

What I Did During My Summer Vacation

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No one can say that I live an unexamined life. I tediously and incessantly look at my life and try to understand why I do what I do and why I feel what I feel. And I ask myself why I make the choices that I do. This summer I kept myself so busy, it was almost silly. In the tradition of Unitarian Universalist ministry, I was given a month off to study. Study I did. I took classes and went to workshops, I attended conferences and I read books. I frantically dove in and swam through the life of the mind, as hard as I could go for as long as my stamina could hold.

Now I'm tired, and our new year is just beginning. But that is my way. I'll come back to some thoughts about my extravagant pace, but truly, I wanted to learn so much during this "break" so that I could dazzle and delight you all year with what I learned. I want to bring you really excellent worship services and lead interesting classes. But of course you know that. It is just another thing to notice: how I push myself to become wise and accomplished in a month. How I think that my being industrious will make you will approve of me more. And how I think study will make me wise. And why do I think that you want more than my own life? My experience and presence and witness? Isn't that the best thing we can ever share? Our own examined experience of the world? Our own attentiveness to one another? But am I worthy enough that that my life would interest you? What does being "worthy" mean? By whose standard? Is hard work or deep reflection more important? What about just loving life and sharing from that place of joy? I guess it is my way to keep wrestling angels in hopes of finding an answer.

I gave a draft of this morning's words to my daughter Marilyn for a reaction. She said that it is unlike other sermons I've given that she has reviewed and that I should say so in the beginning. She doesn't want visitors to be thrown off by the way it tries to catch us all up to date after my absence of five weeks. She said it is kind of like friends getting together after a long separation who try to fit eight meaningful discussions into one conversation and end up talking over each other and moving abruptly from one idea to the next to make sure they catch up completely. She suggested that it would go better if you were all prepared. So, be prepared.

First I went to our Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in Long Beach, California. Last year it was at the Fleet Center in Boston where the Democratic Convention was just held. It's nice to have a picture of being awarded my preliminary fellowship right there. I went early to GA this year to participate in Professional Days. Two days with a thousand ministers learning from one another and hearing great presentations. It was wonderful. The keynote speaker was Ernesto Cortez. I will be telling you about him in detail in a couple of weeks. Then GA opened and many of you showed up. I was proud of the number of us who made the trip and I'm hoping we get together next week to talk about our experiences before the memories fade.

I myself am a real junkie of these meetings. The world often bruises my heart. I worry about peace and justice and the environment and what will become of everything and at these meetings, I find myself among people with the same concerns but who are essentially hopeful. Who act as if we can make a difference. We UUs jump into the raging river of life over and over again, battered against rocks and squeezed through canyons of white water, and we keep paddling on for our values. I do believe we make a difference. We influence the larger conversation and perhaps even sway some of those people in the middle 20% who are said to change their minds when they hear good arguments. I believe it matters that we are out there trying and I hope that this year we have a significant impact. No matter what, we are out there doing our best.

I also came home with new course materials for this year. "Articulating Your UU Faith" and the new version of Evensong. UU101 for any interested newcomers or anyone else begins

September 20th for three weeks. Signup sheets are already posted on the back bulletin board.

You see, I get so excited about being a UU and so pleased with all of these materials, I can't stop dreaming about how to bring as much as I can of our culture to you here. And you said you wanted more classes. I read it in your feedback.

Next, after General Assembly, I took a course in Kabbalah. Jewish Mysticism. I couldn't let Madonna get ahead of me spiritually. I am interested in the model of energy and spiritual advancement that Catholics and Hindus and mystical Jews have each developed and I'm intrigued by the way the systems overlap. I'm designing a service to explore these models later in the year.

I have been planning services all the way to next June. I want to include all of our traditional holidays, time with our kids, time to wrestle with questions of ultimate meaning or theology, time to look at social justice issues and then tie in some of our denominational history and famous people. By the way, I spent time reading your comments made during the pledge drive and all of your requests for specific topics and I intend to weave in as much as I can. I do appreciate your feedback. I love it when you let me know how it's going for you. If you don't tell me your truth, don't grouse. I will be available nine a.m. to nine p.m. daily. I am thinking I need to take a day off. I've just taken blocks as I wanted them, but I am going, yet again, to try to be more disciplined this year. I will also take Wednesday as a writing day and not return calls or emails until the sermon is mostly done. I am planning to be more conscientious about sitting. *Get up and sit* is my new chant. Meditation first thing. Telling you may help me keep to the practice.

