

# The Faith of the Future Is Formational

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One of the great things about being at the end of a line of such distinguished colleagues is that I feel the burden of originality completely lifted off my shoulders. I'll see if there's anything new I have to offer.

I want to start my remarks today with two anecdotes.

One is from a fellow Unitarian Universalist religious professional in my area. Commenting on [spiritualspringcleaning.com](http://spiritualspringcleaning.com), a month-long online spiritual practice I am doing this April, he said, *"What I like about your blog is it gives people a way to have ownership and a process around faith formation on the daily level."*

This young colleague of mine was clear that he did not want to return to the Evangelical Christianity in which he was raised. But he did tell me he missed the everyday emphasis on faith formation and practice that were a part of his youth. He lamented that we UU's often lack explicit modeling about how we live every day for, and in, our faith.

The second anecdote I remember reading in the *New York Times* over a decade ago. An article told a story of an affluent, highly educated young woman who chose to practice a traditional, but not reactionary, form of Judaism that was foreign to her largely cultural, secular upbringing in that tradition. She sought this daily faith because, *"it lets me know how to use my freedom."*

Unitarian Universalism is a free-faith tradition. As Marilyn Sewell asked us last night, one of the key questions facing us is whether we will become more explicit about what our freedom *is for*, rather than asserting that we are UU simply because we are *free from* certain things.

This kind of positive, affirmative freedom will create our future.

Where I do ministry, where WellSprings was planted and launched, is in a suburban/exurban community outside of Philadelphia. In the last decade the area has incorporated many people in new and rapid growth. It's why WellSprings was planted where it was. We just celebrated our fourth birthday in January.

It is a social context and way of doing church that is far from here. I was corrected last night when I mentioned I learned that First Church was founded in 1630. No, it wasn't founded, the congregation was *gathered* in 1630. Starting with my being a Yankees fan, I always seem indecorous when I'm in New England.

This is the most dressed up I've been in the pulpit in a long time. I am not using any Power Point slides or videos today in my presentation. I use them all the time at home. We have a rock band. How we worship on Sundays is very different from how I know many of you worship. I'm aware that some established UU's have said that if WellSprings is the future of this faith, they won't be a part of it. In worship we live out our sense of mission to be, as Walt Whitman wrote, *charged full with the charge of the soul*. It's our calling and we're fully devoted to it.

Here's the thing, though. I don't believe the future has to be rock bands in worship, or ministers who dress down or use pop culture references. It's not the future for all of us. I'm not here to share or sell hip, contemporary church. Or to promise you how it will double your attendance in less than a year. It might. I believe in our worship practices, but that's not the only way to the future of our faith.

Instead, I want to talk about something older.

One of the church growth consultants that I've learned from is a guy named Tom Bandy. A phrase he often uses is about equipping current churches to have *"ancient faith for a postmodern world."*

If there is good news for our UU future, I believe we can find a great portion of it in our somewhat distant past. Not as far back as ancient, but still some time ago. In this quest, we won't end up sounding exactly like our ancestors. But we can be inspired by them.

**Woven throughout so much of the theology and belief of our 19th century forebears is the understanding that each day is a chance to grow, shape and form our spiritual character through practices both inner and outer directed. This tradition is still in our own collective religious DNA. If we listen to this part of our past, we will create our future.**

As someone who didn't study at a UU seminary and who hasn't served an established congregation, I have to be intentional about staying grounded in our traditions. One of the best places that I've found to do this is the blog called Boston Unitarian. It's a fantastic resource that features some of the best of our theological tradition.

Not long ago, the blog featured these words, from William Ellery Channing's important sermon, "Likeness to God":

I affirm, and would maintain, that true religion consists in proposing as our great end, a growing likeness to the Supreme Being...I begin with observing, what all indeed will understand, that the likeness to God, of which I propose to speak, belongs to our higher or spiritual nature. [This Likeness] has its foundation in the original and essential capacities of the mind. In proportion as these are unfolded by right and vigorous exertion, it is extended and brightened. In proportion as these lie dormant, it is obscured.

