



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“The Fruits of Practice/Harvest of Worship,”  
a sermon given by by Meg Soens  
on April 10, 2011

In her poem “The Messenger,” Mary Oliver gives us a picture we can touch and smell of the harvest of a spiritual practice. It brings alive in our minds the fruits that can ripen in us when we cultivate weekly worship at church, when we go further and nurture other spiritual practices as well...

“My work is loving the world, is rejoicing, is gratitude...”

So what is it that can nurture such amazing fruits, of love, rejoicing, of gratitude... what is a spiritual practice?...

For some of you, the word “spiritual” can be uninviting, even off-putting. To some humanists, in particular, this word may call up mind-body dualism, and reek of devaluing the material world, reek of irrational concepts of the supernatural.

For other people, ‘spiritual’ may sound too lofty or removed from their own lives. In reality, people of both perspectives can rest reassured: spiritual doesn’t need to imply the supernatural, and it has everything to do our day-to-day concrete material lives... The definition I am about to share will be open enough, I hope, to allow everyone here to be a part of the conversation.

“Spiritual” has many meanings, but one of the best definitions is also one of the simplest. Parker Palmer, the well-known educator, wrote:

“By spiritual, I mean the diverse ways we answer the heart’s longing to be connected with the largeness of life.”

A spiritual practice, then, is something we do regularly, with discipline, in a bid to ‘answer our hearts’ longing to be connected with the largeness of life’, our hearts’ longing to be connected with that “MORE”, that “BEYONDNESS” we can never fully describe, the BEYONDNESS that is of ultimate worth, whether we call it God, or humanity, or spirit, or life energy, or something else....

Some common spiritual practices are you will recognize include worship, prayer, and meditation.

William James, the famous American psychologist and philosopher, taught us a great deal about spiritual and religious practices and their effects upon people. His 1902 book, *The Varieties of*

*Religious Experience*, described his findings based on research with people of many different religions. His research led James to believe that love, joy, gratitude, and even enchantment with life were among the primary emotional outcomes of having a spiritual practice -- the very feelings Mary Oliver's poem communicates so expressively.

These feelings were not the only products of a spiritual practice James found, though...there were others...including

inner peace ...  
deep restedness ...  
a sense of the vastness beyond us...  
a feeling of union with what is outside us ...

...  
But all these fruits of spiritual practice were, he believed, different expressions of one basic feeling, what he described as an open and expansive feeling toward life.

And regardless of the particular form in which this openness and expansive feeling toward life comes to an individual, William James observed that it had powerful effects. It could overcome depression, numbness, despair; it could give strength and endurance to the person engaged in the spiritual practice, or a zest, or a meaning in life; finally, this open and expansive feeling often gave people a sense of enchantment and glory in the common objects of life...

Wow! Worth working for!! .... Worth practicing for!

William James, though, was perhaps being a little obscure with his term "openness and expansiveness towards life." It seems to me that the expansive and open feeling he spoke of is really just another way of describing the most basic, expansive emotion of all: love. For isn't love, at its most basic, the act of opening the self into positive connection with anything else?

Love is also the nub of why many of us come to church, isn't it? We may say we come for community ... or a place for our children to develop good values ... or learning how to be a better person ... but all these are different ways of saying, "we come to love, and to grow in our ability to love" ...

So it makes sense: our basic desire is to learn to love better, in many ways, and worship and other spiritual practices, too, answer this desire by building our capacity to love. Spiritual practices address the most basic reasons we come to church. Spiritual practices have many fruits, but all of them ripen on plants that grow in the garden of love...

"My work is loving the world"  
"My work is loving the world"

Building our capacity to love can be transformative in our lives. Which is to say, building our capacity to love can ground us in who we really are, open us to knowing and understanding and living out who we truly are... and that is, individuals involved in a unique set of loving

relationships ... relationships with ourselves, with each other, with the broader world, and with what is beyond all this.... the holy.

Let me tell you a story.

