Reading

Annie Dillard, from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

“One day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance … I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at the moment I was lifted and struck.”

Message

Lifted and Struck

Rev. David Kraemer

Long ago, in our first Unitarian Universalist Church, Mary and I joined in a “Building Your Own Theology” course. Some of you might remember it. It was kind of a signature program for us at a time when lots of us were pushing away at the faith traditions of our upbringing, when individualism was strong, and we were maybe a bit full of ourselves. Sure, we can be theologians, we thought. And we can. Everyone is, in their own way, of course, even if we’ve backed off from that hubris a bit.

In one of the first sessions, we were asked to graph our spiritual and religious lives, the highs and lows, over time. What was most surprising was that Mary and I each took the assignment the same way, which was not necessarily how we were asked to do it, or how other people did it. But we each drew two lines -- one for our spiritual lives and one for our religious lives. They were not the same. Sometimes the lines ran parallel, sometimes close together, but more often they crossed and spread wide apart -- the times when we each felt most spiritual were not often the times we were most involved, and vice versa.

The big epiphany at the time was a new goal – to find a way to make the lines match up, to bring the spiritual and the religious into harmony with each other, to make our selves whole.

 One way to look at this is that the spiritual line reflects an inner, personal life, and the religious line reflects an outer, public life. But that’s not really quite right either. Sometimes spirituality is public, as when my friends the peace activists stand out in front of the library each week. And sometimes religion is private, as when it is against the law to ask about faith preference on a job application.

But whatever, I wanted to make my lines move together, to bring whatever “sides” of myself they reflect, into agreement.

Some part of this I think is what moved me eventually into ministry. What drives me now is what has driven me always -- a desire to use those gifts that come most naturally to me, to talk with people, to hear their stories, to use the language and, I hope, to find some meaning.

And then I reread that quote from Annie Dillard, or come upon some similar thought, and I think “I’m really not much of a minister.”

You all have said some really kind things of me in the last few weeks as we have moved through the Installation. But really, if I had to draw lines again today, I think the religion line would be right up there as high as it’s ever been, but the spirituality line … that needs some work.

It is hard to maintain this, to tend to both myself and to others, to seek out those moments when I know myself to be simply a bell, to be lifted and struck.

I have experienced moments like this at times in my life – brief moments – staring up at the night sky, or gazing down at my newborn son, or sometimes even here in a sanctuary, singing, or reflecting on the words being said.

But these moments do not come as often as I would like. Not as often, anyway, as I think they should for someone in my shoes. I have my own delusions about what a minister is, just like you do.

Whoever I am, whoever you are, all of us likely might want a few more moments like this. But that’s just not reality.

I was at the car dealer a week ago and the salesman asked me what I did for a living. When I told him, he replied “Oh yes, you have that sense of Godliness about you.”

Seriously!? That’s your line?

I’m here in used car lot. It’s late on a Friday. I hate buying clothes, much less cars. I’m doing my best to be polite, but I could just as easily be a grouch and I know I don’t hide it all that well. So if this is next to Godliness, I don’t want to get close to whatever the alternative is.

I gave him a pass on his compliment.

But I am not at all fooled.

I am just a regular person. Up here in this collar or out there somewhere in my new pickup truck. I have known this all through seminary and on into life as a minister.

I think maybe somewhere I thought that in this transition magic would happen and I would become spiritual. But I have come to realize that’s not going to happen. I will not be lifted and struck, forever and ever. Jesus is not going to swoop in and save me. The Holy Spirit only talks when you are listening.

So I came to understand that if I am going to make the lines match up, if I am really going to live in to our third principle, -- acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth -- I’m going to have to work at it. I am going to have to find some way of doing this, on purpose, and mostly on my own. That’s why they call it

spiritual

practice.

A few years ago I started doing yoga in the morning, every morning. It was part of yet another matriculation requirement at the time – an assignment from my committee -- to engage in spiritual practice.

But it was not totally new to me. I had done some weekly yoga classes on and off for some years before this, and I thought I could use the physical work, so I started, every day.

I remembered a few poses from class. Got a book. Memorized the routines of sun salutation A and B, added a little spinal twist, and savasana, flat on my back, corpse pose, my favorite. After a little while, I added some balance work, because those poses had always been hardest for me. They take a lot of concentration. And maybe a year ago, I started some inversion, crow pose, to get my head down below my heart. Lately, I’ve thrown in boat pose to help my abs, and bridge when sleep leaves my lower back sore.

Yoga, as it is practiced often in a gym, can be understood as physical exercise. But its roots lie deep within spirituality. It makes a connection between the sacred and the profane, the physical and the divine. Advanced practitioners tap into a power far beyond the strength and flexibility of their bodies.

I am not a learned student of the spirituality of yoga, but when I started, I was open to the changes that spiritual work might do.

I did not set my hopes too high. I understand myself well enough to know have been far more of an instant-gratification person most of my life. If it doesn’t pay off pretty quickly, I’m off to something else. So keeping at something every day was not natural for me.

And I will say that after maybe four solid years of this, every morning, I have fallen off quite a bit. I do not practice every day any more.

But the practice of practice, the solid work of it, for a fairly long time, has been really instructive, really surprising. I have come to see real value in it. And now, even though it’s not all the time, I can jump back into it pretty quickly.

The first big thing this practice has taught me is just that, practice. The word itself means different things.

It can mean preparation for some real test, some real work, sometime in the future – like the practice a musician puts in so that the performance is perfect, or the practice you might do at the driving range. Practice with some distant goal in mind.