The wisdom of Channing's words, over 150 years old, is confirmed by some of the most recent understandings of how we flourish. As we go back to the past for inspiration, we simultaneously embrace some of the most up-to-date understanding of what it is to be human. We find Channing's method correlates with what folks like the Philadelphia neuroscientist/"neurotheologian" Dr. Andrew Newberg are telling us about the nature of the brain and how we're hard-wired for spiritual experience and development.

Dr. Newberg takes MRI's, images of people's brains who have well-developed spiritual practices. In one of his experiments, he compares the brain scans of Carmelite nuns in their theistic Centering Prayer practice with Buddhist monks and their non-theistic mindfulness meditation. Different traditions, different names for the experience of the Holy. But the brains of these Buddhist and Catholic practitioners appeared the same in the imaging. The parts of the mind that were associated with empathy, compassion, peace and self-transcendence all showed greater engagement. Activity in the parts of the brain associated with fear, anxiety, aggression, the "reptile brain," diminished.

What the research of Dr. Newberg, and others, reveals is that we can bring many names, and still grow into that same likeness of and with the Source and Center of Life. But it takes practice to form and shape that original, sacred likeness that is implanted within each of us. Channing was right. As these qualities are exercised, they are cultivated and we grow. As these qualities lie dormant, they are obscured and unused. There are some parts of our living tradition that encourage us to develop these inherent parts of ourselves. Other parts, not so much.

I take very seriously this affirmation from our Sources: *Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.*

I believe that we should be warned not just to the religious idolatries and prejudices that worldwide bruise and batter people's lives and bodies. We can apply the teaching of this Source beyond just the evils of fundamentalism. The Source also calls us to critically examine our own idolatry of rationalism. Of the ways in which we narrowly understand human reason, and end up confusing intellectual knowledge with spiritual wisdom.

A few years ago a man who had a former association with a UU congregation in Florida committed an atrocity. In a fit of homophobic rage, this damaged man murdered his ex-wife, her partner, and his children. An unspeakably evil act, to which one member of the local UU congregation responded in the press, that he couldn't understand how someone so well educated could do such an awful thing.

Confusing knowledge with wisdom; mistaking a person's intellectual background with their moral and spiritual formation. If that isn't the sin of idolatry, I'm not sure what is.

To truly heed the guidance of this Source means learning from and applying the positive understanding of how some of our most fascinating science is validating formative spiritual practices that are thousands of years old. Spiritual practices that must be entered into and experienced before we can comprehend the rational content of the practice.

As we commit to spiritual practices much as our ancestors did, we find Channing's natural capacities of the mind waiting to be birthed. We find deeper confirmation that we are not inherently flawed. We are not born sinning, originally. Growth is natural to us.

At the same time we also move beyond the lazy "I'm okay, you're okay" caricature of religious liberalism, that somehow we're not in need of deeper growth and further development. Rejecting both the doctrine of original sin and the notion that our inherent worth and dignity are some static entity, instead we affirm that we are inherently invested by the Universe with the capacity to develop our lives.

When we as UU's can move beyond simply defending our theological turf, we discover that we share the practice and experience of cultivating sacred ground with some surprising people.

Among them is Sam Harris, the non-theist writer and ardent opponent of organized religion. The intellectual provocateur spoke a few years ago at the American Atheist Alliance. It should have been a coronation for him, as well known as he was for really giving it to all those religious types. Instead, Harris used his talk to extol the virtues of contemplative practice, saying, "Contemplative experiences have a lot to say about the plasticity of the human mind, and the possibilities of human happiness."

I hear in his words an echo, an updated version of what Hosea Ballou called "happification," the process by which the Divine wills the fulfillment and flourishing for the whole of Creation. Different traditions and language, certainly, but at base the same call to form and express the wholeness that is present within us.

This development of religious character occurs fundamentally through consciously chosen spiritual practice. Too often we UU's think of our internal theological diversity like we're some kind of living college course catalog, a bunch of discrete pieces of information. In speaking of our spiritual ancestors we provide stories, facts and biographies. We're great at putting "Famous UU's" on poster. But simply giving information without providing models and methods of application to our everyday lives is an abdication of religious leadership.

When we provide information without means of application, we open ourselves to the justifiable charge that we have sometimes made of others' faiths. That we are a *religion about* Thoreau or Emerson or Barton or Anthony, rather than seeking to embody the wisdom of these past masters and asking ourselves how we can be the *religion of* these great teachers in our place and in our time. When we do this in our faith communities we create a common sacred ground from which we all can aspire to practice love, compassion, and awakening in our daily lives.

