

THE SPIRITUALITY OF KINSHIP

Rev. Scott W. Alexander, Preaching
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
Sunday, March 4, 2018

Opening Words (*Read Responsively*)

In a world with so much hatred and violence,

We need a religion that proclaims the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

In a world with so much brutality and fear,

We need a religion that seeks justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.

In a world with so many persons abused and neglected,

We need a religion that calls us to accept one another and encourage one another to spiritual growth.

In a world with so much dogmatism and falsehood,

We need a religion that challenges us to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

In a world with so much tyranny and oppression,

We need a religion that affirms the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process.

In a world with so much inequality and strife,

We need a religion that strives toward the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

In a world with so much environmental degradation,

We need a religion that advocates respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

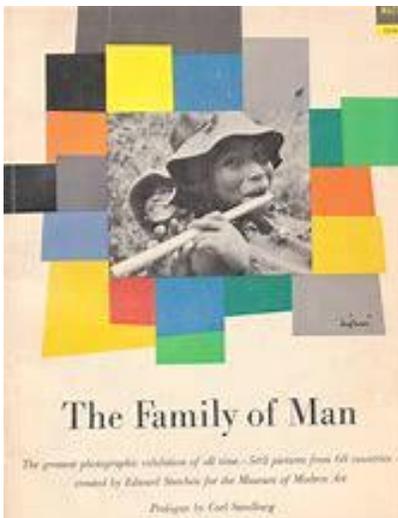
In a world with so much uncertainty and despair,

We need a religion that teaches our hearts to hope, and our hands to serve.

- Rev. Scott W. Alexander

Reading Before the Sermon

[BOOK JACKET PROJECTED UP ON CHANCEL SCREENS]



From *The Family of Man* – Prologue by Carl Sandburg

(Sandburg is describing the human family scattered around the Globe)

Everywhere is love and love-making, weddings and babies from generation to generation – keeping the family of Man alive and continuing. Everywhere the sun, moon and stars, the climates and weathers, have meanings for people. Though meanings vary, we are alike in all countries and tribes, in trying to read what sky, land, and sea say to us. Alike and ever alike we are on all continents – in need of love, food, clothing, work, speech, worship, sleep, games, dancing, fun. From tropics to arctics – humanity lives with these needs so alike, so inexorably alike...one big Family of Man, clinging to earth for life, and being.

Here ends the morning's reading

The Sermon

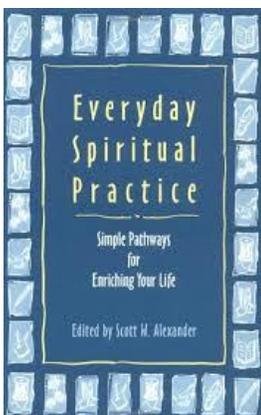
[PROJECT PICTURE AND CAPTION OF 17TH STREET BRIDGE ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]



Sunrise on the 17th Street Bridge in Vero Beach, Florida

Let me tell you how I begin every weekday here in beautiful Vero Beach. After getting up just a little after 6 AM, reading the newspapers, enjoying a couple of cups of coffee and a bit of breakfast, I head out on my trusty bike (around 8 AM) on a sixteen-mile (intentional) loop that first takes me Eastbound over the 17th Street Bridge. There is that beautiful arching span with the great view once you get to the top. Then I bike along the island's wonderful beaches to Jaycee Park, back to the Barber Bridge, then (once again on the mainland) I weave my way through the city neighborhoods until I arrive about an hour-and-a-quarter after leaving home here at the Fellowship...all exercised and ready for work. In and of itself, this cycling loop of mine is a great and enjoyable morning physical fitness routine that really gets both my mind and body

pumping – but it is really much more than that – it is also for me a daily spiritual practice. What do I mean by that?



