

A State of Being
December 1, 2019
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This was a week when some of us traveled and others shopped, peeled, mashed, chopped, baked, and roasted our way to cooking and eating a delicious Thanksgiving feast with friends and family. After the feast, came clearing tables, washing, drying and putting away dishes, glasses, pots and pans – all to get ready for the next course – dessert and pie! Delicious, yummy pies!

Thanksgiving is a lot of Doing, but its small potatoes compared to getting ready for Christmas. I won't get into all the Doing that Christmas typically entails, but let's suffice it to say.... Many of us will be making long To Do lists and checking them twice, actually, checking them numerous times before Christmas has come and gone.

'Tis the season of a lot of Doing. Just talking about the holiday season, maybe you feel your anxiety level start to increase, even as you sit in this calm, lovely Sanctuary? Maybe you feel an urge to start making lists in your head. Or, perhaps, this Happy Ho Ho Ho time of year is hard because it's a stark contrast to the sadness you feel in your heart. The Doing may be trying to avoid the music and joviality of the season.

'Tis the season of a lot of Doing, and a lot of stress. So, let's take a moment to shift from the Doing-mode that may have been activated by all this talk of the holidays and settle gently into a Being-mode. I invite you to close your eyes for a moment and simply notice the sensations in your body. Silently name a word or two that describes what the sensation of Doing feels like.

Now, I invite us to take three deep breaths together in a particular way. I'll describe it first and then; we'll do it together.

- Take a deep breath in. Hold for a moment.
- As you breathe out, relax into your body.

Let's do it together 3 x's.

- Deep breath in. Hold
- Release and relax into your body.

Now, I once again invite you to close your eyes for a moment and notice the sensations in your body. Silently name a word or two that describes what the sensation of Being feels like. This is a simple and immediately accessible way to bring yourself back to a more relaxed state of Being anytime you notice yourself getting stressed by too much Doing.

I led this breathing exercise during a section on Doing vs Being at a staff retreat in October. Staff members described their state of Being as feeling: Centered, Relaxed, Less Tense, More at Ease, Less Tired, Eyes Clearer, Breathing Slower. Maybe one of these was your experience, or something similar.

Each person is a mix of both Doing and Being but tend to lean toward one or the other.

- Doing is mostly an outer state and is time driven: It's more task-oriented – focused on taking action, achieving goals, being productive.
- While, Being is mostly an inner state and the sense of time is more fluid: It's more relationship-oriented – focused on cultivating emotional and spiritual presence, and spending time getting to know others.

We need both Doing and Being to live our lives. For Thanksgiving to happen, we had to do the shopping, cooking, serving, eating, and cleaning. But, for the spirit of giving thanks and spending time with family and friends to happen, we settled into a state of Being.

Just as each person tends to lean toward Doing or Being, so do societal cultures. The United States is predominantly a Doing culture, but I really didn't need to tell you that, did I? We put a lot of value on productivity – getting things done, accomplishing goals. Even during the times when we are supposed to “off,” such as weekends, we put an emphasis on the number of chores, errands, or other activities – even fun ones – we can get done in two days.

In our U.S. culture of Doing, it's counter-cultural to *rest quietly in the tall, green grass, surrounded by the ceaseless buzzing of crickets. To watch the beautiful white clouds draw past through the deep blue like beautiful, quiet dreams*¹... *not, for a moment, concerned about the goal, the product...*²

At the staff retreat, I asked, “When you are stressed from too much doing, what brings you back into a state of Being?” The answers included: taking a walk outside, playing music, reading poetry, proximity to pets, focus on relationship, taking three deep breaths. These were the staff's responses. What are yours? When you are stressed from too much doing, what brings you back into a state of Being?

Traditional spiritual practices such as meditation, yoga and prayer are used by many people to develop their connection with presence. But, daily acts of living can also be a spiritual practice – when they are done mindfully with the intention of slowing down and being present in the moment. These practices help us cultivate the capacity to be more fully present with ourselves, others, and spirit, so that when we return to the land of Doing, *to action, product and goal, our hearts will be strong, our minds awake.*³

Maybe resting in a place called stopping is one of the reasons why some people come to Sunday morning worship. It's a place that offers a counter-cultural experience of music, prayers, silence, and kindling of candles. In this sacred space, we are invited to stop and rest

¹ Lyrics to *Feldeinsamkeit* by Johannes Brahms

² *My Soul Seeks Stopping* by Wendy von Oech

³ *My Soul Seeks Stopping* by Wendy von Oech

here a while; to fill our souls with love and light, so when we return to the world of Doing, *we can step with purpose, with guidance, direction and grace. We can move with the wisdom of Stopping that time cannot erase.*⁴

I've recently had two experiences which have been doorways to remembering the spirituality of Being. One was leading the Doing vs Being session at the staff retreat I've been referring to. The second is a Spiritual Direction group I've been participating in to support my ministerial formation. The group is led by Rev. Jade Angelica, a Unitarian Universalist Community Minister and Spiritual Director.

