

Growing Our Spirit

Delivered by Angela Herrera, Ministerial Intern

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[Reading appended.]

The theme of this Association Sunday is “growing our spirit.” This strikes me as being a more nuanced and potentially more difficult task than the ordinary vertical kind of growing. Heaven knows I’ve been challenged in *that* regard. You have to go back four generations to my great grandmother’s Aunt Iva to find someone my size in my family. I take heart though in the words of a colleague I met a couple of years ago, a woman who is nearly six feet tall. One day after an impassioned discussion at the table with other chaplain interns at Brigham and Women’s Hospital, I confided that sometimes I really feel like a big person trapped in a small person’s body, to which she replied, “You don’t SEEM small!”

You know, I think you could say the same thing about Unitarian Universalists. We are a small denomination right now. But join us at the State House for a march, or even just get this one congregation singing out loud, encircled by our glorious choir, and we don’t SEEM small either. I think this must be a direct reflection of the size of our spirit. And when I say spirit, in this case what I mean is that amazing, synergistic thing that happens when we come together.

But what does it mean to **grow** our spirit? What kind of spirit are we talking about when we talk about spiritual growth?

The UUA sent out a packet of resources for today. I was hoping it would narrow the question down. Here’s how it read: We need to *Grow Our Spirit*: our group spirit, the human spirit, the holy spirit, the spirit of life, the spirit of love; **it is calling us**. Apparently there is no limit to the number of ways the spirit can manifest. And it seems spirit, in all of its forms, is connected. I think this is well reflected in our everyday experiences. Spirit is an everyday thing. It is not a supernatural phenomenon. I’m not asking you to believe in something you have not experienced directly in your own life. If the phrase “holy spirit” leapt out at you like a bad smell just now, chances are you’ve had those words wielded against you at some point, which is ironically very spirit diminishing, and not at all what I’m talking about. What I’m talking about is more like

what A.R. Ammons was describing in the poem this morning. Something that is everywhere partial and entire; on the inside of everything and on the outside.

What I'm talking about is what I ran into one night about a year ago, on a bus in Cambridge. It had been a nasty day, cold and gray with rain freezing on its way down and threatening to turn into a layer of ice. And you know, things had not really gone my way. Earlier that afternoon I was sitting in my car as it tugged along through the car wash when one of their hydraulic lines broke and showered the exterior with oily orange goo. Not realizing what had happened, the folks on the other end proceeded to try and rub it into the paint, as though it were polish. And then, even though, my car was covered in it--including the windshield!-- the attendant really did not feel he could wash it again for free. We finally got it all off an hour later at a different location.

So I'm standing there in the sleet with my husband later that night, waiting for the bus. Parking is expected to be scarce downtown, and we have left the car at home. But it's dark, and that frustration is still with me. To make matters worse, now the bus is running really late, and as I stand there in the mud, I'm grumbling to myself that its cranky driver will probably drive right past us without so much as a wave, as sometimes happens when the bus is full, and that it will probably even splash us with black grit on the way by. Oh yes, I'm *getting down* at the pity party. My spirits are low, and my spirit—that part of my self that transcends these kinds of moments, that part of me from which I speak and act when I am my best self—has already run for cover. And then... the bus pulls up. It stops. The door opens... and live gospel music comes pouring out. About six singers from a black gospel choir are practicing acapella beneath the bus's fluorescent lights. The beaming woman behind the steering wheel says something I neither expected nor expect ever to hear again on the T. She says, "You're on the *happy bus!*"

As I sat down, the music permeated my body. The spirit they were putting into their music lifted *my* spirit. Hauled it out of the sleet and brushed it off. Called it back to presence. It changed everything.

That's what I mean when I say spirit in all its manifestations is connected. You have probably had similar experiences of feeling really stirred by the energy of something outside yourself. Hopefully, it is something you experience here at First Parish, too.

But this is still a somewhat vague definition. If spirit is this kind of fluid thing, how do we understand what we might call our personal spirits? If the larger spirit of a group or of something beautiful can lift us up personally, surely the reverse is true as well. And

surely “growing our spirit” in harmony with thousands of other congregations this morning involves paying attention to our personal spirits. Particularly at this moment. Particularly when there is so much uncertainty in the world we share. When our sense of security, like Pam’s vase [from the children’s story] has been seriously cracked, and at times we wonder if it will even be headed for the trash. It can make everything seem dim. Don’t worry. I’m not going to tell you to stick a flower in it. These are serious times. We can’t gloss it over, or run for cover.

