

## **“Droplets on the Spider Web”**

**By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City MD, Nov 3, 2019**

Sister Annabel Laity reflects on her interactions with Zen monk Tich Nhat Hanh, who she refers to as Thay: “Sometimes Thay walks through the kitchen where his disciples are preparing a meal, and he asks someone, ‘what are you doing, my child?’ Thay can see very well that his disciple is washing lettuce or cutting green beans. The aim of the question is not to enlighten Thay as to what someone is doing but to awaken the disciple to the present moment. The answer might be: ‘Thank you for bringing me back to my true self,’ or a smile of recognition that we are not in the present moment.”

Sometimes we may need this reminder. “What are you doing, my child?” Perhaps we are sitting at a desk, focusing on our next task, not noticing the touch of the chair below us or our feet on a surface. Not noticing the sound of passing traffic or the hum of the air conditioning. Perhaps we are walking on the sidewalk, mind focused on our destination or maybe ruminating on a mistake made earlier in the day, not noticing the trees lining the path or traffic passing alongside us. Not noticing the shape of the clouds or the chirp of birds.

These things are simple, yet profound.

Mary Oliver writes in her poem entitled “I Wake Close to Morning,” “Why do people keep asking to see God’s identity papers/ When the darkness opening into morning is more than enough?”

Why do people keep asking to see God's identity papers, when the darkness opening into morning is more than enough. God seen in those moments when the earth's rotation around the sun creates the effect of the sun rising over the horizon, of that great sphere bringing light back to the landscape that had been blanketed in darkness – that is God. In all of these moments – God, the sacred, spirit of life or love, Goddess, science – whatever the holy is to you – seeing this, feeling this, smelling this, touching this in all of the every day beauty that is all around us – that every day beauty we so often forget to notice – this is so holy, so sacred, and yet so easily accessible.

It is this same sun, this same sacred source of heat and light, that caused Janisse Ray, the poet we just heard, notice a spider web “strung between us and sky,” that caused her to “greet the light,” to suddenly notice the beauty of nature that was surrounding her – with a sense of awe. “So much depends on where one looks... and when.” This can be “happenstance, accident, grace,” or, I propose, a practice of mindfulness. Of living mindfully – of intentionally noticing the beauty that surrounds us – whether the dewdrops on a spiderweb draped on a railing, or the soothing warmth on the hands of a cup of coffee in morning as we wake to greet the day. The poet continues, “Too often the little voices that say ‘See!’ and ‘There!’ are silent.” How can we awaken these voices? These sacred voices, calling us to take note of the simple yet profound beauty that is all around us. She writes, “But I see the web, nothing more than another life, noticed, which is our job while we are here.” Let us take these words to heart, and simply notice. To see the holy in a spiderweb.

“No matter how pressed my life is or how fraught with difficulty,” writes author Joyce Rupp, “I do eventually wake up. My desire to be aware is restored most often through finally stopping,

or being stopped, by the sheer magnificence of creation.” Every life has its difficulties.

Struggling and suffering is inherent to the human condition. Living in this moment can be hard.

We can get wrought with anxiety living in the future, or obsessing over a past mistake, or

perhaps burdened with depression when we are not focused on the now. We need wake up!

We need notice this sheer magnificence of creation.

This noticing, this mindfulness, this waking up, this is sacred – and so very achievable! I

remember as a child at one point my family lived in a house in the country with a huge

backyard filled with flowers and trees and rodents and insects. My sister and I spent hours

exploring that stretch of land and the adjacent yards. But the real magic came during summer

nights, when the sky filled with stars – stars that seemed to trickle down from the sky into our

very yard! Stars in our yard – blinking and flashing and darting about – we were surrounded,

captivated, enchanted with fireflies – lighting bugs. Dashing around we would run and try to

chase these magnificent insects – squeal with delight if one landed on us. Those summer nights

were sacred, all of our senses were experiencing this delight. We felt the tingle of grass on our

feet and the warm summer air on our skin, we saw our yard draped in darkness and filled with

twinkling lights, we smelled that deep, earthy smell of nature. We were fully present. Those

nights showed the holy at work. And yet this can become harder as we transition into adult

hood – as lives become filled with deadlines and meetings and tasks and to-do lists – Let’s

pause. Let’s notice if those stars begin to trickle to the ground, or if the damp grass is tickling

our feet, or if a recent rainfall causes the air to smell of earth. Those are God’s identity papers.

