

**UU PSI SYMPOSIUM LECTURE:
Spiritual Practice for Unitarian Universalists
UUA GENERAL ASSEMBLY – HOUSTON, TEXAS
Dr. Laurel E. Hallman - June 25, 2005**

When I first started doing this work, I called it “Private Religious Practice.” And to some degree it is still that—because Unitarian Universalists do need a private practice—as outwardly focused as we are, much of the time. But then, I began to realize that rightly understood, spiritual practice is a process of both/and, inside and out. A woman in my congregation who is a lawyer, said she was coming to one of my classes because she wanted to learn to live “from the inside/out”.

That sounded just right to me. From the inside/out. Ours is neither a solitary faith (though we are individuals) nor a communal faith, (though we do gather together). It is both/and. Inside out. (And probably outside/in, but for now let’s work on inside/out.)

If you were to take any religion—let’s just lump all the forms of Buddhism together for a moment—if you were to take any religion, such as Buddhism, you would find (and many of you already know this)—you would find that they believe three things are needed for a balanced practice. The Buddha, The Dharma, and The Sangha.

The Buddha, is the archetypal teaching/loving/wisdom figure to whom the Buddhists look for a relation to their faith.

The Dharma is the teaching, the scripture, the wisdom literature, which they hear when they go to “Dharma talks”. It is what they read and study and memorize on their own. In the introduction to the *Diamond Sutra* by Thich Nhat Hanh, he says,

“Brothers and sisters, please read *The Diamond that Cuts through Illusion* with a serene mind, a mind free from views. Do not rush into the commentaries or you may be unduly influenced by them. Please read the sutra first. You may see things that no commentator has seen. You can read as if you were chanting, using your clear body and mind to be in touch with the words. Try to understand the sutra from your own experiences and your own suffering. It is helpful to ask, “Do these teachings of the Buddha have anything to do with my daily life?” Abstract ideas can be beautiful, but if they have nothing to do with our life, of what use are they? So please ask, “Do the words have anything to do with eating a meal, drinking tea, cutting wood, or carrying water?”¹

So the Dharma is the teaching of the Buddha which resonates within, and relates to the heart of lived lives.

The Sanga, is the Meditating or Chanting Group. Again, Thich Nhat Hanh (who you may know is a Vietnamese Buddhist Monk, living in France

¹ [The Diamond that Cuts Through Illusion: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Diamond Sutra.](#) Thich Nhat Hanh, Parallax Press, 1992, Introduction.

at a Monastery called Plum Village.) His is a two-fold mission, coming from the Vietnam war. It is to teach Westerners the ways of inner (and subsequently outer) peace, and secondly to regather the Vietnamese diaspora at least from time to time, at Plum Village, to give them the experience of the religion and culture of their homeland. Interestingly, his work in the western world is not intended to convert anyone to Buddhism. He says, “Do not become a Buddhist. Go back to your own country. Practice your own faith, now that you have seen it through the lens of the practice of Plum Village.”²

In his book *Our Appointment with Life: The Buddha’s Teaching on Living in the Present* he says, Buddhist meditators know the importance of practicing in a community. That is the meaning of the phrase, “I take refuge in the sangha.” A Vietnamese proverb goes: “Soup is to a meal what friends are to the practice.” To be in touch with a community, to learn from its members, and to take refuge in a community is very important. To discover the way of being alone in a practice community is something we need to do.”³

So we have The Buddha, The Dharma, and the Sangha. The archetypal teacher, the teachings, or wisdom of the teacher, and the community in which we take refuge. It doesn’t mean hide, it means find solace and comfort and again, wisdom.

So if you will bear with me, let’s think of Christianity in those categories. The Buddha—let’s say Jesus, or archetypally, The Christ; the relational figure upon whom the practice rests. When I was a Christian, Jesus was in my heart. Perhaps some of you have had this same experience. Jesus was my solace, my androgynous friend and lover. (Certainly not Mel Gibson’s Christ—but then Mel Gibson’s Christ wasn’t very Biblical, either—but that’s another topic). My Jesus, and even my Christ (who was the risen, triumphant one) was my refuge back then.

So if Buddhism has The Buddha, Christianity has The Christ.

