

Zen Along the Muddy River

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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Opening Reading: From *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker

Finding God—Tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to SHARE God, not find God....God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifests itself, even if you are not looking, or don't know what you are looking for.

Although I grew up in the country, and live there now—again, I have had times of city living. For more than thirty years, off and on, I have been taking early morning walks. About twenty years ago, I was serving a church in Boston and was living on the edge of Boston—in Brookline.

And there in the city, too, I continued my early morning routine. I would conquer a tinge of fear—I would summon my trust in good outweighing evil—and each day, regardless of the weather, I took my walk. I would stumble out of bed at dawn—tie on my Nikes—and—after stretching this and that, go down the stairs and out the door.

I walked down the street, turned right and descended the many steps to walk along the Muddy River.

I had started this morning routine yet again—late one summer. I had become disgusted with myself for failed attempts to get back in shape—and drop the pounds settled all too comfortably to stay. I began walking again to lose some weight and gain some health—but much, much more was lost and found those mornings along the Muddy River.

One of the things lost was my habit of turning on the news upon awakening—my need for instant involvement with the world. Lost, as well, was the stiffness that sometimes greeted me upon arising—and also gone, was the resignation to my slower, larger form.

In exchange for these losses, came a sense of renewed self—able, well and strong! That's not a bad return for getting out of bed and heading out the door! And if that were all I had found along the Muddy River—it would have been enough.

But I found more! As I gave up my lethargy and lost my need to hook into the latest event or violent act to start my day:

I watched the seasons change—all around me. I saw sunrise touch gold and amber trees, I felt rain drops—and saw them peppering the surface of the pond.

I watched flocks of mallards gathered daily to mate—to dive—and gossip. A heron occasionally watched silently among the reeds. Pigeons met in the same spot each morning—where earlier than I—unseen hands had scattered crumbs upon the ground.

People, too, appear early in an oasis in the city—this one-mile stretch of reeds and grass and trees along the Muddy River. A microcosm of the city comes and goes early in the morning. Hospital workers pour off the “T” and scurry to start their day. One day, the Governor appeared and said "Hello".

A Chinese boy rides his bike—while Mother does Tai Chi underneath a tree. Puppies come to learn to “sit”—to “come” and “stay”—and jogging pets lead their companions along the path.

Underneath another tree, a man sorts bags and bags of cans and bottles—while a group of homeless men gather up their few belongings to start another desperate day.

Some eyes smile and say “good morning”.
Some behind dark glasses never say “hello”.
Some few figures do raise some apprehension—but most are totally absorbed and just pass by.

Sometimes on my walk, nothing of great import happens—some mornings it is tempting not to go.

But—there ARE moments—there are mornings touched with insight and communion. And—if I had not put the body out there—if I had remained incased in brick and glass—absorbed too soon in the matters of the world—the morning would have passed without that opening to the Spirit—to start my day.

We Unitarian Universalists don't have prescribed rituals to invoke the Spirit. Many of us left faith traditions where those practices had become sterile—or totally irrelevant to our present comprehension of the Holy.

When I grew up in a Unitarian church, there WAS a discipline of sorts. We went to church every Sunday. There was an accepted belief statement that we learned in Sunday school—and we regularly recited the Lord's Prayer.

Certainly some of it “took” because it has become my life—but I was not often aware of being moved or deepened—there in church on Sunday morning. Still, much of what I heard and read and sang—through osmosis or subliminally—became my faith.

But as I grew older, the most dependable way for me to be “inspired” was to walk along the shore. That experience has never failed to be a space where I could feel my God—

and be renewed. Star Island—the Oregon coast—the rocky coast of Maine and the shore of Lake Michigan— have all been reliable touch-stones for my spirit.

There are many ways to listen for the spirit. One of them is “The Zen of Seeing”, by recently deceased artist, author and philosopher, Fredrick Franck. His book describes how “seeing/drawing” as he calls it, can connect one with the power of creation. I met him years ago and found him to be a man of evident serenity—a great creative power. He says, about the “zen of seeing”:

In this 20th century, to stop rushing around—to sit quietly on the grass,
to switch off this world and come back to Earth, to allow the eye to
see—a willow—a bush—a cloud—a leaf—is an unforgettable experience.

Seeing/drawing as a technique of contemplation, for him, is a way particularly suited to the “Western Temperament.” He suggests the western temperament may be no more than a habitual over-stimulated nervous system—an overloaded switchboard. Seeing/Drawing is the discipline through which he extricated himself from the mechanical pre-digested—the acquisitive facets of our society. With paper and drawing instrument in hand—he looks not at the paper, but at his surroundings. The process — rather than the product—is the objective.

He says, “I stand face to face with a hill, a bird, a human face, with myself in unwavering attention.” That is the “Zen of Seeing”. One asks, what, then IS Zen? Frank answers:

Zen is being in touch with the inner workings of life.
Zen is life that knows it is living.
Zen is this moment speaking as time and eternity.
Zen is seeing into the nature of things, inside and outside of myself.
Zen is when all living things of the Earth open their eyes wide and
look me in the eyes.

What habits of the spirit do YOU practice? Are they life giving and sustaining? Do you have habits that obstruct your contact with the meaning dimension of life?

There are many practices employed around our globe:

Some say the Rosary—some keep the Sabbath.
Some ring a Temple bell and chant.
Five times each day, many face Mecca praising Allah.
Some cast sacred circles—or gather around a fire.
In homes Sabbath lights are lit—children say a bedtime prayer—or
grace precedes a meal.

Are these empty rituals—homage to some magic, non-existent God? I am not so sure. For even if our understanding can no longer utilize these practices—for many they remain an avenue of connection with the mystery behind these ancient rites.

Don Juan tells Carlos Castaneda, “Look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself, and yourself alone, one question—‘Does this path have a heart?’” A “path with a heart”? What might that be for you? A practice that engages you—and touches your soul.

Castaneda says, “All paths lead nowhere—but one has heart, the other does not.” By this, I take him to mean, the value comes not from the particular discipline per se, but from the attitude and attention its practice evokes. In this sense, a “path with a heart” is a spiritual discipline that helps evoke your potential for spiritual being.

Habits of the spirit—a path with a heart—invite the opportunity to be in touch with Great Mystery—in whatever form a faith interprets it to be.

Each of us can find connection to the mystery of which we are a part. We can increase our physical and mental well being by making spaces where we truly listen—where we really see. In these spaces we are refreshed. We are renewed. We are encouraged for our lives and we are strengthened and sustained for whatever work we are called to do in this too often troubled world we share.

Let it be so for you.

Amen