

Many of us bring spiritual practices from other faiths or domains with us when we come to Unitarian Universalism. Some of these - like meditation, prayer, and rituals - are shared around the world in all kinds of settings, including our faith. But are there spiritual practices that are unique to us? Can Unitarian Universalism be a spiritual practice?

As we explore the answers to those questions, it might be useful to distinguish between spirituality and religion, and how they inform each other.

In the words of Franz Waals, religion is “the shared reverence for the supernatural, sacred, or spiritual as well as the symbols, rituals, and worship that are associated with it.” There are other, more technical, definitions, but I like that one because I think reverence is the heart of the matter.

What does religion give us? A context for our experiences. It lets us build on the experiences of others. It provides education and guidelines. It helps us keep our values at the forefront, and it lets us be part of something bigger than ourselves.

Spirituality is much harder to define because it is more context dependent. It is both experience and practice.

The term was originally used within early Christianity to refer to a life oriented toward the Holy Spirit. To be animated by God, not one’s personal needs and desires.

The term spread and broadened to refer to a wider range of experience, including those from a range of esoteric traditions and religious traditions, as well as secular experiences. We now tend to refer to the spiritual as a subjective experience of a sacred dimension and concerned with the deepest values and meanings by which people live.

That covers a lot of ground. The most relevant for us is probably what is loosely termed “secular spirituality”.

From Wikipedia: *Secular spirituality is the adherence to a spiritual philosophy without adherence to a religion. Secular spirituality emphasizes the personal growth and inner peace of the individual, rather than a relationship with the divine. Secular spirituality is made up of the search for meaning outside of a religious institution; it considers one's*

*relationship with the self, others, nature, and whatever else one considers to be the ultimate.*

However, we are part of a religious institution, so this takes us into one of those fuzzy territories we are so fond of.

Intention and context matter a lot when we talk about spiritual practices. But whatever their context, what we tend to agree on is what constitutes a spiritual practice, although some are more widely accepted than others.

There are physical practices like fasting, vows of poverty and simplicity. Chastity, abstinence, mortification of the flesh, and flagellation. Trance dancing and the use of mind-altering substances.

There are psychological practices, like meditation, mindfulness. Journaling and deep reading of sacred texts also find a home in this category.

Social practices can include communal living, spiritual retreats, and social work.

And then there are those practices whose purpose is to purify the self of ego-centeredness, and to identify with divine reality. Prayer, contemplation, meditation, and others already mentioned can be used for this purpose.

One of our challenges as UU's is that we don't seem to have any specific practices we can call our own, so we go other sources for them: Zen, Taoism, paganism, and so on - and we end up with a lot of what we call hyphenated UU's - which I consider to be a wonderful thing.

We do have our own unique UU spirituality, one grounded in Transcendentalism. I've spoken before about how Transcendentalism was a generational revolt from Unitarianism, which itself had split off from Calvinism only a generation before.

That generation split with the Calvinists on largely rational grounds. The new generation decried a lack of religious feeling and enthusiasm among the Unitarians because of too much rationalism. Emerson called their theology "corpse-cold," and "lifeless".

But one thing both generations shared was the idea of “self-culture”. Today we call it personal growth, or spiritual development. For the Transcendentalists, the spiritual practices that supported self-culture were simple living, immersion in nature, contemplation, reading, journal writing, and education.

For both, self-culture required not just the discipline to achieve that growth, but that these inner aspirations were manifested in outward action. One’s ethical values had to align with one’s outward behavior in society.

What I want to posit here is that our core spiritual practice is the spiritual practice of community. Having an individual practice or practices is great, and necessary, but to be a UU means being in community – the community of our particular fellowship or congregation, our human communities, and the still larger community of life on Earth.

And here’s is where I find a bit of a disconnect.

Spiritual practice tends to be perceived as something an individual does. Not something we do together. Together we have worship and some shared rituals, such as Flower Communion, Water Ceremony and a few others. We aspire to be a Welcoming Congregation, and to the Beloved Community.

We don’t often view community as a practice, or have an understanding of how to practice community as a spiritual discipline. But every time we are together, we have an opportunity to practice those things we can only practice with others. Such as:

Listening. True listening involves attention, being present, hospitality, and it is a component of devotion, nurturing, and wonder. It also means that we choose not to listen to gossip, or participate in triangulation. In fact, we discourage that kind of speaking.

Forgiveness. Forgiveness is conscious, deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward a person or group who has harmed you, regardless of whether they actually deserve your forgiveness.

Compassion. Tolerance, acceptance, and understanding. Compassion means to feel with the other. Tolerance is a virtue. It is a version of the golden rule in that, insofar as we want others to treat us decently, we need to treat them decently as well.

