

CHOP WOOD...CARRY WATER...

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach, Florida

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READING BEFORE THE SERMON

Jonthan Kabat Zinn

From his book Coming to our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness

“[Our] entire society suffers from [ADD] attention deficit disorder...and it is getting worse by the day...Much has changed for us in the last 100 years, as we have drifted away from intimacy with the natural world and a lifetime connectedness to the community into which we were born.....and this change has become even more striking in the past 20 or so years, with the advent (and virtually universal adoption of) the digital revolution...[through our home computers and lap tops...smart phones and tablets...24/7 high speed conductivity, the nearly infinite channels of cable television...the incredible reach of the] internet and its world wide web, and of course e-mail [and countless social media platforms]...[All these technologies, despite their] undeniable convenience, usefulness, [and] efficiency...[have] already irreversibly transfigured how we live our lives, whether we realize it or not.....This new way of working and living has inundated us (all of a sudden) with endless options, endless opportunities (for interruption and distraction)...and a kind of free-floating urgency attached to even the most trivial of events [or communications]... We are continuously bombarded with information, appeals, deadlines, [and] communications...We find ourselves responding willy-nilly to the increasing volumes of e-mail, voice mail, [Facebook posts and tweets], and cell phone traffic coming in from all corners of the planet...WE ARE LITERALLY BEING DRIVEN TO DISTRACTION BY OUR DELICIOUS OPPORTUNITIES AND CHOICES.

[PAUSE...]

[This] technology itself undermines any time we might be inclined to take for reflection...It has given rise to a DANCE OF INATTENTION AND INSTABILITY OF MIND...[there is so much] more to pay attention to...it is now harder to pay attention to any one thing...The relentless acceleration of our way of life over the past few generations have made focusing in on anything something of a lost art...Things come at us fast and furious, relentlessly...These assaults on our nervous system continually stimulate and foster desire and agitation rather than connectedness and calmness...and, if we are not careful, [they] rob us of time, [rob us] of our moments. So many of us feel trapped [by this crazy acceleration] yet at the same time also addicted to the speed at which our lives are unfolding. Even our stress and distress can feel oddly satisfying or outright

intoxicating. So we are reluctant to slow ourselves down and GIVE OURSELVES OVER TO THE PRESENT MOMENT, to ATTEND FULLY [to what is so richly before us].

HERE ENDS THE MORNING'S READING

THE SERMON

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

Ancient Zen Proverb from the 6th Century:

"Before enlightenment: chop wood, carry water. After Enlightenment: chop wood, carry water."

My sermon title this morning comes from a famous/ancient Zen proverb, that comes from the 6th Century...which simply reads: "Before enlightenment: chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment: chop wood, carry water." Now...what in the world does this mean? Well, like so many Zen proverbs from the Buddhist tradition, this one is meant to vex, tease and challenge us a bit...because it suggests (confusingly) that both before AND after enlightenment we are to do mundane tasks like chopping wood and carrying water...I mean, I thought enlightenment was supposed to change everything? What is this proverb teaching?

Well...the Zen idea [here] (as best as my "linear Western analytical mind" can understand it) is that human enlightenment (and fulfillment and happiness) is achieved in this life not through some glorified, esoteric spiritual transition...but simply by being fully present...with total mindful awareness...to the ordinary and mundane tasks in your life -- like the ancient simple tasks of chopping wood and carrying water. As one Buddhist author put it, "doing any task with full awareness, practicing being in the world with [focused] loving-kindness, will help one reach enlightenment...[this proverb teaches] that the chattering/ thinking mind can be quieted through repetitive, awareness-filled work." And another writer says this proverb urges us to "Break life down into the simplicity of the present moment. As human beings we do not [usually] live in the present moment. We carry our past forward with us, we yearn for something in the future and all the time we miss what is in front of us at all times. Life is beautiful right in front of us at every moment. Focusing on this moment right now removes the mind from drifting to wants, needs, desires....all driven by the mind in search of attachment. With attachment comes suffering."

Now...this makes great spiritual sense to me. Whether you are talking about life in 6th Century China...or 21st Century America...our lives are made rich and full and satisfying when we mindfully (and lovingly) focus on each moment and task that is at hand (no matter how mundane) and refuse all the easy distractions that can keep us locked away from the fullness of each irretrievable moment that is ours. In this morning's "Reading Before the Sermon" American Buddhist teacher Jonathan Kabat Zinn reminds us that modern American life (with all its high-tech gadgetry clamoring 24-7 for our attentions) conspires to keep us DISTRACTED and

(thereby) DISTANCED from much of the rich life that is directly in front of us in any given moment of existence.

