

## The Wisdom Within

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD January 2, 2023

As the ancient Sufi story tells us, Rabiya, a famous Sufi mystic, was diligently searching for a lost needle on the road outside of her small hut. As the sun sank and ushered in the darkness of night, Rabiya's neighbors offered to help her in her search. "What have you lost?" they inquired. Rabiya responded that she had lost a needle. A kindly neighbor noted, "the sun is setting – this will make the needle hard to find. I wonder, can you tell us where it has fallen?" Rabiya responded, "Well, it has not fallen on this road. I dropped it in my house." Rabiya's neighbors looked at each other and began to laugh. "If the needle has fallen within your house, why are you searching for it in the street?" The neighbors brushed off her needs and began to disperse. "Wait!" cried Rabiya. "I was simply following your example. I see you daily – searching for bliss in the outside world without asking yourselves the same question you asked me: where have I lost it?" She paused, took a breath, and continued. "You have lost it inside of you, and yet you look to recover it in the world beyond. Your ears listening, eyes seeking, hands grasping – searching and searching. For quite some time, I was doing the same. But then I searched inside and was met with surprise. This is where I had lost my bliss – and this was where I could find it."<sup>1</sup>

I wonder how many of us can relate to this story of Sufi wisdom. I dare to venture – all of us, to a degree. Spending time searching beyond, looking for external bliss, in accomplishments, prestige, the acquisition of things large and small, or those things that satisfy the senses. This mystic offers, it is within us that we find our bliss. Our center, our core, our heart, our soul – that which we carry within – this is where we connect to those true blessings, to wisdom, to honest fulfillment. We each hold it within. Author Stephen Prothero sought wisdom from Sufi leaders while writing a book on world religions. He spoke to a lifelong Sufi, who offered the following sentiments: Sufism, which is a branch of Islam, "is about a heart-and-soul connection between the individual believer and God - the sort of ... love that sets your whole being into

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<sup>1</sup> <https://philipchircop.wordpress.com/2015/08/09/are-you-searching-in-the-wrong-place/>

dance.”<sup>2</sup> I attended a Sufi worship service once, and the spirituality and divine love cultivated in that room did bring us to dance, and sing, and experience pure joy supplemented by chocolate and a disco ball. Each attendee focused on centering with all they held within, just as Rabiya taught, and in doing so engaged with their God, in the spirit of celebration. Beautiful, inspiring, fulfilling, and joy filled. Through our inner being, we are taught that we can connect with God. Through this connection, we can center in faith, love, and joy.

Last month in worship, we explored wonder and awe in all of that which surrounds us – the vast expanse of the night sky, the childhood delight in magic. This month, we focus on that wonder within. This month, we focus on our center. What do we find when we search within? We each may find something slightly different, something that is deserving of its own name: Spirit, God, soul, intuition. To me, I call it heart space. Heart space is where my innate wisdom is held, always one calm, deep breath away from access when I need guidance – to me, this is a culmination of God, love, and soul. I reflect on the words of Sikh activist Valerie Kaur. She names her center “wise woman” – a woman she describes as “tender and truthful” – unafraid of anyone or anything. Not all-knowing nor all-powerful, this “wise woman” does not offer answers to all of life’s questions. Instead, she responds to each moment. She offers Kaur the next best step – “to wonder, grieve, fight, rage, listen, reimagine, breathe, or push.”<sup>3</sup> What do we need to do in this moment – in any moment? Our center knows.

There are times in life when we encounter tears – unexpected tears. Theologian Frederick Buechner notes that when we encounter these tears, we need to pay close attention. Buechner reflects that these tears, and I quote, “are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where you should go next.”<sup>4</sup> Tears erupt from our center, our core, when we unexpectedly encounter the presence of our God, our sacred, whatever that may mean to each one of us, arising in nature, in art, in

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<sup>2</sup> *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World* by Stephen Prothero, pg. 57

<sup>3</sup> “The Wisdom Within” by Valarie Kaur

<sup>4</sup> “Beyond Words” by Frederick Buechner

any mundane object or event. We reflect on where we come from and are summoned to where we will go next.

One afternoon when feeling internally lost and secretly scared of what lay ahead of me in life, I aimlessly wandered around my mother's backyard. I stumbled upon the sight of a flowering blue bush, a bush that served as a headstone for a dog recently passed. This bush brought tears to my eyes and brought me to my knees, I knew not why. But what made sense to me in that moment was to pray, and so I prayed to a dead beloved, and I prayed, for the first time, to a God, to my sacred. For no known reason, that bush in that moment kindled a spirituality that fueled a life of faith. I listened to those unexpected tears.