["EVERYDAY SPIRITUAL PRACTICE" IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

Almost twenty years ago I published a book *entitled Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life* which is still in print, and has become something of a "UU Best Seller." In this book, we describe a wide variety of simple everyday practices – everything from meditation to quilting...yoga to fasting...journal writing to cooking with your family. If you engage in these everyday practices regularly and purposefully, they can enrich and ennoble your life.

[THE FOLLOWING SENTENCE IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

My morning ride to work through Vero Beach is an intentional and daily spiritual practice of mindfulness and kinship....a blessed opportunity for me to connect caringly with my environment and all the living things that share this world with me.

Each morning when I first turn my bike out of the driveway at home, I say to myself, "I wonder who and what I will see today on the way to work?" which is my way of reminding myself that it is spiritually important to be (1) mindful (as awake and attentive to as possible) of what is around me (not to miss the beauty and richness of my world)...and...to (2) practice kinship (to know and nurture my spiritual belonging) with all that surrounds me.

As I ride, I do so not with my head down and legs pumping, lost in my own thoughts, missing most of the intricacies and variety round me. I sit up and pay attention...keen attention...(that's the mindfulness part...just being awake to "what is")...and at the same time I also make an effort to be hospitable, welcoming and respectful to the life around me (that's the kinship piece).

So as I cycle mindfully, I take in the congenial natural interplay between sky...cloud...sun...and water. I take in the freshness of the morning breeze and the sun on my face...the green of the ever-changing landscape as it whizzes past me...and all the living things – people, animals, birds, fish – that are constantly moving around me. And the key spiritual thing here is that in addition to just noticing life around me I also strive to establish real kinship with it...a sense of genuine care and belonging to the elements of life around me.

There is one place on my ride, for example, right along Indian River Boulevard, where I almost always see and "spiritually say hello to" the same growing now-10-foot alligator (I've called him "ally-gator" for years now) resting in his little lair in the water next to the road. I diligently look for my friend each day and note his presence just as he notices mine! Moments later – as I cross the 17th street bridge – I commune with the soaring pelicans with wings outspread on the upward breeze and to majestic dolphins gliding next to each other through the blue waters below. When I reach the island, that is when I begin in earnest passing the many persons who are also routinely out in the morning – the joggers, runners, cyclists and walkers who are "exercising" the streets...and the many landscapers and construction guys already at work...and the folks faithfully walking their dogs or children. I make an effort to greet each one of them either with a wave of my hand or an actual verbal greeting.

One of the best parts of this "Kinship Practice" is that because I routinely bike the same loop at the same time each morning, I pass some of the same people (who are also morning creatures of habit) day after day after day. And although we do not really "know" each other or one another's names even, we nonetheless warmly greet each other as fellow morning compatriots, often commenting on the weather or how we are feeling. A couple of weeks ago, it had just stopped raining and the sun had come back out, and two of my regular ladies walking their dogs called out to me, "Did you see that spectacular rainbow over the ocean?" I was able to tell them that I had! By simply acknowledging the human presence of one another, we become part of a genuine community of people connected to one another in simple kindness and kinship.

So...on my daily bike rides to work here in Vero Beach, my spiritual practice is a dual one of mindfulness and

kinship.

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

My Morning Spiritual Practice on the Bike = MINDFULNESS + KINSHIP

I strive to pay attention and connect up with my world as intimately and caringly as I can, with the hope that I can increasingly feel every day in a spiritual way that I belong to everything...and everything belongs to me. The title of my sermon this morning is "The Spirituality of Kinship."

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

The Spirituality of Kinship



***Albert Schweitzer (1875-1969)
with his pet deer in the jungles
of Africa***

Words by the famous humanitarian Albert Schweitzer, who was both a Lutheran and Unitarian Universalist, pretty much sums it up for me:

"As a being in an active relation to the world [each individual] comes into a spiritual relation with it by not living for him [or her] self alone, but feeling him [or her] self one with all life that comes within his reach...the first spiritual act in [human] experience is reverence for life."