As he writes elsewhere, Jon Kabat-Zinn says, “Fundamentally, mindfulness is a simple concept...mindfulness means paying attention [in your life] in a particular way...ON PURPOSE...[to] the timeless beauty and richness of the present moment...openheartedly...and not judgmentally...Mindfulness is none other than the capacity we already have to know what is actually happening as it is happening...it is a vast and spacious awareness of both heart and mind...We have already noted how OUT OF SHAPE [we Americans are] when it comes to exercising our INNATE CAPACITY TO PAY ATTENTION. [But] mindfulness...can be refined through systematic practice...[and then Kabat-Zinn gets to something I feel is crucial for us all to understand, he writes]...And since there is nothing particularly Buddhist about paying attention or about awareness, nor anything particularly Eastern or Western, or Northern or Southern for that matter, THE ESSENCE OF MINDFULNESS IS TRULY UNIVERSAL....Mindfulness is the final common pathway for what makes us human, our capacity for awareness and self-knowing.”

[PAUSE...]

So...the Zen saying “after enlightenment: chop wood...carry water” is simply a powerful reminder for each of us to remember to FOCUS MINDFULLY on each task and moment (no matter how mundane) which life presents for us to experience.

[PICTURE OF SCOTT CYCLING ACROSS AMERICA IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREENS]



Many of you know that – over the last two decades -- I have completed five, intense 30-day charity bike rides across America...and I must tell you that each of these long rides (about 120 miles every day) have been for me an opportunity for incredible, life-enriching mindfulness.

Now I will admit that some days on these rides can be rather tedious...especially out West where the terrain doesn't always vary much. But I am here to report that...

[PICTURE OF RIDERS IN NOWHERE, OKLAHOMA IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]



Even in an ignominiously named place like "Nowhere Oklahoma" (and tiny/dusty town I have actually ridden through) there is plenty to "mindfully" take in IF YOU ARE WILLING TO BE AWAKE! Because you see "No-Where" Oklahoma (a low self-esteem town if there ever was

one) could also be understood as “Now-Here” Oklahoma...An interesting place that begs you to notice its nuances! Think again about this spiritual double-entendre: “I’m dying on the vine here in No-where Oklahoma...or “I’m fully alive in Now-Here Oklahoma” ...the spiritual choice is up to you!

Years ago, I was driving South on the New Jersey Turnpike (not too far from Bayonne where all those stinky oil refineries are) when I was struck (again by the irony of the message) by a billboard advertising a gambling casino in Atlantic city.

[PICTURE AND CAPTION GO UP ON THE SCREENS]

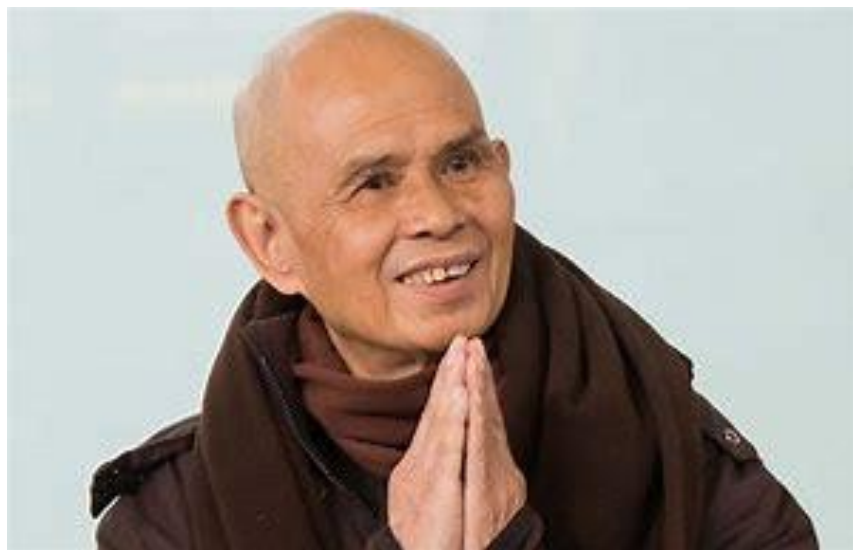


Steve Wynn

“You’ve Got To Be Present To Win!”

There was the grinning owner of the casino (Steve Wynn) with the quote “You’ve got to be present to win!” He was talking (of course) about gambling “Come to my casino and play” ...but I took it as a call to greater mindfulness. The irony here is that a gambling casino is one of the last places on earth conducive to mindfulness! ...what with its lack of windows and constant buzzing and whirling screens and sirens!...a casino is distraction-central!

[PHOTO AND QUOTE OF Thich Nhat Hanh IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]



THICH NHAT HANH: "Each daily act must be carried out in mindfulness."

Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Each daily act must be carried out in mindfulness" and as an example of this he suggests how we should spiritually approach something as simple as washing the evening dishes...I quote him:

To my mind, the idea that doing dishes is unpleasant can occur to us only when we are not doing them. Once we are standing in front of the sink with our sleeves rolled up and our hands in warm water, it is really not bad at all. I enjoy taking my time with each dish, being fully aware of the dish, the water, and each movement of my hands. I know that if I hurry in order to go and have dessert, the time will be unpleasant, not worth living. That would be a pity, for every second of life is a miracle. The dishes themselves and the fact that I am here washing them are miracles!

Each thought, each action in the sunlight of awareness becomes sacred. In this light, no boundary exists between the sacred and the profane. It may take a bit longer to do the dishes, but we can live fully, happily, in every moment. Washing the dishes is at the same time a means and an end- that is, not only do we do the dishes in order to have clean dishes, we also do the dishes just to do the dishes and live fully each moment while washing them.

[AND THEN HE CONCLUDES]

If I am incapable of washing dishes joyfully, if I want to finish them quickly so I can go and have dessert and a cup of tea, I will be equally incapable of doing these things joyfully. With the cup in my hands, I will be thinking about what to do next, and the fragrance and the flavour of the tea, together with the pleasure of drinking it, will be lost. I will always be dragged into the future, never able to live in the present moment. The time of dishwashing is as important as the time of meditation. That is why the everyday mind is called the Buddha's mind.

Novelist Henry Miller similarly said: "the moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself..."

[PICTURE OF Thich Nhat Hanh COMES DOWN OFF CHANCEL SCREENS]

Now...I realize that to a lot of us "busy, no-nonsense" Americans, this idea of turning one's mundane evening dish-washing chore into a sacred moment of life-satisfying and soul-filling awareness might seem (well) silly...but I say "Don't knock it until you've tried it!" I have found (again and again and again in my life) that when I have the spiritual wisdom to simply focus myself and my attentions to whatever is "at hand" in my life: whether it is mowing the lawn (which I personally enjoy, actually)...or quietly reading the morning's newspaper before sunrise...or vacuuming the house...or making a sandwich for lunch...or getting dressed for the day...or even cleaning the bathroom (one, I will admit, of my least favorite routines) whenever I have the spiritual wisdom to keenly focus myself and my attentions on whatever is immediately "at hand" in my life...I discover unexpected satisfaction, richness and joy.

Let me give a little example of this from my own life. Recently, I have made a spiritual practice of simple, focused mindfulness around the process of waking up each morning. As soon as I open my eyes in response to the alarm (and leave the world of my dreams...and become aware that I am lying restfully in my bedroom) I say to myself, "OK, Scott...now you're waking up to the new day...but before you put your feet to the floor and get busy with what's next, let yourself lie here (still and quiet...relaxed and attentive) and take just a moment to notice where you are...who you're with...to fully take in your immediate physical surroundings (what you see, touch, smell, and hear)...and then...slowly (after you have fully focused on precisely where you are)...to catalogue (fully in your mind's eye) what you think the day will hold for you." This simple process of "taking stock" of "where and what and who I am" before I arise from my bed helps me to begin the day in awareness, appreciation and calm...and it sets the stage for greater personal mindfulness all day long. And then I try (regularly throughout my day – some days more successfully than others I will admit!) to spiritually pause...and remind myself (again...) precisely where I am...who I'm with...and what I'm doing – which often leads me (blessedly) to discover "The Sacred" nestled quietly with "The Mundane."

Let me give another example of this. As I have shared on at least a couple of occasions from this pulpit, each and every morning (when I arrive here at the fellowship for work Monday-through-Friday) before I go to my desk and get to my ministerial work (usually writing sermons, answering email, or making phone calls) I take just a moment to walk down to our nursery school (the Bridges Early Learning Center) and check in with the two classrooms of energetic two-year-olds that are just inside the hall door.

[PICTURE OF NURSERY SCHOOL KIDS GOES UP ON THE SCREENS]



I greet them with "Hey...how are you guys doing this morning?" ...and they greet me (usually running up to this familiar bald guy with smiles and enthusiastic "high-fives"). By taking just a

moment to “check in with my favorite kids” and be FULLY PRESENT TO THEIR PURE ENERGY AND BEAUTY I am able to begin my work day (no matter how harried or preoccupied I might be) with clarity and joy. It just takes a minute or two to focus on the bright faces of these two-year-olds...and by focusing fully on them (attending to their amazing, vibrant humanity) I am reminded of life’s beauty and holiness...pure and simple.

