

Mindfulness

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

Rev. Paul Beckel

September 24, 2017

When the world and all the horrors are so big and so real, I bake. Baking my grandma's and mom's recipes, feeling love coming down through the generations, the smells holding me in the hugs that their arms can no longer give, I find that I can breathe. I pray. I cry. Thank you, banana bread, for reminding me how deep love is, and how much we matter to one another. I don't have any profound wisdom today, but I send you all my love.

—Laura Aosved

Member of the Unitarian Free Church, Blaine WA

WELCOME

As we gather today, some of us are celebrating another beautiful day. Others are struggling with difficult news or difficult memories. Among those struggling are some who just need this time to themselves...and others hoping see an old friend, or meet a new one. The carefree among us include some who will need to bolt back home after the service to get ready for even more fun this afternoon...and some, perhaps who have no settled home. We each bring a unique set of circumstances to this day. And there is no *necessary* correlation between what's going on in our lives and how we respond. May our hearts be big enough today to embrace the full range of human experience...including our own experience in all of its complexity.

GATHERING SONG

*Gathered here in the mystery of the hour, gathered here in one strong body,
gathered here in the struggle and the power, spirit draw near.*

CHILDREN'S FOCUS Doing the Turtle

ERACISM MINUTE Judy Pine

MEDITATION

I invite you to close your eyes, now, if you wish. Put your feet flat on the floor, sit with your back straight and your shoulders square... and prepare yourselves to imagine how bats experience the world through the dark world which to them, I'm guessing, is not scary at all. This is an adaptation of an essay by Linda Hogan, afterward let's enjoy a minute of silence.

Bats hear their way through the world. Hearing the sounds that exist at the edges of our lives. Leaping through twilight they cry out a thin language and listen for its echo to return. In this dusky world of songs — a pitch above our own — the world throws back a language. Everything answers, the corner of a house, the shaking leaves on a wind-blown tree, the solid voice of bricks. An insect is located. A wall sings out its presence. There are currents of air loud as ocean waves, a music of trees, stones, and barbed wire. A music that goes undetected by us, even in what we call moments of silence.

How might we get there from here? Get to the center of the world, to the place where the universe carries down the song of the night. How might we listen or see or find our way by feel — to the heart of every yes

or no? How do we learn to trust ourselves enough to hear the chanting of the earth? To know what's alive or absent around us, what penetrates the void behind our eyes, the pulse that resonates through the living landscape, until a wild mercy wakes in us, climbs out, and takes wing in the sky?

SERMON

A friend told me this week — a little breathless because she didn't know if she would meet me on time — she said that she had just been sitting at a railroad crossing. And she counted 142 cars. Really, she said, she counted them all. I said you must have been very focused. I'm guessing that that could have been a great mindfulness exercise. Sure, she said, it could have been, if I hadn't just gotten more peeved with every damn train car.

Mindfulness is the practice of awareness, noticing, paying attention to our immediate experience. Seeing what we're seeing, hearing what we're hearing, feeling what we're feeling. Maybe that doesn't sound too complicated, or too difficult. Good, it's not supposed to be complicated or difficult. But how often do we do it? And when we do, are we able to see and hear and feel without turning away from those aspects of our experience that are uncomfortable, unexpected, or unwelcome?

The ideals of mindfulness arose in Buddhist teachings about 2,500 years ago. In recent decades it has been adapted to secular purposes from improving athletic performance to promoting physical and mental well-being. The first noble truth taught by the Buddha is that life is stressful. The original term is often translated as 'suffering,' but it can refer to the full range of discomfort from an uneasiness, that we can't quite name ... to deep anguish. According to Buddhist teaching, stress is caused by the fact that everything is constantly changing and is therefore impossible to grasp. And we resist this inescapable experience of life.

Practitioners of mindfulness have no illusion that they or you can eliminate this quandary. So the practice of mindfulness does not require that we be grateful or even accepting of every aspect of our experience. That would be a pretty high bar. I think it's a good start simply to be able to acknowledge what is real. To be open, to be receptive, to acknowledge rather than to run from our experience.

And when our attention slips, which will happen again and again, the point is simply to gently return our attention to our direct experience. Through mindfulness practices we discover ways to attend to what is real, including that which we'd rather not see, so that we can attend to our real circumstances with less distress.

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The plan for our program year at BUF, now through June, is to introduce a little bit of mindfulness into what we do in our Sunday services and religious education ... and who knows where else. In all likelihood our gardeners and quilters and cooks, and our bookkeeper, have done this kind of thing forever and don't need any fancy word for what they do. In all likelihood each of us has done this from time to time. If you're doing it 24 hours a day and seven days a week it may be time to be mindful that you haven't slept for a very long time. Otherwise you might want to consider adding just a little bit of mindfulness to your every day.