The Kabbalah class was part lecture and part improvisational drama using fabulous robes representing the various energies of the Tree of Life. Wearing the robes and personifying various energies helped us to anchor the learning and take it into our whole selves. Saturday, we did a ritual at night with hours of drumming around a huge fire as one by one we left the circle of community to experience another part of the ritual off in the darkness. It was all very rich with intellectual and embodied learning. We all need to leave our village, our home, our family, and explore the unknown for ourselves to become more alert and vigorously engaged with all that life offers us. This symbolic enactment reminds us of what we already

know and strengthens us for the ongoing challenges of the human condition. It was wonderful to come back into that firelit circle at the end of the edge of the darkness. Learning and then returning to community is the very rhythm of life.

Next on my summer extravaganza was a weekend of Integral Transformative Practice. Some of you may know the name George Leonard. He has taught at Esalen and developed a system of exercises for integrating mind and body and spirit. The "Kata", or form as in Aikido, helps us find our center, or "hara". I am quite interested in Ken Wilbur, and this system is resonant with his system of spiritual, ethical and moral growth. Tradition systems like Jean Piaget's say that we are mature when we reach the stage of development in which we can reason and create concepts. This is the stage of "formal operations" that typically begins when we are teenagers. Wilbur and others believe that there is far more possible in our largely untapped potential if we learn to integrate all the aspects of who we are. Who we are is bigger than our intellect. The movement part of this integration practice or kata is forty-five minutes long with sun salutations and other yoga positions. It is not supposed to be strenuous, but I found it plenty tiring. Maybe because of my foot.

I should tell you that I have an injury to the peroneal nerve on my left leg which makes my toes not work. It is very weird, a little painful, and will gradually resolve itself, they tell me, in a few months or within a year. Meanwhile, I have to think about walking and could pretty easily trip if I don't pay attention. Who knew all the things toes do for us? I have two friends who had polio as children, and my friend Spot — who made the new wall quilt for my office that you are all invited to see — has Multiple Sclerosis. My toes seem a very small thing by comparison, but it is an experience of having a disability that is new for me. We are all only temporarily abled. If we live long enough, we will all need to learn to live with significant loss of function. I hope to bring my awareness to this injury in a way that helps me to understand something more about what it is like to have physical limitations. I think I can use it like any other learning experience and perhaps even transform some of the frustration into a kind of "meeting a new challenge." I can still walk, but not as far. I get quite tired, largely I think because I have to pay so much attention. The only real danger seems to be that I will forget myself and fall, causing more injury.

So the Integral Transformative work had a very interesting way of looking at how our lives are balanced and where we are weak and how we can make adjustments. I've decided to use

that model for a New Year's Eve goal-setting workshop if we have a party this year and the Yule Log ritual. If not, we'll find another time. I think reviewing our lives and making plans and committing yet again to disciplines is part of leading an examined life.

The next class was the biggest time commitment of the summer. The Historical Jesus and American Society, taught by John Dominic Crossan up on "Holy Hill" in Berkeley. As I've told many of you, it required a thousand pages of reading. I was aghast, but I said I would and I did and I truly found it all fascinating. If you ever watch the History Channel or A&E about the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Library, you have probably seen John Dominic adding his two cents. He is an Irishman with a wicked wit and a scholar's fascination with the first century. Our lectures were four hours each night and I was totally captivated the entire time.

I came to seminary with a lot of scar tissue from the church of my youth but a lingering curiosity about Jesus. I had long since left the Episcopal church and do not consider myself a Christian, but I am interested in who Jesus was before the institution of the church took over and created the creeds and structures that we think of as Christianity today and made him into a god.