But there’s also the sense of practice as practical, as something done not for future ends, but for itself, right now. Like a doctor’s practice – the practical application of knowledge and skills to real life, here and now.

I think that yoga has been both of these things for me. I certainly have practiced, in the more preparatory sense, not quite getting it right, trying all the time. And I have practiced, every day, routinely and, I would say, successfully. I have made a practice of yoga. I practice at it, at the same time as I practice.

Spirituality is like this. It is here and now, and it is a kind of preparation. It is something I try at, and something I do.

Those moments of feeling lifted and struck, those small epiphanies, they can come more readily when you watch for them. Luck favors the prepared mind. I practice, and I practice. And my tree finds its roots.

And inside that is the second big thing yoga has taught me, that is forgiveness. In practice, I often fail. I have tried and tried, over and again. And I am not one to be patient with myself. Like I said, if it doesn’t come to me in the first few tries, I pretty often move on to something else.

But the balance poses, and the inversions, these were great lessons. For months I would focus all of my attention on a single spot on the wall – my drishti in yoga-speak, my focal point, just like they say in all the books – and I would raise my left foot to the inside of my right thigh in preparation for tree, and I would fall over. Over and over. I came to believe I would never get it, that my balance was just bad. And then one day, I stayed upright – wobbly and straining – but up, for a full 10 breaths. And the next day, and the next. And then I’d fall over again. And then I’d stay up.

And after a while, I found I could raise my hands over my head. And my body would relax. And I could do this without burning a hole in the wall with my gaze.

There were other lessons in this. My balance was better in a familiar setting. Even after becoming completely comfortable standing on one leg for a long period of time in my upstairs bedroom, gazing out the window at an actual tree, if I was in another room with another view instantly I would fall over again. Until I found that I could calm my mind, just as I had in my room, in my new setting, and stay upright.

What it took was forgiveness. Forgiveness of myself when I would fall over. To not dwell on the failure, to ignore my inner critic, but to accept the fact that I couldn’t do it today and move on. And then the next day, to try again.

Marcia has told me that in the process of creating these beautiful hangings, she has many times labored for hours to stitch in pieces of fabric or beadwork, only to step back, see it for what it is, then rip it all out and start over. I imagine she must feel a bit of this forgiveness or else she would never continue.

So there might be bigger lessons in this. I don’t want to get too preachy, but you might have things of your life, too, that did not quite work out, times when you needed to start over.

If you are a parent, for example, you might know the lessons of this kind of failure. To fall down, and then the next day, to do it all over again. Or you might see your own children stumble, and know that all you can do is forgive.

Forgiveness is a gift. And always, gifts have to be both given and received, or they are not gifts.

I have been in situations in which I have been given something insignificant, like a stick of gum maybe, but the power of the moment, the power of the gift, lies not in what was offered, but in how it was received.

To say, “no thanks, I’m good,” is not always the right thing to do. Cultural differences and expectations sometimes play into this. Even when the gift is humbling, when it comes as too much from someone with too little, the grace of it comes in acceptance.

And inside this, is maybe the third big thing I’ve gotten from yoga. That is there is value in a group, in a community of like-minded practitioners.

My yoga practice for the first few years was a solitary thing. I practiced when I worked in Rockford, Illinois, during my internship, and then in Sioux Falls as interim. Mary was living in Rochester during this time, and I made this part of my routine as a part-time commuter.

But the asanas, the poses, I would not have been able to do had I not gone to classes before this. One value of having a yoga teacher is that the vinyasa, the flow, is in the hands of someone else.

You don't have to think about what comes after downward facing dog, or how to move smoothly from standing to seated. And the teacher is there, too, to gently urge a deeper stretch, or to remind you to place your feet just so.

And then a year ago, we moved here, and Mary and I were in the same dwelling together for the first time in four years. And she practices, too. So suddenly I had a partner, which is to say, an audience, and that changed things, too. She was able to remind me of small refinements, (as she does in many other aspects of my life), better ways to move, better ways to be.

It is different to practice in a group than it is to practice at home alone. It helps stretch me into new ways, new poses. It helps me be better, to be more graceful, more focused, more comfortable in the asanas.

I have been a part of some yoga classes where a rapport grows among the students and the teacher, where something happens in the room, on the mats, that cannot happen when you are alone.

It is like that here in church, as well. I am more than willing to allow that each of us might find spirituality as much in nature as here in this sanctuary. I resonate with the spiritual-not-religious crowd that dominates our culture. In some sense, our Unitarian Universalist tradition is particularly accepting of this belief. Similar to our attempts to Build Your Own Theology.

But I also know that I could not do this – this religiosity, this form of spiritualism – without this congregation, without the care and support and loving forgiveness of the people who are here. You all make me better, more gracious, more comfortable in my skin.

So three lessons from yoga: practice, and forgiveness, and community. I can see these in in our Third Principle Wall Hanging. It reminds me of these things, too.

Just as the children did earlier, I invite you to study on this piece. Take a close look. Notice things.

See whether our covenant to accept one another and encourage spiritual growth in this congregation is enabled by this work.

You might think about your own spiritual practice. It might be yoga. It might be painting or art. It might be quilting. Or hanging from a tree with a chainsaw in your hands. Whatever it is, see whether there are lessons there for you, as well.

May you feel alive. May you be knocked breathless.

May you be seen, as if for the first time.

May you stand on the grass on fire, utterly focused, utterly dreamed.

May you be a bell, lifted and struck.