We can do this every day.

Zen Master Lin Chi said, “the miracle is to walk on earth.” To walk on earth. Not on water, not on air, but on earth. On hard, packed earth or green and brown grass or even cement or asphalt – that is the miracle. That is the holy. Living, touching, walking mindfully and taking in the beauty that is around us. Thich Nhat Hanh writes, “life is only found in the present moment... we only need to open our eyes.” We need only to open our eyes and look around! What beauty do we see? What simple miracles? What holy is at work? Life is only found in the present moment – this sacred moment. We are provided with tangible ways to interact with the sacred in this very moment – to transform this simple and life-sustaining act of breathing into a spiritual practice. Zen Buddhism teaches the art of living mindfully and noticing. Of breathing in and out with intention, noticing the sensations, the lungs expanding and contracting, that moment of pause between inhale and exhale, a hand on the stomach noting the rise and fall of the diaphragm. Holy work. Accessible work. These are the conditions for peace and happiness. These practices calm us, center us, heal us.

And yet this idea of the importance of the present moment stretches far beyond mindfulness, far beyond Buddhism and Zen monks. This emphasis on the now, on what is here, on nature, on the holy, on ourselves, this is woven throughout so many of the world religions. This practice of connecting and healing.

In Christianity this present moment – the power of this present moment – can be found in prayer. There is an idea of focusing on prayer and connection to the holy. There is a sacredness involved in really meaning these prayers; in reflecting on those words stemming from the soul to reach the holy. The power of using this time of prayer to get in touch with one’s true self. Franciscan friar Richard Rohr writes that prayer can serve to bring devotees to a

liminal space – a space held delicately between two realms – a space betwixt and between, a space of transition - in which the devotee is closer to God and the holy. This practice of prayer, focusing on words and oneself and the present moment, brings Christians closer to God. This practice draws followers into a sacred, liminal space. Father Rohr writes that this practice of reflective prayer keeps people from settling into “normalcy,” and from focusing on problem solving and fixing. Being mindful of this practice, of these words, of this holy connection in a liminal space, this presence brings devotees closer to God.

Christians noticing that sacred now through prayer; healing by accessing that liminal space.

Humanists can find solace in the tangible effects of mindfulness and focusing on the present moment. There are physical and mental health benefits to taking time each day to pause and simply be; to focus on the breath. This practice is shown to be therapeutic and reduce worry. Practicing the art of being present may also help prevent future mental health problems.

Counselor Chas Barnes writes that by living in the present, we eliminate the depression that arises from living in the past, and the anxiety that absorbs us when our energy is focused on the future. Focusing on the holy now, practicing meditation, these acts have scientific repercussions! Barnes notes that regular mindfulness practices form new neural pathways in the brain that can help in the decision making process and promote and ground us emotionally. There is evidence to suggest that the practice of mindfulness meditation can help alleviate a handful of physical and mental illnesses.

Humanists noticing that sacred now and appreciating those tangible, scientific facts surrounding this practice.

Emily Dickinson writes,

The bee is not afraid of me,

I know the butterfly;

The pretty people in the woods

Receive me cordially.

The brooks laugh louder when I come,

The breezes madder play.

Wherefore, mine eyes, thy silver mists?

Wherefore, O summer's day?

When we are present, we notice that bee and the bee becomes our friend; we connect with butterflies as they search for pollen, and we giggle with flowing water. Perhaps through prayer, perhaps through science, perhaps through yoga.

