

## Nurture Your Spirit

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First Parish in Brookline

The very air has changed! Whatever September means to you, we are in the thick of it! Some of us have experienced a change of pace in our work lives; some returned to school or college; others are preparing to close summer abodes, and a few actually have nothing further they need to do. This one weekend is a critical hinge point in the year recognized in multiple societies over thousands of years. Welcome to this September! For those who have already seen a fair number of Septembers, and you know who you are, I offer a James Broughton poem: "I've been through what my through was to be. I did what I could and couldn't. I was never sure how I would get there. I nourished an ardor for thresholds, for stepping stones, and for ladders. I discovered detour and ditch. I swam in the high tides of greed. I built sandcastles to house my dreams. I survived the sunburns of love. No longer do I hunt for targets. I've climbed all the summits I need to, and I've eaten my share of lotus. Now I give praise and thanks for what could not be avoided, and for every foolhardy choice. I cherish my wounds, and their cures, and the sweet enervations of bliss. My book is an open life! I wave goodbye to the absolutes and send my regrets to infinity. I'd rather be blithe than correct. Until something transcendent turns up, I splash in my poetry puddle, and try to keep God amused." What better way to nurture one's spirit than to splash in poetry puddles, trying to amuse God, until something truly transcendent should turn up in our lives? Welcome to Life's Autumn!

We are in the second day of Rosh Hashanah, the *Festival of Trumpets*, which begins the ten *Days of Awe* and repentance that mark the beginning of the Jewish New Year, and culminate next weekend with Yom Kippur, the *Day of Atonement*. In that portion of the Torah known as *the Priest's Manual*, also called the book of Leviticus, the directions for Rosh Hashanah are quite brief. It says: "The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: in the seventh [lunar] month, on the first day of the month [which this year was last Friday], you shall observe a day of complete rest, a holy convocation commemorated with trumpet blasts. You shall not work at your occupations; and you shall present the LORD's offering by fire." Happy New Year!

Leviticus then goes on to describe Yom Kippur, the tenth day of this seventh lunar month, the day for atonement with the divine, in somewhat greater detail. However it is only in the oral Torah, also known as the *Misnah*, in which instructions are set forth for blowing the *Shofar*, or ram's horn, as the special mark of this day. And it is in the Talmud tractate on Rosh Hashanah that instructions for the book of life describes these ten days leading to Yom Kippur as a time to repent and make amends with your fellow human beings, any and all that have been wronged by you, prior to seeking atonement with the divine beginning next Sunday evening. This is not a bad way to start any new year, spending a week making amends and reconciling with other human beings, before then trying to become right with the source of ultimacy.

For Muslims, who also follow a lunar calendar, today is Eid ul-Fitr, a festival to break the 30-day fast of Ramadan. This Muslim celebration does not include trumpet blasts, resting, or what we might consider fun. It includes a small breakfast, morning prayers, a sermon, and supplication

for forgiveness, mercy and help for all living beings across the world. Perhaps you didn't know that the Qur'an suggests good Muslims ought to seek the good for all living beings across the world? The sermons also often remind Muslims of their obligation this particular day to find someone in financial need to give them a small blessing. Contemporary commentaries on the Qur'an say every Muslim who is mature, sane, financially able, and conscious on the eve of Eid al-Fitr should pay *Zakat*, or religious alms on behalf of yourself, your spouse or children, and any other dependants, including anyone who happens to visit you for Eid al-Fitr. These alms, typically amounting to about six dollars per person, are freely given to those with dire financial need, but only if they live locally, are not known alcoholics, or fail to say their prayers, or are openly living in sin. It is spiritually significant to send money to help alleviate desperate poverty at a great distance, but it is equally spiritually important to help those who live in your own neighborhood. Who is our neighbor? Jesus, of course, memorably says that it is anyone we come into contact with who needs our help. *These are the people in your neighborhood*, Mr. Rogers perhaps equally memorably suggests that it is everyone who lives in geographic proximity to us. So he might say that everyone living within five miles of us, whether or not they are in deep financial need, is our neighbor. This is our neighborhood! Can you find anyone within 5 miles who would be helped by \$6? Eid al-Fitr seeks to relieve the poor of the burden of their poverty at least this one day of the year. Thus Muslims begin the year praising the source of ultimacy and the kindness of fellow humans. Surely you know someone who could use \$6? Blessed Eid!

It is significant these ancient rituals occur on Autumnal Equinox, when light and darkness are in perfect balance, and coincide with the ancient harvest celebrations and preparations for the dark, colder part of the year to come. A new moon arose last Thursday night. For those who wish, following our worship service Pam Kristen will lead a ceremony at 12:45 pm in the balcony room bringing intentionality to noticing the waxing and waning of the moon. Our next full moon is called the harvest moon, and due to its position relative to both earth and sun, this moon will appear larger and brighter than other full moons. Perhaps you saw the glorious full moon we experienced three weeks ago? I happened to have left my bedroom window open that evening and was awoken around 3 am by the bright light of this full moon pouring light into my room as it cleared our tree line. It was a spiritual presence for me, truly awesome! The harvest moon at the end of this month is expected to be even more glorious. Happy Equinox!

Those who prefer earth-centered worship are often called neo-pagans, and may celebrate the Autumnal Equinox on Sept. 22 as an invitation to harvest what the universe has waiting for us; using this time intentionally to balance ourselves and our life; and preparing our lives for our next cycle of being. Christian mystics and secular humanists have long felt their sense of spirituality in tune with the changing seasons and the changes of nature. As mammals we participate in the wondrous movement and transition called the cycle of life and death. On Friday I led a Memorial Service; Saturday I presided at a wedding. This is a time for giving thanks, for finding new balance, and reconciling ourselves with those we have wronged.

