

Breathe In, Breathe Out
Sermon by Rev. Carly Gaylor
October 17th, 2021

"When Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh was invited to the San Francisco Zen Center, the students asked him what they could do to improve their practice. He had entered a monastery at age sixteen, was an ordained monk, and had endured the horrors of the war in Vietnam. I imagine they expected some rigorous prescription for deepening their spiritual life.

"Thich Nhat Hanh's response: 'You guys get up too early for one thing; you should get up a little later. And your practice is too grim. I have just two instructions for you. One is to breathe, and one is to smile.'"

—from True Refuge, by Tara Brach.

Thomas Moore, author of several books including "Care of the Soul," gave a similar message to a group of Unitarian Universalist ministers in 2009. We were gathered in Ottawa at a conference. He was the keynote speaker. One of his key messages for the 500 or so gathered ministers was to let a little more pleasure into our lives: a little more chocolate and sex, a little less intensity in our impulses to save the world. Moore contends that the soul "persuades more with desire than with reasonableness" and "has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart, and personal substance." Rather than relief or embrace of his message, what I felt in the room was mostly discomfort, and even anger. Perhaps not unique when you tell a room full of ministers to have more sex. But mainly, the dismay had more to do with the suggestion that we might sometimes prioritize enjoying life as it is, over our constant struggle for justice and improvement. I wonder how the Buddhist monks in San Francisco responded to Thich Nhat Hanh's advice about their practice: were they relieved or disturbed? A little of each? Interestingly, Moore, like Thich Nhat Hanh, spent his young adulthood as a monk, in Moore's case in the Catholic faith.

So much of our UU identity is based in trying to make the world a better place. This is imbedded in our theology: instead of focused on a heavenly afterlife, we have shifted to focus on creating heaven on earth. Look at our principles: they are all about the kind of world we want, one of justice, equity, compassion, acceptance, peace, and respect for our interdependence and the inherent worth and dignity of all. They are earthly things. And they are more than a little bit difficult to live in our own lives, let alone in the vastness and brokenness of the world. At best they are visions that we strive toward.

They are also complex: for a true heaven on earth, we would probably need more agreement about what it would actually look and feel like. Some things are simple - an end to violence and poverty, for example. But would it be a life of technological advancement, or the simplicity still lived by the majority of people on this earth? Would it be religious or secular? Each to their own? Would we live in small tight knit communities, or metropolitan cities? Would we have local or global governments? Social programs or neighbourliness in times of hardship?

There is a Taoist story of a wise and elderly farmer. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbours sympathized: "Such bad luck," they said. "Maybe," the farmer replied. The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses. "How wonderful," the neighbours exclaimed. "Maybe," was all the farmer said. Later that week, the farmer's son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown and broke his leg. The neighbours came once again to commiserate on the farmer's bad luck. "Maybe," answered the farmer.

Soon after, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbours congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out. "Maybe," said the farmer.

Unitarian Universalists have historically ascribed to the notion of progress, especially social progress: that we can, as individuals and as a collective human race, move closer to the world we desire. In our congregations I have often heard the Martin Luther King, Jr., quote - which was in fact a paraphrase of 19th-century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker - "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Increasingly, my response to our best efforts at change and justice is "maybe." Not that we shouldn't work for change, but that we will not know for some time, perhaps not even in our lifetime, how our actions help or harm, or both or neither.

But there are things that are not so ambiguous, things we don't need to hold our breath to see the impact. A simple act of kindness, a heart-to-heart conversation with a friend, curling up with a good book, a minute or two or thirty of meditation, just about any spiritual practices that ground us. A deep breathe in the midst of sorrow, conflict, or joy. Gentleness with one another. Enjoying the sunshine on a beautiful day. Going for a good puddle romp on a rainy day. Time with our loved ones. Treasuring and playing with the children in our lives. Very rarely do any of these things require a "maybe" to see how they turn out.

And so perhaps in the midst of all that is, the best we can do, at least sometimes, is breathe... breathe in peace as best we can, breathe out love as best we can, making not the world but our lives, our families, our circles, our little corner of earth, more meaningful, more fun, more connected, more harmonious. Even if we are destined to make great change in the world, we will be most capable of that change when we are well nourished in body and soul. Getting a little more sleep, breathing more deeply, and most importantly, smiling more often.

May it be so for us today and always.

Blessed be.

Amen.