

Think of the Colour Blue: Some Thoughts on Ritual and Spiritual Discipline
Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, Sunday September 25th, 2016
Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman

“We live, not by things, but by the meanings of things..... Therefore we do not neglect the ceremonies of our passage.....” [“Singing the Living Tradition” #649 Antoine de St.-Exupéry]

Some definitions— Ritual or rite: a body of customary observances..... Discipline: mental, moral or physical instruction or training—orderly behaviour.... Spiritual: there is a Nobel prize still sitting on the shelf for anyone who can come up with a satisfactory definition of spirituality. I use a working definition of spirituality in its most literal sense—breath; whatever inspires us, keeps body, mind and spirit walking at their ease with one another—and, awake. Our lay chaplains perform rites of passage that mark major turning points. Our personal spiritual disciplines mark, perhaps, resting points.

For some, this time of autumn harvest will mark a periods of increased labour and activity. For some, the ease and warmth of these last summer-y days will open opportunities for an appreciative engagement with landscape, and waterscape, reconnecting us with the web of all existence. Perhaps, a resting point.

Spiritual discipline, repeated behaviour—or practice—can give shape to our days and lives: the yoga class, the daily walk; the book we read and re-read, plumbing the depths; the morning meditation, the meal prepared and shared at noon, tenderly; the cup of tea at four p.m., the evening embrace of one’s household. I recognize as a spiritual discipline, that which is done intentionally, mindfully, repeatedly, towards a calm wakefulness. Practice—where the results do not really matter as much as the doing of it; there is no end, just the doing of it, day after day.

This shaping of our days calls to mind a poem by Billy Collins, called “Horizon”:

You can use the brush of a Japanese monk
or a pencil stub from a race track.

As long as you draw the line a third
the way up from the bottom of the page,

the effect is the same: the world suddenly
divided into its elemental realms.

A moment ago there was only a piece of paper.
Now there is earth and sky, sky and sea.

You were sitting alone in a small room.
Now you are walking in the heat of a vast desert

or standing on the ledge of a winter beach
watching the light on the water, light in the air.

The words of Billy Collins, one of America's Poets Laureate.

Horizons—and the colour blue.

A few years ago, by chance, I was reading two books at about the same time, and by coincidence both included a blue table. One was Paul Watkins' novel, "The Story of My Disappearance", a gritty tale of legitimizing ordeals. The narrator concludes by saying he has set down his account in a far country, seated at a rough wood table painted blue, trying to make sense of it all.

The second was Michael Ondaatje's novel, "Divisadero", described on the dust jacket as "a multilayered novel about passion, loss, and the unshakeable past." The colour blue is a recurring theme in this book, as is a kitchen table. Slowly, fractionally, the table enters the story: first in the stark catalogue of the possessions of a poor farmer (234); later as the place where two friends share stories of loss and gain and deep sorrow—"One solitary light in the room over the blue table. And him putting his hands out to reach for her thin fingers that had nothing in them."(241)

Finally the blue table returns as a piece of furniture salvaged from the wreck of one household and transported to a new place; two pine boards, about a metre in width, a metre in length. "The table always a fraction below his notebooks, always out of focus as he wrote. The six nails that held it together, the colour of the paint, that exact height for him to bend over, as if over a mirror, to see what could be found. His constant companion."(269)

A blue table, where our hunger for meaning crafts art from the raw materials of life.

I was intrigued by this coincidence, the two stories, the two blue tables, both encountered by me within a few weeks, though there was ten years between their publication dates. I mentioned my intrigue at a gathering of colleagues in the Pacific Northwest—the horizontality of it, the colour blue—and someone immediately said—oh, that's Leon and the blue cloth.

And so the third piece emerged—the third blue horizontal. Once upon a time there was a beloved minister in the Puget Sound area. His name was Leon. His life was very full, and his desk was chaos. Each morning Leon would seat himself at his crowded desk, and spread a blue cloth across the chaos, and just sit there. Just sit, and breathe.

Just sit and breathe in, and breathe out, breathe in, breathe out—can you do that? Just imagine you are Leon, at the morning desk, and you spread a blue cloth across the chaos, and just for the moment you breathe in and breathe out, breathe in, and breathe out. The clamour of the day recedes. The sense of one's true self, one's true intentions, returns. And we, with Leon, share this peace, this tranquillity of the blue cloth. And from our blue table we return to the business of the day more clear in body, mind, and spirit, more awake, more able to focus deliberately for this day. And that, dear friends, is a spiritual discipline.

For some, the notion of ritual might seem empty—but I would invite you to look more deeply. For example, there's cake—birthday cakes, wedding cakes, the cakes we bring out for special events, like anniversaries; and the solemn foods we offer those who have travelled a distance to attend a memorial service. It's not about the cake; it's about sharing food and time and care, about recognition and hospitality. When they put your name on a cake, it means they like you, they really like you.

