

“The Miracle of the Ordinary”

A Sermon by The Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, March 4, 2007

For the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, North Carolina

Many years ago when I was a young minister, I attended a five-day retreat designed to provide an inspirational start-up to a new ministry. All the ministers present had just begun new positions with Unitarian Universalist churches.

Someone in the UUA's Department of the Ministry in Boston had decided that it would help us to take part in reflection upon our ministry and our goals so that we could serve in our new positions most effectively. They thought it was so important that they were even willing to pay the bill. It was free. I've always been impressed when someone else offers to pay my bills. I know they're serious about something.

The only thing I remember from the retreat was that we were asked what we did as a regular spiritual practice. The question was posed the way someone might ask what food you eat most often. Of course you eat. You wouldn't stay alive if you didn't, unless they put you on an IV. The same assumption stood behind the question of spiritual practice. Of course you have one. What is it? Or what is it that you do regularly that supports your spiritual life?

I went away from the retreat feeling guilty. You see, I didn't have a spiritual practice, at least not one that I could separate from the other things I did and point to and say “That's it. That's my spiritual practice. All these other things I do are something else. They aren't part of my spiritual practice.”

I got the message clearly. I was supposed to do something for which I would set time aside that would make me deeper, richer, more significant to myself and to those I served because it was my spiritual practice. I should do journaling, or Tai Chi, or meditate or pray or something that was spiritual, that didn't look like the rest of the things I did. I had tried them all, but none of them became something I felt a need to keep doing.

Finally I said “I write sermons,” hoping that would get me off the hook. After all, ordinary people don't write sermons regularly. Maybe once a year, a few of them, but most of them never. That's probably the major thing that showed people I was a minister, a “professional spiritual” person. I wrote sermons, religiously, preached them aloud and got people to listen to me.

Nope, that wasn't a good enough answer, at least not for my colleagues. That was work, a thing I did like a shoemaker makes shoes and a lawyer argues in court and a chef cooks food. That would make them what they did for a living but it couldn't count as a spiritual practice. Too ordinary.

To qualify as a spiritual practice, they said, it needed to be set aside from everything else in my life and it needed to be done regularly for no good, practical reason. I went away from the retreat feeling inadequate instead of inspired. I enjoyed the time off. I was glad someone else paid the bill. But I was left with a new itch to scratch, and I wasn't sure I wanted it.

Then I read Thich Nhat Han and learned that the ordinary is spiritual too. He says when you do it for its own sake (not for some gain but just do it to do it) it can be the most wondrous and enlightening thing you do. The ordinary. Whatever it is that you have to do to exist. What does that mean?

Get out of bed. Stumble to the bathroom. Do your thing. Get dressed. Eat breakfast. Walk out

to the car. Go wherever it is that you go. Do what you do to go through each day. Eat again. Say hello. Say goodbye. Come home. Kiss your partner and your children. (Or don't if you don't have them.) Fix food. Eat again. While away the evening. Go to bed. Sleep.

If you do it well, he says it's as spiritually deepening as any special practice that you make a commitment to. There's a depth in the ordinary that can take you as deep as anything else. I think it sometimes can take you deeper, if you stay in the moment rather than trying to jump ahead in your thoughts to something else you need to get done.

Staying in the moment is what happens in a spiritual practice when it becomes significant. It stops being a task you do to make something else possible, and becomes only the thing you do when you do it. You become centered in it. At home in it. You know you are okay doing it. You feel good. There's no pay-off at the end that justifies doing it. Or if there is a pay-off, that doesn't justify doing it. It's doing it that justifies doing it, nothing else. Now if you heard Thich Naht Han saying this you'd know he was talking about a spiritual practice, because he's a Buddhist monk and he even looks religious. If someone who looks religious says it is, it must be so. He says it.

Doing the ordinary well may be more spiritual than doing some formal spiritual practices, because you do the ordinary so often that you don't even notice it when you are doing it. It becomes part of you. Notice it. Be right there doing it, not somewhere else in your mind. Do what you're doing when you do it. Stay there, with yourself. That's exactly how you get centered in any spiritual practice. That's what happens there too.

You can do a special spiritual practice if you want to, but I hope you won't miss this time that is the most time you have in your life. If you aren't spiritual in the ordinary, you're missing your greatest opportunity.

Annie Dillard is a wonderfully spiritual writer. She finds the spiritual in everything around her, often in nature. She says in her book Teaching a Stone to Talk:

At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world, Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait, listening. After a time you hear it: there is nothing there. There is nothing but those things only, those created objects, discrete, growing or holding or swaying, being rained on or raining, held, flooding or ebbing, standing, or spread. You feel the world's word as a tension, a hum, a single chorused note everywhere the same. This is it: this hum is the silence....

The silence is all there is. It is the alpha and the omega. It is God's brooding over the face of the waters; it is the blended note of the ten thousand things, the whine of wings. You take a step in the right direction to pray to this silence, and even to address the prayer to "World." Distinctions blur. Quit your tents. Pray without ceasing.