[PICTURE OF KIDS COMES DOWN OFF CHANCEL SCREENS]

Another spiritual practice of “chopping wood and carrying water” that I attempt to honor again and again throughout each day IS TO INTENTIONALLY FOCUS ON ONLY ONE THING AT A TIME...USUALLY THAT WHICH IS MOST IMPORTANTLY RIGHT IN FRONT OF ME...AND REFUSE TO ALLOW THE SOUL-ROBBING DISTRACTIONS THAT COME FROM THE MODERN-DAY-CURSE WHICH IS CALLED “MULTI-TASKING.” Let me give an example of this. If I am at my desk working on a sermon on my computer and someone leans his or her head in my office and asks “Do you have a minute?” the answer (in all but very rare situations) is “Yes, sure, come in,” because such “interruptions” (such spontaneous moments) are what ministry is all about. Ministry (Just like life itself!) can only be done at one-focused-human-moment-or-encounter-or-conversation-at-a-time. And so whenever someone comes to my door, I get up from my desk (the sermon or email will wait!) I move to one of the comfortable chairs around my office coffee table, and invite the person to sit down across from me...and focus on what has brought them to my door. I try this same shift-in-focus if a phone call comes into my desk while I’m working on other matters. I stop typing into my computer...look away from the screen...and turn my attentions (as fully as I can) to the voice on the other end of the line...because I know that if I try to split my attentions between the document up on my computer screen and my phone conversation, I will pay attention successfully or well to NEITHER! Let me say this all a little differently, in your life, you will never “chop wood” or “carry water” (or do anything else) with spiritual focus and satisfaction if you are trying to do something else at the same time. **So chop wood when you chop wood...and carry water when you carry water!**

[PAUSE...]

Look folks...the science is in on this, OK? Despite how many of us sophisticated and productive 21st Century types THINK we can successfully multi-task our way through our days...the fact is very few of us are any good at dividing our attentions! Although many of us delude ourselves into thinking we are very good at competently doing several things at once, Dr. Earl Miller – a leading neuroscientist (and a world expert on divided human attention) at MIT – calls this a powerful and diabolical illusion. “Our brains [he writes] are NOT wired to multi-task well...When people think they’re multi-tasking, they’re actually just switching from one task to another very rapidly. And every time they do, there’s a cognitive cost in doing so. People can’t multitask very well, and when people say they can, they’re deluding themselves,” said Miller. “Switching from task to task, you think you’re actually paying attention to everything around you at the same time...but you’re actually not...for the most part, we [human beings] simply can’t focus on more than one thing at a time. [and then he gives an everyday example of this] “Think about writing an e-mail and talking on the phone at the same time [I, of course, like all of you have NEVER attempted such multi-tasking, right???]...Those things are nearly impossible to do at the same time...You cannot focus on one while doing the other.

That's because of what's called INTERFERENCE between the two tasks," Miller says "They involve communicating via speech or the written word, and so there's a lot of conflict between the two of them." In field experiments, researchers say they can actually see the brain struggling during any attempt to multi-task between any two (or three) tasks.

[PAUSE...]

Here's the bottom line, folks...the more we Americans hurry and multi-task (across the various venues of our lives), the less calm and focus we have in our hearts and minds. Buddhism has (for many centuries) had a word for this spiritually unwise, distracted state, DUKKHA [Duk-Kha], which is variously translated as "suffering, anguish, stress, malaise, dis-ease, or unsatisfactoriness."

[PICTURE OF MONKEY MIND IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]



Many Buddhist teachers also use a more colloquial phrase...MONKEY MIND. Everybody in this room knows what it is like to have a monkey mind. You have a monkey mind when (because of the crazy, cluttered, distracting pace you are keeping in your neurological life) multiple thoughts are racing willy-nilly in your head, much the way a monkey scurries frenetically and aimlessly in some high jungle tree. When you have monkey mind, it's hard (if not impossible!) to settle in and enjoy the present moment (in all its texture, richness and charm).

[PICTURE OF MONKEY MIND COMES DOWN OFF CHANCEL SCREENS]

And so – my dear-and-busy Vero Beach friends – whenever you “chop wood” or “carry water” or “do the evening dishes” or “walk the dog” or “cut the lawn” or “fix dinner for the family” or “give your grandson a bath”...WAKE UP FULLY TO THE MOMENT...AND PAY SINGULAR/HOLY ATTENTION TO WHAT IS AT HAND.

The Zen masters have it right. By being fully mindful of the mundane realities of your life, you will discover that which is truly sacred. So my message to you this morning is pure and simple: Pay attention to what is right in front of you, right now. For life flies by so very fast, and you don't want to miss the holiness that is everywhere for the taking.

Amen.