I probably had depression and anxiety much of my life. I was angry and anxious, but it was very difficult for me to recognize, let alone acknowledge, this. When I became a parent, things got harder and my anger and anxious worrying got worse. I knew that my anger, at times explosive and scary, was hurting my children and my entire family. But I couldn't seem to 'get rid of it', never felt like I could manage it properly, although I tried. Then, a quick series of deaths happened in my larger family. And finally, sort of like an alcoholic, I had to cry "uncle" because I was just overwhelmed, nothing in my life seemed to be working.... I ended up getting counseling, taking antidepressant medication and I re-started a daily spiritual practice, quiet sitting. In a short time, I was no longer constantly angry and explosive. I was calm. Within two years, I was feeling real and deep joy in my family and in life more generally, feeling a trust in the world that I had never known before.... Now, the medication and therapy eliminated my depression and its major symptom, the constant anger. But the open and expansive feelings, the love expressed in trust and joy and positive connection, I believe these were the fruit of my spiritual practice...

"Now I become myself. It's taken  
Time, many years and places;  
I have been dissolved and shaken,  
Worn other people's faces,  
All fuses now, falls into place  
From wish to action, word to silence,  
My work, my love, my time, my face  
Gathered into one intense  
Gesture of growing like a plant."  
[May Sarton, "Now I Become Myself"]

To become ourselves, to find our own work, the work that answers our hearts longing to love and be loved.... this is the fruit of spiritual practice...

"My work is loving the world....."

Our Unitarian, Universalist and Christian ancestors over the course of two thousand years developed a rich store of spiritual practices that could build this open and expansive capacity to love. Weekly worship was, and still is, our core shared spiritual practice. It is rich soil in which the fruits of spiritual practice can grow. Other practices, well loved by many Unitarians and Universalists before us, include prayer, meditation, and also practices that are less common today, such as journaling, solitude in nature, sacred reading, sauntering, and the service of others... all these practices are "spiritual" when undertaken regularly, with that longing to connect with the largeness of Life, that Parker Palmer so clearly articulated.

We each already have at least one spiritual practice: we all come to Sunday morning worship! Anything we can add to this basic practice in our weekday lives, even a small, quick practice, can help us grow in our ability to love even more, help us move toward a transformation we may not even know we hunger for. I encourage you to try another practice out! There are many, many resources if you are interested... The internet has many excellent sites -- one of my favorites is: [www.gratefulness.org](http://www.gratefulness.org). Another resource is the Buddhist meditation group that from your website says meets here Sunday evenings; and....I am sure Rev. Clarkson would welcome conversations about developing a practice that works for you.

But I want to share a practice right now, that you can take and start right away if you want to. It is one of the simplest: Take a couple of minutes to think of, and reflect on, three events, people, or things in your life for which you are grateful. Make sure that one of them is something for which you have never before been conscious of being grateful ... Reflect on these one at a time, bring them to life in your heart, turn them over in your mind until you can feel your gratitude and love. I invite you to try it now! .... You can do this simple spiritual practice every morning when you wake up, or every evening right before you go to sleep. It's simple, and it will bear fruit...

My friends, there are many possible paths of spiritual practice... and the fruits of spiritual practice are fragrant and sweet. When we discipline ourselves and work at connecting with the largeness of life, we can transform our lives. We can become increasingly our true selves, increasingly able to love others, our world, the holy, and our selves in the ways that only we can truly love.

"My work is loving the world."

"Your work is loving the world..."

"Our work is loving the world..."

Please join me now in a litany of affirmation... Please respond to my statements by saying:  
"Our work is loving the world".

Where someone is hated and feared, "our work is loving the world".  
where someone is injured or in pain, "our work is loving the world".  
where there is despair and loneliness; "our work is loving the world".  
where there is joy and gladness, "our work is loving the world"  
where there is beauty and grace "our work is loving the world"  
where there is awe and reverence "our work is loving the world"  
where there is community and connection "our work is loving the world"  
where there is anything, anything at all... "our work is loving the world."

Amen.

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