If Buddhism has the Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha (including commentaries.) Then Christianity has the “Old” and “New” Testaments, which are Christianity’s teachings, along with commentaries as well. “The Bible” is a compilation of all those varied forms of literature that teach us about how to live as Christians. We know more now about how they were developed—some early forms of the human desire to make sense of existence and purpose—some later, and even conflicting forms of that same desire in different times. But if you will stick with me as I lay this out—we can say, fairly simply, for Christianity the Dharma is the Bible.

I remember as a child and young person, studying my Bible. Memorizing scripture. Reading commentaries. Trying to live my life in accordance with its teachings.

² I spent time in Plum Village in 1995, during a sabbatical. He said this in my hearing at that time.

³ *Our Appointment with Life: The Buddha’s Teaching on Living in the Present*. Thich Nhat Hanh. Parallax Press, 1990. p. 25.

So we have the Buddha and the Christ, the Sutras and the Christian Scriptures. And we have the Sanga, and the gathered Congregation for Christians. Maybe sometimes House Churches. Sometimes mega-churches. But to make our typology parallel, we can say that gathered Christians form congregations—or all sorts and types.

The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. The Christ, The Bible, and the Church.

For Islam, we could perhaps say, Mohammad as the archetypal relational figure, the Qur'an as the teachings, and the Five Pillars which are so embedded culturally that they would probably not be called communal, but which unite the people in common rituals. These include worship, praying five times a day, testifying, helping the needy, reflecting and fasting, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca.

There, of course, could be much more said about all of these varied elements between religions, and within the differences that abound in each religion.

But my lecture today is about Spiritual Practices for UUs. So how would Unitarian Universalism fit in this general scheme?

I know how it was when I first became a UU. (To give you a picture, I first joined a UU Church in 1965. I was ordained in 1981.) I think this question was always in the back of my mind, having come from Christianity as I did. Rejecting the Jesus of my childhood, the inerrancy of Scripture, and the rules of the church, I still yearned for relationship, depth, and community.

Looking back, I think now that the relational, archetypal figure in those days was The Self—that center of human potential that we yearned to fulfill. It wasn't synonymous with who we were, but was a vision of possibility. Our scripture—self-help books. Some of them were pretty shallow. But others were very helpful. I still look to the early Gestalt psychologists, and the work coming out of Esalen, as important in my life—I believe it was our scripture in UU churches across the country. And in our congregations—we didn't think of them as churches—many of them, at least. They were Fellowships, or Societies. But we were gathered in small groups, whatever they were called. Support groups, Personal Growth groups, and too—there were political action groups.

So our language of religion was psychological and therapeutic, and our language of community was political. We studied religion when I was in theological school, but the *languages* of our religion were therapeutic and political.

And then I became a minister. And I began to notice some things. The first was that when people came to me for counsel, they often spoke in the language of therapy, but it didn't seem that they wanted therapy. There were plenty of therapists in my town anyway. They wanted something else.

And I also noticed that people in my congregation spoke political and psychological languages at church, and then slipped off to the Buddhist meditation center for their zazen practice. Or studied the sutras at

a retreat center that was in the home of one of our members. Or they practiced Yoga, not as good exercise, (though it was), but as a spiritual practice. They did Dances for the Planet. There was no end of practices they were involved in, but not in connection with our church. Some of them alternated with the local Quaker meeting house, where they found their need for communal silence, satisfied. I began to wonder aloud if we were an interesting community, a stimulating and supportive community, but not a place for what I might call “indigenous” spiritual practice. Something organically connected to who we were as Unitarian Universalists.

Today is not the day to tell you my whole life story. But suffice to say that my quest took me to Plum Village, it took me to Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, an Ecumenical center in Washington D.C. with some Eastern leanings. (Eastern religion that is.) It took me to some teachers within our tradition—Harry Scholefield, who was retired from serving the First Unitarian Church of San Francisco for almost 25 years, and Carl Scovel who was then the minister of King’s Chapel (Unitarian) in Boston. And to Jerry May, a Psychiatrist who had founded Shalem, who became an important teacher for me. And other spiritual directors—mostly Catholic religious—who helped me along the way.

Suffice to say, that I think now that I know we have a deeply grounded Spiritual Practice within our tradition. It takes many forms, as well it should. But we don’t have to go across the ocean, or even down the street to claim it. It is in our institutional bones, and as my colleague Anthony David says, it is in our DNA.