Jade has a special interest in offering spiritual direction groups to seminarians because when she was in seminary, she realized students were learning about God and religion, but no one was talking about their direct experience of God/the Holy/the Mystery/the Sacred. That's also my experience of seminary. Surprisingly, God/Spirit/the Holy is not something we talk about very often.

Fortunately, I have Heather as my intern supervisor, and she invites me to fill that gap! Heather and I meet each week for supervision, and each week we talk about God! Heather asks, "Where did you experience God this week?" As part of my ministerial formation, she is inviting me to notice, reflect on and talk about how God shows up in congregational life. She is inviting me to notice when the Holy shines through the ordinary.

I sense God/the Holy when I have what I describe as a time-out-of-time experience – a moment when everything is still – time seems to stop, even briefly, and I feel myself take a breath as my heart expands. It's more experiential than descriptive.

Because of Heather's weekly question, I've become more comfortable talking about God and even welcome it. So, I was excited when the topic for one of our Spiritual Direction sessions was "What is Your Image of God?" To introduce the topic Jade told us a story and I have her permission to share it with you.

Jade attended an annual pledge drive dinner at the Unitarian Universalist church in Yarmouth. The discussion at the table was what she called "cocktail party talk" and she was bored. At one point, someone turned to her and asked, "Jade, what are you up to?" She took a deep breath to gather her courage and replied, "I'm doing research to gather spiritual experiences of Unitarian Universalists."

There was silence for a moment. She wasn't sure what would happen next, but the response shocked her. Jade described it as a stampede – 11 out of the 12 people at the table all shared a story about a spiritual experience. 3/4 of them said they had never told anyone about their experience.

⁴ *My Soul Seeks Stopping* by Wendy von Oech

Then, Jade told us about her spiritual experience and asked us if we had a story we wanted to share. With no advance preparation, each person in the group told about a spiritual encounter they'd had. One person's story happened when she was only 6 years old and is imprinted on her heart and soul. Many of us spoke about hearing a voice or seeing an image, but each experience was unique and profoundly memorable.

I told the group about a spiritual experience I had on July 19, 2003 – 16 years ago. At the time, I had been unchurched for 30 years and had never heard of Unitarian Universalism. I was also focusing a lot of energy on personal development in an attempt to heal the emotional pain I associated with being born with a disability. I did not like my body. I read a lot of self-help books, journaled, and attended retreats.

At one retreat, I met Gayle Casteel, an energy healer. I was drawn to her spirit-filled presence and made an appointment with her for a session, which happened on a Friday night. After the energy healing session, I felt calmer and more peaceful, but that was all. However, the next morning I woke up sensing something was different and began writing in my journal about what I was experiencing. Here is an excerpt of what I wrote:

I'm savoring this sense of peace and internal quiet. I don't want to do anything. I just want to be. Peace, quiet, calm. The internal, constant chatter in my head is quiet. It feels like a calm lake early in the morning – so fresh and pure. I feel a circle of soft light around me. It's gentle and tender. It's the feeling of love – a mother's pure, tender, gentle, unconditional love. A great mother presence gently caresses my cheek, then lifts my chin to see my face and look deep into my eyes and inside my soul and says, "You are beautiful just the way you are." I begin to sob. She holds me to her bosom, strokes my hair and doesn't let go.

That's what I experienced on that July morning – the receiving of pure and simple love from my image of God – Great Mother energy. Gradually, the intensity receded, but a deep sense of peace and an inner warmth of light and love remained.

I wanted to remain still and rest in the sweet sensation of love. But, as life would have it, I had to get up and start Doing. I was traveling that day with my boyfriend and his family to a wedding in Long Island. I thought for sure, the Doing would break the spell of quiet stillness.

But, the most amazing part of that experience was the sense of peacefulness and love that remained in the midst of Doing. During that whole trip, my heart was tender and wide open. I felt a profound sense of empathic connection and oneness with everything and everyone. I felt like I was a huge ball of Love energy walking in the world.

I was Doing from a place of Being Love. This wondrous state of Being lasted about a week. Then, it gradually dissipated. I scheduled a few more energy healing sessions, trying to invoke this wondrous and beautiful experience to happen again, but it never did.

I have shared this story with very few people. Partly, because I'm afraid people will think I'm a whack-a-doodle! But, mostly, I'm careful about who I tell this story to because it's precious and I don't want it to be trampled on. I'm sharing it with you this morning because I'm inspired by something my Spiritual Director said. She said, "Churches should be places where we open the doors to sharing peak spiritual experiences."

By telling my story, I want to open the door so others may feel more comfortable sharing their story – if they want to. And, I hope more of us do want to. One of the blessings of being part of a faith community is, we stand as witnesses to each other's spiritual journey as each of us engages in our own personal search for truth and meaning.

May it be so. Amen.