There's nothing exotic in that passage, nothing difficult, nothing out of the ordinary. Oh, she mentions "God's brooding over the face of the waters" but that's a metaphor for the sense that everything seems larger than just what it is, the ordinary. It is the miracle of the ordinary that makes it important, the very everydayness of it, not magic making something impossible happen, not that kind of miracle.

Please open your hymnbooks to number 354. We're not going to sing right now (we will in a

moment) but I want to point out the ordinariness of what we will be singing about. The hymn goes:

We laugh, we cry, we live, we die; we dance, we sing our song. We need to feel there's something here to which we can belong. We need to feel the freedom just to have some time alone. But most of all we need close friends we can call our very own. And we believe in life, and in the strength of love; and we have found a need to be together. We have our hearts to give, we have our thoughts to receive, and we believe that sharing is an answer.

Nothing remarkable and supernatural there, just the stuff of everyday life, what you do each day: the ordinary.

A couple of years ago a friend came to speak with me about the problem she had knowing that she was spiritual. She was in a twelve-step program and the person leading it wanted her to give her concerns to a higher power.

Alcoholics Anonymous was the first twelve-step program. Now there are hundreds of self-help programs to help people take control of whatever is messing up their lives, from gambling to depression. There's even a non-profit self-help center to refer you to a group for almost any problem. The heart of the twelve-step programs is to recognize that there is a higher power in your life to which (they usually say to whom) you can give your concern, whatever it is.

My friend's problem, she said, is that she was an agnostic. If you aren't sure there is a higher power—in fact you doubt if there is one—how do you give anything to it? If someone says to me, give this to Judy, and I turn and I don't see any Judy, how do I give it to her? Just drop it? That's not giving it to Judy. I have a nagging feeling I haven't done what I needed to do, so I don't get rid of it, even though I'm no longer holding it. My friend couldn't find a higher power to give her problem to.

I said to her “You probably do believe in a higher power, even though you don't identify it with what others seem to mean by that.” She looked perplexed, and not very trusting of my words.

“Actually it may be a lower power,” I said, thinking logically. “What's under your feet?” She looked down and after a minute said “The rug.” “And what's under that?” “The floor.” “And under that?” She laughed and said “The basement.” “And under that?” “Well I guess the ground,” she said. “And under that?” She looked puzzled, so I helped her: “The Earth, all the way down. And under that?” She paused again. “It's not the end,” I said. “There's more.” “The universe, I guess,” she said. “That's right” I said. “It's all holding you up, quite literally. Holding on to you. Just try to jump off.”

“There's a power outside you that supports you every moment and you can't get away from it. You can't be somewhere that you're not being held up. And whether you use traditional religious words like 'God' or abstract concepts like 'higher power' or you don't name it anything at all doesn't really matter. You're being sustained every moment of your life by it. I call it 'the ordinary' because there's nothing that I know that's magic about it, except sometimes it feels miraculous. I don't know how it came about or what it's going to be or how long it's going to be. I studied all that in school, but it never really answered my deepest questions. I only know that it makes it possible for me to be me and you to be you in every instant, and that's the most exciting thing I can imagine.” I said.

“Everything depends on it, and I don’t know how it came about. You and I didn’t make it. No one else made it. We’re here with all our wonder at its power to be and create and change because that keeps happening. It’s the miracle of the ordinary.”

My answer might not have satisfied the leader of my friend’s twelve-step program, who had told her that she needed to have a spiritual life. But it seemed to help her to know that what she has that she knows she has is all that any of us really have, and that all of us are held up in exactly the same way.

Is there something beyond the power, a consciousness that intends to do well by us making this all happen? As a religious naturalist I have an opinion but I admit none of us knows that from first-hand experience, except those who hallucinate or hear voices the rest of us can’t hear. I don’t think it matters, because we’re all held up by the same power anyway and that power doesn’t seem to play favorites. Trust it. It’s all any of us has, the miracle of the ordinary. No matter what you call it. Don’t worry about naming it.

In a great sprawling prose poem Susan Griffin says:

Behind naming, beneath words, is something else. An existence unnamed and unnameable. We give the grass a name, and earth a name. We say grass and earth are separate. We know this because we can pull the grass free of the earth and see its separate roots—but when the grass is free, it dies. We say the inarticulate have no souls. We say the cow’s eye has no existence outside ourselves, that the red wing of the blackbird has no thought, the roe of the salmon no feeling, because we cannot name these. Yet for our own lives we grieve all that cannot be spoken, that there is no name for repeating for ourselves the names of things which surround what cannot be named....

All that we say we are saying around that which cannot be said, cannot be spoken. But in a moment that which is behind naming makes itself known. Hand and breast know each one to the other. Wood in the table knows clay in the bowl. Air knows grass knows water knows mud knows beetle knows frost knows sunlight knows the shape of the earth knows death knows not dying. And all this knowledge is in the souls of everything, behind naming, before speaking, beneath words.

And all I can say is that this, all this is the miracle of the ordinary. And there is nothing more than this. And everything more than it. And no one knows it any better than you, no matter what they call it.

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