So who is our archetypal relational wisdom figure? Wouldn’t you know, it is *Sophia*, in her many forms—it is wisdom itself, personified in so many ways. Thich Nhat Hanh has written a book called, *Living Buddha, Living Jesus*. I began to ‘get it’ that we do carry people in our hearts, just as I was taught when I was young. Some of them are people we love. But today I’m talking about wisdom people who in these loud times speak in the still, small voice the ancients described. Of course we have to be open to them. To their relationships and to their wisdom.

My mentor and friend, the Late Harry Scholefield used to say he felt a “kinship with the universe”. It was what the theologian Buber called, the “I-Thou” relationship with life.

Some may wish to point to one figure, and go deeply in their understanding of what it might mean to be in relationship with Jesus, knowing that wisdom flows out in surprising places and persons if we are open to it.

Some may wish to name their God as mystery, or Love, or Life itself.

There seems to be a need in the human experience to personify life—and I celebrate it, as long as we don’t get stuck thinking our vision is the only one.

So for our purposes today, if the Buddhists have The Buddha, and the Christians have The Christ, we have Wisdom, herself. It’s a relationship, not a definition. So our practice is to do what we would do in a relationship:

Tend it, pay attention, listen, be changed, be assertive (I look to the Jewish practice of shaking a fist at God, over and over again in the Hebrew Bible.) I don't think any wisdom figure expects us to simply roll over and play dead. Wisdom is found in the living, in the interaction, in kinship.

I'll say more about that later. Just put a marker there. Deep knowing. What is the UU place for Scripture, for the Sutras, or the Christian Scripture. All helpful, interesting. But there is so much more. For me it is in wisdom literature of the ages. Including scripture but not limited to it.

I remembered the scripture of my childhood. Deep in the recesses of my brain. Some of it not helpful. But some of it beautiful, comforting, its metaphors speaking to a part of me that wasn't touched by much else.

I have spoken before about my experience of visiting a woman in a nursing home, once a vital leader in the church and community, but no longer able to speak because she was in the later stages of Alzheimer's Disease. We went at Christmas, a group of us, to sing carols to her. And when we started to sing, she joined in. Where were those words in her brain? I'm sure neurologists among us could say, but what I remembered was that they were deep. And I imagined that some of those early verses that I had memorized were buried in my brain somewhere, too.

What do UUs have that rests deeply within?

And that is when I began to realize how important poetry and even some prose could be in our lives.

Poetry may not get as much weight as scripture—but I think scripture is poetry. It is metaphorical. It carries much more than it says.

I began memorizing poetry as Unitarian Universalist spiritual practice.

Now I know I'm not the first. And I'm not the only. But I am here today, because I believe that we all should be memorizing words we choose, but words of importance that we can learn by heart, and have as a storehouse of wisdom. And that metaphorical language goes as far back as storytelling has gone, and has come forward to our present day. It is the language of the gods. Dipping down into the depths of our beings, and across time, to inform our lives.

So if Sophia stands for all the wisdom figures we can love, and poetry, or the muse, stands for all metaphorical language which nourishes us, then what is our sanga. It is first the worshipping community.

Some are surprised when they ask me about spiritual practice, and I tell them my first would be the Sunday Morning Worship Service. They're thinking of something else, I'm sure. But when we gather on Sunday. When we move together to sing, and to pray, and to remember our dying and welcome our newborns, and we listen to what wisdom words the minister can muster—and listen to our hearts resonate within community and alone (both/and)—it is the beginning of UU spiritual practice.

Then what we do after that can only enrich us all the more.

So there is the UU answer to spiritual practice. Love of wisdom (in the most fulsome sense of the word) the ingesting of wisdom words (Harry

Scholefield said, once, “It’s like a meal—this memorizing of poetry.”) and then coming together as a worshipping community—being enveloped together by all that our tradition brings to us—love, forgiveness, justice, challenge, trust, freedom to name just a few of the qualities we can experience together on Sunday.

I don’t know about your church, but at my church people cry. They don’t know why, they say. But they cry. The older members nod knowingly. It is something about the context of freedom and love that comes from our Unitarian and Universalist roots that strikes them so deeply, I think. Acceptance, hard-won by our religious ancestors. Maybe some of that.

So let me talk more specifically about spiritual practices for UUs. For us.