Devotees of Hinduism find the sacred in the present moment as well – and use this to heal.

Hindus practice the path of yoga, focusing on meditative activity. Swami Kiryananda, disciple of Paramhansa Yogananda wrote a book explaining the Hindu sacred text the Bhagavad Gita.

Swami Kriyananda reflects, “As the apple blossom already contains the apple, and is inseparable from that final product, so yoga practice is inseparable from its ultimate fruit: union with the Infinite.” Yoga serves the ultimate goal of connecting devotees to the infinite. Krishna, a deity in Hinduism, encourages devotees to follow the path of yoga. In Hinduism, yoga follows

an 8-fold path. This extends beyond the physical practice of yoga to include such practices as meditation or controlling the energy of the body. Swami Kriyananda notes, however, that yoga is not only following these practices, but that people of any faith or belief that fully dedicate themselves to prayer and meditation can be termed yogis – this is accessible to all! The goal of the Karma Yoga is to please one’s own “divine self.” This practice of yoga, of being in the present, of dedicating life to prayer and meditation, again these practices bring devotees closer to the holy, and again they are achievable to anyone.

The Hindus, finding the sacred now and healing through yoga.

In religious naturalism there is this fundamental idea that humans are interconnected. While there is a strong belief in the scientific method, there is also an acknowledgement of the limitations of science in our human experience. Religious naturalists believe nature is fundamentally sacred at its core; nature is embraced in all of its beauty and wonder; that is what the holy is – is nature. If we stop, pause, and notice this nature, we are noticing a sacred mystery. If we stop, pause, and notice this nature, we are noticing, embracing, and celebrating the holy.

Religious naturalists, seeking the holy in that overwhelming beauty that is nature.

This practice is inherent to Unitarian Universalism as well! These traditions are woven into our principles and sources. We are a tradition that values direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder; we are a tradition that honors wisdom from world religions.

Let us take a collective breath in, and out.

Let us remember Thich Nhat Han's assertion that "to live in the present moment is a miracle." To know Emily Dickinson's butterfly, to listen to a laughing brook, or play with the breeze. This is a miracle. This is holy. And we can do this!

Anywhere. At home, at work, on a walk, even in the city streets. Even in the city streets, we can heal. In those crowded streets we can notice the sounds of many people jostling around, the symphony of noises that arise when people talk, when people navigate the streets in cars or buses, bustling to their next appointment on a bike, honking at one another. Those holy sounds. The touch on the skin of a breeze or the warmth of the sun or the chill of a winter frost. That sacred touch. The wonder at those huge buildings, reaching to the sky! Mingling with the hungry birds, or the low-hanging clouds. What about the architecture? Modern buildings intermixed with old structures donning decorative statues and carvings. God's identity papers can be found in the rhythm of vehicles and pedestrians dancing in efforts to share the streets, or on those sidewalks that at times appear to glitter, or in the rumbling sounds of persistent traffic.

Mary Oliver writes, "Meditation, so I've heard, is best accomplished if you entertain a certain strict posture. Frankly, I prefer to just lounge under a tree."

That simple practice need not be mystical but practical, accessible. We need not be practiced in the art of meditation or be a monk following the 8-fold path in yoga. We need simply pause, simply be. Perhaps meditate. Perhaps pray. Perhaps lounge under a tree, and simply notice what is around us. Everyday we can do this. And these practices are so healing – giving pause to the rush, focusing on the holy now instead of past mistakes or future worries. Take time to



feel the temperature shift as you peel off the blankets in the morning. Or notice when your hands touch that hot cup of coffee or tea, or notice the taste in your mouth as you brush your teeth. Simple, everyday practices with a wealth of benefits. So much of the space in our minds is taken up by the past or the future. May we be grounded in the present, and notice the beauty surrounding us. May we take the time to notice that sacred dew drop clinging to the delicate threads of a spider web. To notice God's identity papers in the rising sun.

May it be so, and Amen.