For some of us, the notion of spiritual discipline might evoke some troubling images, as from “The DaVinci Code” film—but I would invite you to look more deeply. For example—yoga. That practice is physical exercise for some, and for some a social event. And for some, at some point in the practice, as one sinks just a little deeper into the pose, there may be a moment where body, mind and spirit come together, and one feels just a little more at home in one's own skin. That was certainly true for me, in the years I attended karate class three times a week at university, sort of an antithesis to the thesis crafting process. And from time to time, a synthesis, where everything just seemed to flow together. How does our First Source describe it? “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.” A spiritual discipline is one means of pursuing or inviting that direct experience. Of mystery and wonder. Towards renewal of the spirit. And openness to life. Almost sounds like a definition of the holy. Or even maybe, God?

Acta non verba; deeds not words. What might a spiritual discipline look like?

Have you ever become so submerged in the study of a foreign language, or some physical task, or a long walk, so that the hours sped past and you were unconscious of them? Have you ever sung with others and felt a deep intimacy as your voices blended, as the bones in your head resonated with your neighbour's voice? Have you ever read a poem, the same poem, every morning, day in and week out, falling deeper and deeper into the words? Or sat on the same park bench for a set time, each day, each week, as leaves come green and fall away, as the morning sky grows light, as stars fill the fading blue of evening? Have you ever watched the hills, seen sun and shadow disclose hidden valleys, listened for birdsong and the wind in the trees?

Have you ever dragged yourself unwilling into yoga class, or the gym, then felt everything come together as your frustrations slipped away and suddenly your path was clear before you? Have

you ever done repetitive work, like shovelling snow, just for the exhilaration of feeling your body exert its strength?

Here's the thing: the discipline part is where you do the behaviour on a regular basis even though frankly you'd rather be in Philadelphia. A friend of mine was in a convent for a while; every day they sang the psalms. Didn't matter if the particular psalm reflected how you felt that day; you just sang the psalm on the schedule. And in the course of a few months you'd done the whole cycle, and then you began again. You sang the psalms to be singing the psalms.

Have you ever practiced the piano, or some other musical instrument, just for a quarter hour, evening after evening, just for the joy of it? Or as a lullaby?

There is a breathing meditation, as we discussed earlier; just breathe in, breathe out. Perhaps with words:

May I be filled with loving-kindness, may I be well,
may I be peaceful and at ease, may I be happy.

May you be filled with loving kindness, may you be well,
may you be peaceful and at ease, may you be happy.

May we be filled with loving kindness, may we be well,
may we be peaceful and at ease, may we be happy.

What if we went for a walk. And as we walk we stop at various points, perhaps a look out. And we stand still, balanced; soften the gaze; open the eyes to the horizon; and just ... look, and listen. A walking meditation.

What if we began each morning with our social network device and checked into a website where we could awaken the electronic flicker of a candle image and tap in a prayer for the healing of the world?

What if we found a park bench, or a rocky hilltop, and each day we simply sat there, in silent stillness, for fifteen minutes, and opened our eyes, and breathed the scent of the earth, the same place each day, day after day?

A spiritual discipline may serve to lend the practitioner tranquillity, or empower one to face illness with fortitude, or bring strength to a challenging situation. A spiritual discipline might serve to centre or re-ground a person who was adrift. Or wondering if their job was going to be downsized this week. Or sitting vigil in a hospital waiting room. A spiritual discipline might sustain one through the anxieties of radical and unfathomable change.

Radical change can assail us at any time, at any age. I have seen folks treat with one another in gentleness and patient tenderness, in sickness and in health, in infant helplessness and adult frailty. For some among us, that gift of care is also a spiritual discipline, named or unnamed. For some of us, perhaps that tenderness is where we meet what we seek as mystery and openness to life—in our respect and care for ourselves and one another and the universe beyond us. And some might call that meeting God—a spiritual discipline of care. As did Mother Teresa, now Saint Teresa.

In conclusion, I wonder, what discipline calls you into wholeness?

Here's one example, again from poet Billy Collins. He names it "Love."

The boy at the far end of the train car
kept looking behind him
as if he were afraid or expecting someone

and then she appeared in the glass door
of the forward car and he rose
and opened the door and let her in

and she entered the car carrying
a large black case
in the unmistakable shape of a cello.

She looked like an angel with a high forehead
and somber eyes and her hair
was tied up behind her neck with a black bow.

And because of all that,
he seemed a little awkward
in his happiness to see her,

whereas she was simply there,
perfectly existing as a creature
with a soft face who played the cello.

And the reason I am writing this
on the back of a manila envelope
now that they have left the train together

is to tell you that when she turned
to lift the large, delicate cello
onto the overhead rack,

I saw him looking up at her
and what she was doing
the way the eyes of saints are painted

when they're looking up at God
when he is doing something remarkable,
something that identifies him as God.

The words of poet Billy Collins.

May you each find the quiet stillness at the centre, and be held there.

May it be so.

Rev. Fran Dearman, September 25th, 2016, at Olinda

Bibliography:

#649, words of Antoine de St.-Exupéry

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