I think many of us turn to faith to find the courage, wisdom, and love within. To find the answers to those unexpected tears. As a child, I attended Quaker meetings with my dad and my sister. My sister and I were very young at the time, but small pieces of wisdom that I picked up in those early years have stuck with me. In the Quaker faith, we all have an inner light – we each have a piece of God within us. I recently encountered the words of Quaker author Parker Palmer, who wrote, “We all have an inner teacher whose guidance is more reliable than anything we can get from a doctrine, ideology, collective belief system, institution, or leader.”<sup>5</sup> An inner teacher – my heart space, your God or soul or intuition – that center, that thing within. That's what offers wisdom. This deconstructs, in a way, traditional Christianity, where Christians are taught doctrines and creeds. Instead, it focuses on the still, small voice within – this is one of the most powerful guides and sources of inspiration we each have – this is our teacher. Quakers reimagine weekly worship. There is no sermon, there is no scripture, there is no spoken prayer. There is silence, an hour to simply be, with their core, their sacred, all they hold within. This silence is interspersed with unscripted comments from worshipers, as they rise in body or in spirit and share a reflection offered to them from their core – their inner light. In that room each person connects with God, and in that room those sacred messages

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<sup>5</sup> “A Hidden Wholeness” by Parker Palmer

are shared for all to garner wisdom from. This is how they gather wisdom – not from external teachers, but from personal insights from God. How sacred, how holy, how inspiring is this?

What from the beyond calls us to connect with what we hold within? We are called by what our sacred whispers in our ears, by the intricate hums of nature, by piano chords struck in harmonic melody. We are called to connect with our core. We each find those external things that help connect us to all we hold within. Perhaps you are at peace each evening as the sun sets, knowing that you are but a small part of something expansive. Perhaps you connect with the awe of towering skyscrapers in a sprawling city. And this calls us to within – to that strength that we each hold to overcome the impossible, to survive tragedies, to find strength in sorrow, to love amidst despair. We each have this. We each find this – we find bliss – when we search within – just as the Sufi mystic taught us.

Again, where can we find that outward beauty that connects us to all we hold within? I want to pause in this reflection and tie in a favorite quote from a favorite book, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. The character Shug Avery walks alongside her beloved Celie, a woman who has surmounted unimaginable pain and hardship, and speaks to her of God. Shug elaborates, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it. People think pleasing God is all God cares about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back."<sup>6</sup> It's like the music of the Sufis, the quiet of the Quakers, the tears of the theologian, the "wise woman" held within the Sikh activist, or the hum of nature. All sent by the sacred to be appreciated so that we can connect with the still, small voice within. All sent as a gift, a small treasure. Shug's God – our spirit of life, Goddess, Allah, higher power, nature – intentionally creating beauty for us to enjoy. Beauty that can connect us to all we hold within. There is a prevailing goodness, a prevailing beauty, a prevailing faith, accessible to each of us. Just as we can appreciate the color purple in a field of wildflowers, we are called to appreciate the beauty within us.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker

This - all of these reflections of that which lies within - reminds me of Buddhist sentiments, which brought me to a quote of Bhikkhu Bodhi, a Theravada Buddhist monk. Bodhi writes, “No longer can we continue to drift complacently through life, driven blindly by our hunger for sense pleasures and by the pressure of prevailing social norms. A deeper reality beckons us; we have heard the call of a more stable, more authentic happiness, and until we arrive at our destination, we cannot rest content.”<sup>7</sup> “Until we arrive at our destination, we cannot rest content” – our destination within. Again, we are reminded of the Sufi wisdom that teaches us to search within instead of chasing sense pleasures. And we are offered more wisdom; more advice – not to give in to the pressures of social norms, not to drift through life. There is, as Bodhi wrote, as I reflected, a “deeper reality,” something held within us - that beauty. Buddhism teaches us to find this deeper reality by ridding ourselves of suffering, which Buddhists find inherent to life, a problem that each person is on a spiritual journey to resolve. A necessary step in alleviating suffering is the practice of mindfulness - of simply being with and contemplating the present moment. The Buddha teaches that we each have Dhamma, an ultimate truth, held within us – visible and timeless. Part of eliminating our suffering is to connect with this Dhamma – this truth, this ultimate reality, what I have been calling our “core,” through intentional practices of mindfulness.<sup>8</sup> Connecting with our core and our truth relieves us of suffering.

This connects to the Buddhist practice of loving kindness, a meditation of goodwill that starts with self and ripples out. It begins with connecting to and loving our core and extending this love to all of those in our web of life. Trained Buddhist monk Jack Kornfield writes, “You begin with yourself because without loving yourself it is almost impossible to love others.”<sup>9</sup> This inner love is not attained when searching for that needle in the road – chasing that without which is truly held within. It is found when we connect with our core. Even those we dislike, even our enemies – they are touched and held by this love that we cultivated within; the love we fostered for ourselves and faithfully shared.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering* by Bhikkhu Bodhi pg. 1

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* pg. 63

<sup>9</sup> <https://jackkornfield.com/meditation-lovingkindness/>

When we find our center, how does our relationship with the world change? Yes, we heed the Buddhist teaching of goodwill and love towards all, a teaching echoed in the words of Jesus and Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi and the prophets throughout the ages. I also add that it is an invitation to see the humanity in each person, beyond race, ability, class, or political affiliation. As we connect with our own core, we realize this core within each of our siblings, past, present, and future. That which holds together our web of life. Each person is no longer the façade of outward appearances but becomes a holder of that Quaker light, that God, held within. For the world will never be whole until we unite as a sacred collective. The world will never be whole until the least of these mingle with all of these. The world will never be whole until each person's inner light is realized and celebrated. When we find our core, we engage with a sacred invitation to see this in all others, a true gift.

So, may we search for bliss within. May we dance and sing with the holy. May we cry those unexpected tears that tell us our sacred is with us. May we find our light and share it with the world!

May it be so, and Amen