Acceptance goes a step beyond tolerance, and with compassion it leads to understanding the other.

Justice and Reconciliation. We speak out instead of remaining silent, when a family or community member's rights have been violated. We seek reconciliation instead of retribution.

Humility. Humility is about letting go of pride, which translates as letting go of the ego. We deflect attention away from our self, to the larger issues at hand; we make sure proper credit for accomplishment is shared with others. We step back when needed to make room for other voices.

Gratitude for the other. When you go out into your neighborhood or community, and make contact with those passing by (even with people you hardly know, or don't know at all), that conveys acknowledgement and appreciation of the other person. That starts here.

Radical Hospitality. Which is a real buzz phrase for us, but its practice means that every one of us is on board with not just the idea, but the actions that make it real.

As we practice these things in our congregation, we are better able to bring them out into our larger communities. We also come to see that social justice is only one aspect of the spiritual practice of community. Even if your passion isn't social justice, the path of community can be practiced and expressed in many other ways.

There are some real challenges to making these practices real and consistent.

We have to have the desire. If we are to be forgiving, we must have the desire to forgive. If we are to be patient, we must be motivated to act patiently. Spiritual actions take a different sort of focus. It may seem easier to blame than to forgive, or to respond to a hurtful action in kind. It may seem easier to act rather than wait, even though patient waiting might produce the better outcome. But it isn't easier in the end.

Desire by itself is not enough. Action must follow. We may want to show compassion, but the actual compassionate action may somehow not get expressed. Injustice may be felt, even deeply felt, but for whatever reason – whether it be shyness, uncertainty, lack

of confidence, or fear of criticism or recrimination – that feeling does not translate into action to right the wrong.

These actions must be repeated and maintained over time so they become habitual. And spiritual actions can take a lot of effort, especially when they have not yet become habitual.

If we aspire to be more patient, we may need to restrain our impulses to take action. If we want to extend our hospitality, we may need to give up some personal time we were looking forward to. If we are acting for a just cause, we may need to prepare for indifference, criticism, or retribution.

Even though we are well-intentioned and capable, acting may mean changing and elevating our ordinary behavior, and will call for extra effort – time and work that we are not always able, or willing, to give.

Spiritual actions can be physically or emotionally draining. And constant spiritual action can be tiring, and easily deplete our spiritual reserves, and leave us numb - unable to respond appropriately to people or events. We may feel overloaded by all the need and distress in the world, knowing that we can't react to it adequately and fully. To protect ourselves, we may have to filter and block out this distress, become desensitized to it, and respond weakly if at all. We may then choose to withdraw at least for a while, so that we can be renewed. And that is ok.

And even if spiritual fatigue or numbing never occurs, competition from other activities may. Spiritual action may compete with our obligations to family, friends, or work, or other groups we belong to. Our acts of compassion or mercy toward others can take away from caring for family. Not all needs and requests, even the worthiest, can receive the attention we might like to give them. We have to prioritize or we can be overwhelmed.

It very important to support each other in developing these practices as a community. We might even call it a duty to each other, part of our covenant.

How do we do that?

We start by creating the awareness that these are desirable practices that create much needed outcomes. Practices that need nurturing. Practices that help us build our spiritual muscles, so to speak.

We encourage each other along the way. And as odd as it might seem, we need to develop guidelines. Having guidance on how to express things like mercy or forgiveness, can help establish consistent behaviors. And we respect the need for boundaries and time for rest and renewal – in ourselves and others.

We can model these behaviors for each other. Modeling is powerful. We are each other's students and teachers, without trying to outdo each other. We aren't in a competition to see who can be more spiritual, more woke, more compassionate.

Modeling is most effective when it is followed by positive reinforcement. When an act of compassion is criticized, or the recipient of that compassion is portrayed as undeserving, our compassion will not be sustained. Reinforcement matters, whether it is given by others or self-delivered. For spiritual practices to be maintained, they need to be reinforced.

Appreciation and witnessing are simple and powerful ways of doing that.

And we can train. Our association – and many other organizations and traditions – have extensive guidance for developing these skills and practices.

Unitarian Universalism stands in stark contradiction to the ideas of individualism and individual salvation that permeate our culture and much religion.

Unitarian Universalism can be a deep spiritual practice. It's path is the path of community and community building. That path leads, not to the mountain top, but to where the people gather: the community center, the town hall, the fellowship, the sports arena, and many other places.

We walk it together. We pick each other up when we stumble. We share reverence for each of us, and all of us. We help each other in becoming better people and better communities. We rise or fall together. This is our way.

So next time someone asks you about UU spirituality, I hope I've given you some ideas about how to respond.