I chose this topic for this morning because this is "Welcoming Sunday" here at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach – a morning when we hope to introduce Unitarian Universalism to our invited guests and visitors. More than any other single spiritual idea, it is the idea of cultivating kinship – cultivating our real connection with life and other persons – that I think lies at the heart and the center of our long-standing faith tradition. For centuries both Unitarianism and Universalism have called humanity to both recognize and serve the intimate spiritual relatedness and belonging that exists between absolutely everything in our creation – most especially between all human beings.

[PICTURE AND QUOTE OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON ARE PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]



Ralph Waldo Emerson 1803-1882

Here is his most famous quotation on the oneness of our creation, from his essay "The Oversoul."

Let us learn the revelation of all nature and thought...that the highest dwells within us, that the sources of nature are in our own minds. As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so there is no bar or wall in the soul where we, the effect, and God, the cause, begins. There is a deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is accessible to us. Within us is the soul of the whole, the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related: the eternal one. - Ralph Waldo Emerson

So historically the Unitarians spiritually affirmed that creation is of one holy piece...one precious whole...and said that we human beings must live our lives in accordance with that unifying truth.

And on the Universalist side of our faith tradition, our spiritual forebears similarly affirmed the oneness of creation, especially the oneness of humanity as God's children. My favorite Universalist quote of all time comes from early twentieth century American poet Carl Sandburg, which pretty much sums up our faith tradition's spiritual worldview about the radical interconnectedness of life.

[PICTURE AND POEM OF CARL SANDBURG IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]



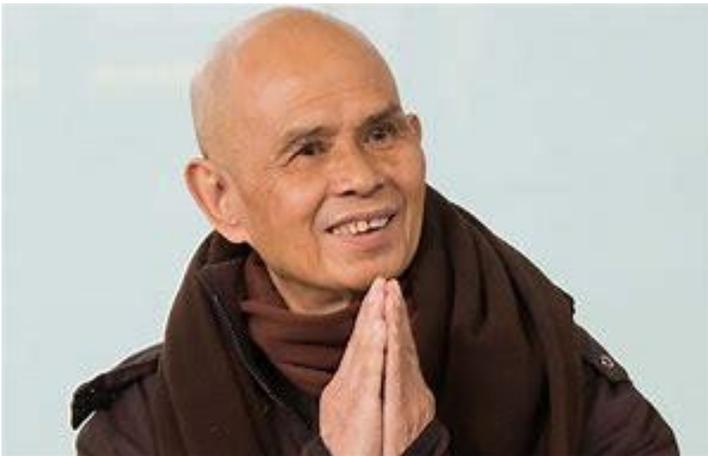
Carl Sandburg 1878-1967

***There is only one horse in the world,
and his name is All Horses.
There is only one bird in the air,
And her name is All Wings.
There is only one fish in the sea,
And his name is All Fins.***

***There is only one man in the world
And his name is All Men.
There is only one woman in the world
And her name is All Women.
There is only one child in the world
And the child's name is All Children.
There is only one Maker in the world
And [that Maker's] children cover the earth
And they are named All God's Children.
From the poem "The People, Yes"***

So ours is a faith tradition that has always taught the interconnectedness and kinship of all life. And it is important to acknowledge that we Unitarian Universalists, of course, are not the only spiritual tradition which understands and affirms this. The most famous saying of contemporary Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh is:

[PICTURE AND QUOTE FROM THICH NHAT HANH IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]



Buddhist teacher and peace activist thich nhat hanh

We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness."

We are here in this creation to spiritually awaken from the illusion of our separateness. Another Buddhist teacher expands on this thought: "I simply need to wake up and see through the illusion of separation...I am not inside, peering out at an external world. Rather, I am what the whole world is doing right here and now. This realization frees me to live as I choose, but that will naturally be in a way that contributes to the well-being of the whole, because I don't feel apart from that whole.

