, and the struggles they endured, whether bad weather or blistered feet, changed them forever.

At the beginning of the sermon, I left you as I was climbing up the stairs to the top of city of Nazareth – remember? Hiking the Jesus trail was to be my lifetime spiritual pilgrimage. I was ready. I had a Bible in my backpack and had planned to read verses out loud to my Buddhist husband while hiking. When we got to the top of Nazareth, we saw a sign that pointed us towards a trail through a field which led deeper into the woods. Wow. This was likely where Jesus must have walked. The Holy Land! I was in the Holy Land. I was so excited! We started to walk and immediately I noticed something was wrong – terribly wrong. On one side of the path there was a bunch of broken clay pots and beside that an old rusty skillet. And then on the other side of the trail, a couch with its springs exposed and a plastic child's toy. As we looked around, I realized an inescapable truth – that my lofty ambitions for pilgrimage would begin by

walking through someone else's trash. I hate to say it, but that was the spiritual lesson I needed to learn.

After making our way through the town dump, we hiked for another day and a half, until we were about a 30 minute car ride from the Sea of Galilee. It had been raining, heavily and we reached a patch of the trail that was thick mud. Mud so thick that your hiking boots get stuck, and you nearly pulled yourself out of boots trying to take the next step. After about 40-minutes of slogging less than an 1/8 of a mile distance, my husband looked at me and finally said “can we just call a cab?” “No,” I shot back. “This is a pilgrimage. It's supposed to be hard!” But after another 10 minutes, we mucked our way to a bus stop – and a bus that just happened to roll up at this moment. I said to Wayne, “yes, but what Jesus do?” He said, “he'd take the bus.” And we did. So the moral of this story is: a lifetime pilgrimage may not turn out to be everything you expected and wanted, but it may still give you what you needed--because that was certainly true for me.

This church is involved in its own lifetime pilgrimage of sorts. Although you will call many ministers in the lifetime of this institution, you are about to embark upon a very special pilgrimage into the unknown. Reverend John plans to stay and you plan to call a new minister; and they, along with you will work out the details of this ministry and how it will unfold, and who will do what and who will be called what. The purpose of this pilgrimage between now and this time next year is not to ask yourselves “What kind of minister do we want?” or “what kind of minister will reflect my personal theology or interests,” but instead, the question at the heart of all spiritual practice “who and what are we; and who and what do we want to become?” That question is at the heart of every pilgrimage, whether personal or institutional. Only after you have clarity about the first question, can you ask the next one “what is our next ministry and who is best suited to partner with us on that journey?”

The concluding paragraph of this sermon will actually be written by you. Before we take up the morning collection, I'm going to ask you to reflect on your choice of a couple of questions, which are on the slide behind me. For those of you who have been at church for a long time, I'd like to

ask you to write down the first thing that comes to your mind when asked the question “what questions are on your mind as UUCA begins another phase of its journey?” (Please note that if you want a response to your question, you must include your name. Anonymous criticism won’t be responded to.)

For those of you who are new and may not be familiar with this church, I’d like to ask you to reflect on the question, in your opinion, What made you decide to come and visit this church today? Did you find what you were looking for?

While Sara Jones plays some music, I’m turning the rest of the service over to you and in about five minutes I’ll ring this bell, and then will announce the offering. Please put your cards in the offering plate as it passes you by. I’ll also have these questions on the website in an on-line format which you can fill out later if you didn’t get a chance to finish it this morning.

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Daily practice. Weekly Worship. Monthly Service. Annual Retreat. Lifetime Pilgrimage. This is the way you build a spiritual life, day by day, month by month, year by year. This is the way you build a life. This is The Way – or at least, one way to help you find meaning and purpose on your life’s journey. Amen and may it be so