A small but important example of this for me is that at WellSprings we pray not just as a staff together, but also in our teams and our small groups. We don't all share a common understanding or experience of God, but what comes from praying aloud with and for each other is the unearthing of what we do hold in common: our aspirations for our community, our individual and collective losses, sorrows, hopes and gratitude. It is time together that we treasure. It's like that old Ragu commercial, we find "it's all in there" in each of us: the need for contemplation, restoration, lamentation, thanksgiving.

Congregations that practice together stay together and grow together. Common spiritual practices expand our experiential unity as a people of faith. We discover a piece of ultimate reality that is bigger than our individual words for it.

With all apologies to the great George Clinton, "Free your mind and your behind will follow" won't quite get us there. We can't just stay in the false security of what our minds can rationally comprehend. As Emerson wrote in a remarkably humble moment, "Faith makes us, we don't make it." Sometimes we must first give ourselves over to the experiences of faith before we can understand the nature of our experience. Spiritual practice invites us to let more of the world in than just our rational minds can immediately apprehend.

Regular spiritual practice is a form of stewardship, a right and vigorous exertion, by which, as Channing wrote, we extend and brighten the innate God-likeness of our lives. This kind of stewardship involves much more than just our money. It is a daily commitment to making good on the gifts that this mysterious and grace-full universe has somehow chosen to invest in us. It is a this-world (not that I discount what may come) everyday kind of Universalism that effects change, healing and wholeness.

And I believe that the future needs healing. There's a recent study by the University of Michigan about the levels of empathy exhibited by incoming college students. It finds that current students are the least empathetic, most narcissistic cohort in the more than two decades since they've been conducting the study.

The study paints a picture of a generational slice of young people who have been raised to be overstimulated, overexcited, overexposed and over-competitive. These are the exact opposite attributes from what daily spiritual practice can help us aspire to be.

The results remind me of the opening words in a book about affluence by the sociologist Avner Offer: "Affluence breeds impatience and impatience undermines well-being." These sentences hit home for me. WellSprings is located in the wealthiest county in Pennsylvania, the 24<sup>th</sup>-most affluent county in the nation. There is much impatience where we do ministry. It's why I believe that before we can talk about authentic transformation, the importance of daily formation must come first.

There's the illusion, sometimes sold as spiritual snake oil, of the transformative properties of one single seminar, prayer, secret saying, or other esoteric ritual. A new fad, a new high. Even the hope for a transformed life can be turned into just another addiction, another form of impatience, if it's untethered from regular practice.

Years ago, I had the privilege of being in the company of someone who is associated in wonderful ways with experiential spirituality, a teacher of the integral connections between mind-body-spirit. This person is a devoted, healing pioneer in this kind of religiosity.

I asked this person about what they thought about the profile of a certain kind of seeker, one who returns over and over again to retreats, seems to get it, and then the next time returns just as miserable or unhappy as when they arrived the time prior.

This person paused, and with a slight smile, "Ah, a retreat junkie, they're just looking for another fix, another high..."

At WellSprings we have a Spiritual Retreat team. Although we're still young we've had seven spiritual retreats in the last few years. The joy is that we get to do this work together, in community. We get to follow up with each other, grow small groups from our retreats, and hold each other accountable for our aspirations.

Our practices take us beyond being individualistic because it is from community that we experience the strength and encouragement to grow deeper. When these gifts are developed in common practices, the fruits of the practices are re-invested back into community which makes our growth sustainable.

These shared gifts of practice give us back the gift of time in a world that says that we have little of it and accuses us of wasting it if we're not constantly being productive. We can't master the speed of the world, and if we're not careful, we can be swept away in it. Or, through daily practice we can be grounded in our response to live in more mindful, more loving, and more just ways.

My last words are from Dr. King's "Strength to Love":

Only through an inner spiritual transformation do we gain the strength to fight vigorously the evils of the world in a humble and loving spirit. This very transformation saves [us] from speaking irresponsible words which estrange without reconciling."

**Transformation is the fruit, formation is the seed.** With that seed we can grow our future.

Thank you.