This is exactly what I try to do each morning on my bike ride...as I strive to mindfully strengthen my kinship and connection with everything round me. I love the idea that it is an "illusion" to think of yourself as in any way "separate" from the rest of creation...for the reality is that we are in literal fact connected to every part of creation and humanity.

Let me come at all this "illusion of our separateness" idea from thinking about our own individual physical bodies as persons. One way to think about your body is that it is a collection of approximately 100 trillion living cells. What holds these trillions of cells "that are you" together as an identifiable organism is your skin...that very thin and vulnerable living layer of a certain kind of cell that separates you from the rest of the world. But as I think you all know, your skin is in fact what scientists call a "semi-permeable membrane" – a living barrier that constantly "lets things in" and "lets things out." In literal, physical fact, there is always living, breathing traffic moving between what you think of as "you" and what you think of as the rest of "the world."

Sometimes when I'm riding my bike, I remind myself of this scientific truth, and imagine my body as contiguous and flowing with the rest of the world..."me" and "all of creation" as one organic, moving piece...Wow!

This is, in fact, exactly what "The New Physics" teaches us about creation. According to the unfolding discoveries of quantum physics everything in the universe is interconnected in multi-dimensional ways – by time, space, matter, and energy. One physics website I consulted points out that "Bell's Theorem" – which, along with "String Theory" is one of the mathematical building blocks of the new physics, says that:

[FOLLOWING QUOTE IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

Bell's Theorem:

Once connected, objects (anywhere in the universe) affect one another forever no matter where they are. Following [that principle] an invisible stream of energy will always connect any two objects that have been connected in any way in the past...this means that everything is connected to everything else and that physical reality is both waves and particles. This model birthed the "holographic universe" idea, the powerful conscious energy of the whole can invariably be found in the tiniest particles: an atom of a blade of grass to the most distance galaxies. The building blocks of atoms are merely "parcels of compressed energy, packed and patterned according to certain mathematical formulae."

I fully admit that I don't quite understand all of this, but the bottom line is that physicists are teaching us that absolutely everything in our physical creation is related to every other thing....that every last atom and molecule in our world is stitched together in one indissoluble wholeness...and that nothing happens in physical isolation.

An example of this is what M.I.T. mathematician Edward Lorenz famously described "The Butterfly Effect":

[THE FOLLOWING PICTURE AND QUOTE ARE PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]



Dr. Edward Lorenz:

The Butterfly Effect – "that because a butterfly flaps its wings somewhere in New Mexico, eventually a hurricane will happen in China...It may take a very long time, but the connection is real. If the butterfly had not flapped its wings in just the right point in space and time, the hurricane would not have happened."

What Dr. Lorenz is saying is that nothing in our physical universe (nothing) happens in isolation...everything is connected to everything else by time, space, matter and energy.

So quantum physics (pure science) confirms what our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition has long understood deep in its heart. Everything in creation is connected...and therefore it is our spiritual task as religious people to acknowledge and nurture our kinship and connection with life and persons around us.

And thus I finally arrive at the spiritual place where I wish to leave you this morning.

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]

OURS IS A "RELATIONAL" RELIGION. TO BE A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST IS TO "AWAKEN

FROM THE ILLUSION OF OUR SEPARATENESS"...AND DEVOTE A LIFETIME TO CULTIVATING KINSHIP, CARING, AND COMPASSION WITH LIFE AND PERSONS AROUND YOU.

We Unitarian Universalists see creation and humanity spiritually stitched together in one sacred and interrelated wholeness...and call as creatures of earth to live lives that celebrate and serve our radical belonging to all. The poet Carl Sandburg had it exactly spiritually right:

There is only one horse in the world,
And his name is All Horses.
There is only one bird in the air,
And her name is All Wings.
There is only one fish in the sea,
And his name is All Fins.
There is only one man in the world
And his name is All Men.
There is only one woman in the world
And her name is All Women.
There is only one child in the world
And the child's name is All Children.
There is only one Maker in the world
And [that Maker's] children cover the earth
And they are named All God's Children.

Amen.