If you are relatively new to Unitarian Universalism, you may wonder why we even notice these various religious practices occasioned by this time of year. It is not that we seek to be Jewish, or Muslim, or neo-pagan, though UUs increasingly include Jews, Muslims, and neo-pagans among our members, but rather we wish to spark and nurture our own spiritual journeys. We have

covenanted to accept one another and also to encourage each other to spiritual growth in our congregations. This is our way of engaging with that deep mystery which is human life.

As Huston Smith writes in his autobiography, “our lives are wrapped in mystery, and a lifetime is hardly sufficient to begin to fathom it... We live in time and timelessness simultaneously, just as we are simultaneously body, mind and spirit.” So Huston Smith finds balance on his unique spiritual journey practicing Hatha yoga, reading sacred texts such as the Torah, the Qur’an, Sufi poems, etc. Then praying, first for others, then himself, and then simply dwelling in luminous consciousness with the source of all ultimacy. Now I don’t have his physical rigor, standing on my head while meditating isn’t for me, yet on our journeys we each find our own unique path. This summer I read Huston Smith’s new autobiography. You may know him as the author of *Religions of Man*, later re-issued as *The World’s Religions*, or *Why Religion Matters*, or *Cleansing the Doors of Perception*. I have known his work for nearly 40 forty years as one of my most reliable guides into the essence of each of the world’s major faith traditions. I had not known that he grew up the son of Christian missionaries in China, learning his first Taoism from his Chinese cook. He describes his childhood spiritual life by saying “the transcendent was my morning meal, we had the Eternal for lunch, and I ate a slice of the Infinite at dinner.” Given the heterodoxy of the community in which he was raised, before he was 15 he had experienced Christianity, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and various other Asian folk religions.

He went to Central Methodist College in Fayette, MO, to become a Christian missionary, but instead the life of the mind captured his imagination, and he ended up doing graduate study with Henry Nelson Wieman, one of the greatest UU theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, at the University of Chicago’s School of Theology. Smith sub-titles his autobiography *Adventures Chasing the Divine*, and attributes his concept of God to lessons learned from Wieman. Smith says, “God, so [Wieman] taught us in his graduate classes, is not a Creator but a creative process, superhuman but not supernatural. Wieman’s was an unusual understanding of Christianity, in which Christ neither reformed an old religion nor created a new one: rather, Jesus was the catalyst that releases the creative powers in his disciples to transcend conventional, societal limitations... Faith is not belief but dedication to serving the highest goal you know.” Smith became Wieman’s disciple, even married Wieman’s daughter Kendra, and brought this post-modern perspective to his study of the world’s religions. Wieman described “God as that aspect of reality... which brings life to its highest fulfillment when the proper adjustment is made to it.” Wieman terms this sense of connection with the divine ultimacy “creative events” and *his* teacher Alfred North Whitehead called them “occasions of experience,” and the contemporary Christian theologian Gordon Kaufman calls it “serendipitous creativity.” All these encounters with ultimacy, which we can call spirituality, are sacred. For these spiritual teachers, God is a verb rather than a noun.

Smith was the first to introduce me to the concept that the most truly spiritually advanced teachers embrace all religious forms shown to be efficacious in bringing one into union with the ground of being, what I call ultimacy. He recounts that in 1947 when he was in India studying the Upanishads, his teacher was the Hindu spiritual guru Swami Satprakashananda, who had himself been a student of Swami Ramakrishna, and who told him: “Whenever Ramakrishna heard of a form of spirituality—Christianity, Islam, [even] devotion to the monkey god Hanuman—he would practice it... Christianity, seen from a Hindu perspective becomes in some

ways an even more admirable religion. No other religion, Satprakash said, presses the claim that God is love so vigorously. In Hindu terms, Christianity offers a unique path that unites *bhakti yoga* (love) with *karma yoga* (service).” As many of you know, I grew up in RI in the 1950s, the son of a liberal American Baptist minister, where God was a noun rather than a verb. My openness to all spiritual paths began for me with experiences with my Taoist father-in-law, adventures with the Upanishads, meditation and vision quests with a UU men’s spirituality group, and experiential learning with Zen Buddhists. Eventually I learned to plumb the depths of Christian mystical spiritual exploration. Each path contributes to a rich and varied spiritual life, and each added to my joy. Today I pray a lot: for everyone in this congregation who is in need; for the world around us that is suffering through the adolescence of humanity; for my extended family and their various wishes and needs; but mostly just out of gratitude for being alive and awake to my life.

I have explored sitting meditation, I know it works for many others, but to be honest it doesn’t feel like my best path into experiencing ultimacy. Taoist, Sufi, and Zen mystics have helped me to explore the core of my being. But if I fail to combine my spiritual journeying with service to humanity, I find it grows strangely self-absorbed and limited for my life. The Jesus Prayer of Eastern Orthodoxy, a form of self-induced trance state, has brought me awesome visions, including the dark night of the soul and the incredible lightness of being, but this too fades in time unless put in service of helping to transform human life on this planet. I have always felt a need to connect through nature with the emerging life that is the unfolding of this awesome universe, where we, mere stardust, get to participate. Thus my spiritual journey is one of activism alternating with introspection, reading, and contemplation propelling me out into the world to make a difference for humanity. This is how I nurture my spirit and find the joy in my life. So my question to you this morning is how will you nurture your spirit? Yes, we all have obligations, our time is not our own, and there are many calling us to do many things which get in the way of nurturing our spiritual life. With all that being true, how will you nurture your spirit? I love you all dearly. Blessed be and Amen.