This is what you need to have a balanced spiritual life as a UU:

You need a teacher. Look around you. Don’t look for the perfect person. Don’t look for the most self-actualized person. You don’t even need to look for a person who has set himself or herself up as a teacher. But decide what you need to learn, and then look for someone to teach you. You’ll find them.

My teachers have changed over the years. But they’re all around, I can assure you. If you want to be wise, look for someone wise. If you want to be compassionate, look for compassion. If you want to live with purpose, find someone whose purpose you admire. Ask them if you can talk with them from time to time. They may be surprised, but tell them why you want to speak with them.

You need a teacher.

There is a woman in my congregation who is in her ‘70s. She’s a wonderful person. I like to be with her, and I take every opportunity I can. She has shaped her life in a way I admire. She visits the sick, often getting there before I can. She keeps company with women of all ages. I haven’t asked her, but I think she enjoys the wide range of friends because it keeps her fresh and alive, which she is. She is interested in others, curious. I want to be like her. And when I’m in my ‘70s, I want to have friends of all ages, so I’m starting now to forge those relationships. I’m learning.

And you need to be a teacher. No matter your age, you’ve had experience that can help someone else. Be prepared to help someone along. Be a mentor. Be available. You’re needed. It’s a UU spiritual practice, this teaching and being taught. Practice it.

Take time to be alone. Really alone. Sit regularly. Or walk if you need to move. But take time to be alone. No goal. No ruminating. To be alone and open to what is. This may fit your more traditional understanding of meditation, but it’s not empty mind. It’s open mind. It’s welcome. It’s noticing what is, and staying with it to see where it will take you. Regularly. Take time to be alone. Preferably every day. Open your heart.

So you need a teacher, and you need to be one. You need to be alone, and you need to be open to what is.

I know this is pretty prescriptive for a UU, but stick with me.

You need to have a group that has a discipline, and is dedicated for a specific amount of time to getting together.

Part of my work at Shalem Institute meant having a Discernment Group. That's a group of people who are present over the long term—so that when decisions emerge, or crises happen, or the flotsam and jetsam of life floats through yours—they can listen, and remind you who you are, and keep you steady.

My discernment group started about four years ago, I think. I had to assemble four other people who would agree to meet with me once a month during the time I was in the Shalem program. I found four people who actually didn't know each other, but who were interested in such a group. And so we started to meet.

The Shalem program ended, and we kept meeting. Let me tell you how we do it, and then how UUs can create variations on the theme. Each person has 15 minutes or so to talk about their spiritual journey. Of course that is usually in pretty concrete terms. We've been through broken relationships, job changes, three of the five have moved, one came right up to the edge of becoming an Oblate in a Christian community, and then realized that wasn't what she wanted—and now she is studying Buddhism—(these are all UUs, remember). All of us, I think I can say without exception, are able to express more joy than before. One is in a new relationship, which she never thought would be possible. Anyway you get the idea.

We have silence, before each person speaks, and then again after. Then we can ask questions—trying to stay out of discussion or information, or problem solving. And our questions have to do with what the depth of our experience is telling us.

Then we ask what they would like us to pray. And then we pray – outloud – for that person. Each of us. We were shy at first. It's a kind of intimacy that takes some getting used to that doesn't have anything to do with theology—with what we think prayer is or does. It's a way of being together in the larger kinship of life.

Then after some silence, we move to the next person.

When the time comes for a big decision to be made for one of us, it's always made in a context much larger than our own predilections. It's made in a context of love and caring, but also of mystery. One thing we know for sure is that we don't know what someone should do or not do. But we are there, and somehow the context of our presence helps.

We email from time to time. And once in awhile we have a dinner together.

I've been in groups where they don't include praying out loud. But just silence between. It's important. This kind of listening no matter what you do with it. But having permission to pray, as UUs from very different experiences of our faith, has been important. I recommend it.

O.K. – A teacher. To teach. A Discernment Group. (That's what we call it. Discernment, as the word suggests is making decisions that are

more than choosing—but wise, thoughtful, and in keeping with the currents of your life.)

Wisdom Words. This one you know already. I'm going to tell you to find a poem. Just one. And memorize it. Take a year. Take two. It doesn't matter. It's not a contest. There's no test. It's a process of ingesting the words, taking them in. Learning them by heart. Heart wisdom. Heart nourishment.