We can, however, take the opportunity to reconsider security.

I once met someone who had been falsely diagnosed with aggressive, terminal cancer. It took many days for the mistake to be corrected, during which, he said, he completely lost it. And when he finally learned that his condition was curable with a simple surgery, he was left reeling. He told me, “I have always been the strong one. I’m so mad at myself. I thought I was bulletproof, but I completely fell apart.” I wondered aloud whether he might become “bulletproof in a more bulletproof way” as a result of this experience. I was referring to the feeling of groundedness and security we can often see in people who have invested in “growing their spirits.”

In our call to worship this morning [#440 in Singing the Living Tradition], we invoked “the love that has shone in the lives of the greatest of men and women, the rays of whose lamps still illumine our way.” I like this as a definition of spirit: something shining, a lamp that is kindled. It’s connected with who you are and where you are, but it transcends that, too, and because it does, it is a constant for you in your shifting world. However badly things fall apart, however radically they change for the better or the worse, that transcendent part of you carries through. And the degree to which you are able to notice and tend to that part of you will determine how much strength you can draw from it. We know there are ordinary folks whose lamps illumine the way for others, too. I’m calling us to kindle our own light. To call it up a little brighter especially in times when the mind’s eye strains to see into the future.

Actually, it isn’t very complicated. It just requires intentionality, for the most part. The Sufi mystic, Rumi, said, “The mystery does not get clearer by repeating the question, nor is it bought with going to amazing places. Work in the invisible world at least as hard as you do in the visible.” Work in the invisible world at least as hard as you do in the visible.

And Ammons says he must go up farther than the loss of sight. Past the “light diffusions” and “bombardments.” The not-seeing seems to be an important part of

growing our spirits. Sometimes life will provide these opportunities for you. It will nudge you along by showing you that you don't know as much as you think you do, or that you aren't in charge like you thought you were. It engenders humility.

To be human is to not-see quite a lot.

Yet in contrast, Ammons also speaks of drawing in closer, with "thin tools." He must stay here with the separate leaves, he says. And we understand that a strong spirituality is one that does not just live up in the heavens where things are amorphous. It examines and is engaged with our very concrete lives here on earth. The thing is, one has to both *not know*, and *pay attention*. That's a combination that doesn't happen very well by accident. Paying attention requires a lot of *intention*. We are so busy. The world is so busy. With all this distraction, it takes intention to pay attention. And those two things together, whatever shape they may take, add up to a spiritual practice.

Mary Elizabeth Wheeler, the director of Wright Tavern, mentioned to me the other day what happens in classes where folks talk about their spiritual practices. Some people are hesitant at first, she says, because they don't even consider themselves spiritual. This is something people commonly say. It's understandable. "Spiritual" can have a woo-woo or new age-y connotation that doesn't suit everyone. But I say, if you are alive and will someday die, and you are capable of thinking about these facts, then you are of a spiritual nature. Interestingly, Mary Elizabeth says it usually turns out people are already engaged in things that function as spiritual practices. They just aren't thinking of them that way.

They are the things we do that sustain us without distracting us. A certain kind of music, a quiet walk, art, writing. I'm sure there are countless examples in this congregation—some of them probably very creative. Whenever we are intentional about them, paying attention to their work on our invisible world, we kindle our light.

Together this morning, in our little place here in the east amidst all the other congregations whose intention and attention is set on growing our spirit, the effect is a steady and heartening radiance. May we carry it within us and share it with others all week, until we meet again.

Amen.

Hymn

I know if I find you I will have to leave the earth
and go on out
over the sea marshes and the brant in bays
and over the hills of tall hickory
and over the crater lakes and canyons
and on up through the spheres of diminishing air
past the blackset noctilucent clouds
where one wants to stop and look
way past all the light diffusions and bombardments
up farther than the loss of sight
into the unseasonal undifferentiated empty stark

And I know if I find you I will have to stay with the earth
inspecting with thin tools and ground eyes
trusting the microvilli sporangia and simplest
coelenterates
and praying for a nerve cell
with all the soul of my chemical reactions
and going right on down where the eye sees only traces

You are everywhere partial and entire
You are on the inside of everything and on the outside

I walk down the path down the hill where the sweetgum
has begun to ooze spring sap at the cut
and I see how the bark cracks and winds like no other bark
chasmal to my ant-soul running up and down
and if I find you I must go out deep into your
far resolutions
and if I find you I must stay here with the separate leaves

A.R. Ammons