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The world is too vast, even within the comparatively small sphere off our senses, so we cannot pay close attention to everything. We can't even notice everything. And if we start to notice more of what is going on around us, that may not be pleasant, at first. Not everything we see or hear will be to our liking. On the

other hand, we may be missing a lot of wonderful experiences that are close at hand if we're too caught up in the random chatter of our thoughts ... or emotional and cognitive mayhem of Facebook.

Also, even if what is happening here and now is stressful, it's only a fragment of the infinite possible stresses we could be obsessing about from yesterday, or the infinite anxieties that we could project upon tomorrow.

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But let's get back to suffering, because I want to tell you about my trip to the dentist this week. I'm not going to ask you to feel my pain, nor will I brag about my ability to flow through the poking and drilling with perfect serenity because I was practicing mindfulness. No, I'm going to tell you that I panicked, and almost threw up on the dentist and her able assistant. The problem wasn't the pain or the jarring vibrations, but my gag reflex when they tried to shove these rubber gadgets down my throat. I acknowledge that these were intended to be protective measures, and everyone was kind. They were looking out for my best interests.

But again and again, despite my best efforts to relax and breathe, one touch on the back of my tongue and my whole body jolted up, and my eyes almost exploded from my head. My point is that to some degree, our reactivity is outside of our control. I mean, maybe the Buddha didn't have a gag reflex but you and I do. So we don't need to judge ourselves by the standard of perfect equanimity under any circumstances.

And some times are better than others for practicing mindfulness. Just like some times are better than others for having dental work. I did not know this until a few days ago when my dentist suggested that, for anything other than cleaning, I should schedule appointments in the afternoon. Apparently the gag reflex is strongest in the morning ... though apparently this isn't a problem for most people. I imagine it's the same with practices of mindfulness: we all gotta figure out what's right for us. And that will likely change from time to time.

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So those who teach and promote mindfulness — whether as a spiritual or a therapeutic practice — don't suggest that we need to spend every moment of our lives in this state. There are times when it is *good* to dream about possibilities for something outside the here and now. There are times to reflect, or reminisce. Other times we have step away from the here and now in order to strategize, organize, and design. Critical thinking and sophisticated abstract analysis are powerful and vital to our well-being. Sometimes we need to figure out what words mean, rather than just hearing their melody.

Proponents of mindfulness are certainly not opposed to these essential life functions. What's important, though, is that we take a break from this demanding work on a regular basis. It's important that we develop the skills and the discipline to rest our bodies and our minds.

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There are, of course, a variety of ways to rest our bodies and our minds. *Mindlessness* might be a good one as well. It depends on what you mean by mindlessness, I guess, but there are legitimate meditative practices that involve emptying ourselves completely rather than attending to our experience. I will just

point out that neither of these is about running away from reality or shirking responsibility. It's not about egocentric obsession on the meaning of life or concentrating on our needs, or our navels.

On the contrary, the point of raising mindfulness as a theme for our entire church year is that our congregational mission calls us to live with passion and compassion in the world, not just in our own heads. And in these stressful times, we are called out there. Our love, integrity, creativity, and the insights of our centuries-old liberal religious tradition are all needed out there to help shape the world that is yet to be born, a world still determined to break through the fear, and rise above authoritarianism, inequity, and disrespect for our living planet.

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Sometimes when we're doing everything we can to hold ourselves together, we somehow put what might be overwhelming stress — we put it aside so that we can do what we need to do. With a child in the hospital, or moving, or changing jobs, or finishing school, we just gotta get through it. We don't attend to our bodies, our feelings. I'm not saying that's wrong. We do what we need to do. But once the pressure is off, the shock can come on strong. In the coming weeks we'll be talking about and practicing some very simple techniques that might help us get through such times, and minimize the tsunami that can come later.

And sometimes, even when things are okay in our immediate surroundings, we feel deep distress because far away in the world, but up close in the news, we see people suffering from hurricanes, earthquakes, terrorism, war, disease, hunger, hatred and injustice. Whether near or far away, we are human and we connect with others who are struggling and dying through no fault of their own. Really there is no distance between us, not just because instant telecommunications enable us to hear and see what they're going through, but because they are our sisters and brothers.

This week I invite you to watch and listen to as much or as little news as you wish. And once a day, you may wish to include the wider world in your mindful observation of your immediate surroundings. Still, see here, where you sit or stand. Feel the cool of fall in the air, or the heat if you have a furnace. Taste food. Feel the joy and pain present in that very moment. Call it a break, call it a prayer, call it Doris. Or call it nothing as you just experience this most simple straightforward gift you can give and receive at the same time.

PHOENIX ENSEMBLE *Simple Gifts*
SEJC COLLECTION for Humanitas
SENDING SONG #391 *Voice Still and Small*

BENEDICTION

As we extinguish the chalice we remember that it is but a symbol. A powerful symbol, because it represents the light of love to which we aspire. But that light and its warmth did not come from a match. And it was not held up here by a candle. It came from this loving assembly, and goes with you now into the world.