I have been learning “Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver over the last year. I take a long time myself—usually sitting with a line, then two, then three. Sometimes doing them in sections. I know a woman who learns them last line first. That way she focuses on the meaning of each line, rather than accomplishing the end.

Wild Geese, by Mary Oliver. It's in our hymnbook. #490 *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, 1993.

You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles,
through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours. And I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the moon
and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees, the
mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese high in the clean blue air
are heading home again.
Whoever you are,
No matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination.
Calls to you like the wild geese,
harsh and exciting--
over and over
announcing your place
in the family of things.⁴

I was recently very discouraged about a project I had wanted to undertake for a long time, and which hadn't had the results I had anticipated. I was really disappointed. Depressed.

And “Wild Geese” was there. I said it and remembered one more time “my place in the family of things.” Somehow things righted themselves.

Now I'm not going to claim that one poem, once, will save you from yourself. But I am going to say that I believe this is an essential discipline, right up there with the scientific method, practicing strength of character, and all the other disciplines our tradition has given us.

You can go to the back of our hymnbook for starters, to find wisdom words that can speak to your heart. Memorize them, and they will be yours till the day you die. And into the mystery.

⁴ #490, *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, 1993.

Keep a journal. I know some of you don't like to write. Then draw. I don't think it matters much what we write. Probably the most important part of this practice is writing enough that from time to time we can go back—and see the larger currents of our lives. We can practice discernment by noticing with open receptive hearts, what it is that we are doing with the time of our lives. I find wisdom is there long before I knew it. Going back helps me find it.

Live generously. Look at your budget and give away some of your income. Plan on it. Do it. This isn't a pitch for the church—although it could be. Choose where your generosity will go. And do it. It's a spiritual practice. Pretty tangible. It will strengthen your spirit.

And live justly. This is a tough one because no one can live a completely just life. We are too intertwined with the structures of society to seek purity. It's like Corinthians 13, the oft quoted chapter on Love. I tell people who want it read at their weddings to remember that it is about "Love" not necessarily them. "Love" is kind, even when they are not. "Love is not rude" even when they are. It is a reminder and a challenge—but not to be confused with perfection.

The same goes for justice. Live justly in ways that you are able. Sit awhile, be attentive, and you will be able to discern what ways that might be. It's a UU spiritual practice.

It brings me back full circle. Live inside/Out. Seek a relationship with wisdom figures throughout time and all around you. Memorize wisdom literature from world religions and from our own time. And worship with your church community, your 'sanga'. And then I would suggest forming a discernment group with some discipline that shapes your time together. It will steady your path and give you strength.

Now one more word and then we'll have time to talk together. This is a symposium after all.

It is the Psi Symposium, which tends to the para-normal, the surprising realities that we experience that don't fit in our normal understanding of 'how it is.'

I had a woman tell me recently that the first time she came to church she was so overwhelmed by the experience, that when she went outside she could see the very molecules in the air.

We don't usually walk around seeing molecules, unaided by high power microscopes, or drugs. I believe her.

I call myself a Rational/Mystic. Because most of the time things have to make sense. I stand in a rational tradition of thought that tests reality, looks for continuity, creates structures around that which we know. I know myself as rational. And I also know that from time to time people experience moments in which there are no divisions, no categories, when all is one, when mystery is seen and felt and known. I have had inexplicable moments myself. Often around death and dying. Around connection and love. Around wholeness. I have had such experiences myself.

I listen when people come to me with their experiences, sometimes even shy to tell me what they think they saw or felt or heard.

I am a rational mystic for lots of reasons, not the least is the paradoxical tension between them, because I believe that is where we live. In the tension.

That said, I know from reading the old contemplatives, that it is easy to be what they call 'kidnapped' by the extraordinary, lured away from the ordinary by some of these events.

I believe that UU Spiritual Practice says "well, that's interesting", taking it in—whatever it is. Noticing, being open to it, attentive, writing it down as we know it in our journals for later reference. And then letting it go. It is so easy to try to grab onto these wonderful moments—many times they are extraordinarily wonderful. It is so easy to grab onto them. To try to keep them. To try to replicate them. But the practice is in keeping an open hand and heart—so that more mystery can flow in. More wisdom. More delight. More wonder. More love.

This is longer than any preacher should talk—even in a lecture. I am honored to have been invited to speak. And now would like to open this to a discussion. Or an exploration of anything I've said that you'd like to try in the time remaining.