And how is our American culture shaped as it grows out of our most commonly read book, the Bible? We have all been shaped by these stories even if we were raised by radical atheists. To live in a culture that is formed from these particular stories is to be shaped by them, like it or not. And knowing something about them lets us dissect where our own notions about how the world is have been developed. I think we need to know more from a secular engagement with these texts in order to participate in the public square conversations that shape our personal worldview and our institutions and this presidential election.

Our kids will be studying the Bible for the next two years and tying the stories to our UU principles. We grownups better keep up! I plan two services in the spring from this particular course material, bracketing Holy Week. Quite a number of you have asked for the big Christian holidays to be observed in a Unitarian Universalist way. I myself miss the rhythms of life that the church gave me growing up, even though the religious faith in which I was steeped has long since been discarded. I know any mention of Christian holidays is

difficult for some of us. I want you to know that I am aware of that and that I am trying to be inclusive of everyone's feelings without offering lukewarm apologetics all the time.

Continue to give me feedback and please use this as an opportunity to practice generosity, too. I promise you that I'm trying to include a wide variety of philosophical and theological events so that we all get fed.

I do have a negative reaction to the sort of church that tries so hard to be neutral and politically correct that the services are insipid and pleasing to no one. I ask you to translate the language of God to whatever imagery works for you: highest good, true justice, love, mystery, source. Let's not water everything down but instead take turns exploring all the faiths that inform our denomination with great richness and vivid color. I am weary of our tiptoeing. And my foot won't let me anyway . . . although of course I will continue to be as careful as I can and, again, I invite you to tell me how you are feeling.

One of the members of the Pacific Central District board, Terry Throop, is a staunch humanist. When he was asked how he felt when his church engaged in more "spiritual" display, he replied, "I know they still want me there and I still feel welcome. There is still room for me." I hope each of you can say the same. I expect I will be an equal-opportunity offender if we do all that I hope to do this year.

Finally, in the third week of July I attended the Ministries with the Marginalized conference with my friend and mentor, Chaplain Nick Ristad. Nick has spent his entire ministry standing up to institutions and the way they feed on their own power and crush what is good and life-giving. Mostly the people who attend this conference work in jails or prisons. This year there was an ex-felon in attendance who has developed a prison ministry. He added an absolutely fascinating perspective from being really inside the system. He has had a terrible life, was incarcerated for many years, murdered another inmate, and made an attempt on two other lives, men who were members of the Black Gorillas. He was a member of the only other group in his prison at that time, the White Aryans. It was quite a tale of abuse and violence and reclaiming his right to find a life outside of all the brutality that had been his norm. It is amazing that any human being could even survive what he has lived through. By the way, since he was white and had attacked black inmates, he was not punished for stabbing them,

although they all ended up in the hospital. Just another little window into how unbalanced our system is.

Why am I so drawn to prison work? To these places of outrageous abuse and horror? I watch myself and think about it. I believe that our work on this planet has to do with learning all that we can about being human. About all the aspects of the human condition. I'm not sure if this is philosophy or theology. I guess it depends on the lens you bring to it. I want to know as much as I can about being alive and how we find or develop meaning. I believe that we cannot live without hope, or at least we cannot enjoy our lives if we don't have hope. But hope for what? Is that what separates us? What we hope for?

The prison conversation also divides conservatives from liberals in a tidy way. Liberals want restitution and retraining and healing. Conservatives want punishment and retribution. These defining positions are not random. They spring from a worldview. I knew that, I think, but reading Moral Politics has brought a much clearer focus. This book by the linguist George Lakoff that I promised you I would read is very, very interesting. Lakoff says that there is no such thing as common sense. Everything we commonly refer to as common sense derives from our essential worldview. This is a most interesting subject that I will definitely explore at length. The liberals have done a really poor job of understanding this basic point and have not developed the rhetoric to speak powerfully to that 20% of the population who are able to change their minds. I am primarily invested in helping us here to speak to each other with greater clarity and understanding.

Being a classic liberal, I am more about process than decision-making. Staying in the conversation, making sure everyone feels heard, and maintaining relationships often matters more to me than the actual choices . . . although I also agree with the conservatives that mature people do make decisions and accept responsibility for the consequences. That's just an appetizer for the sermon coming before the election.

That was my study month. Followed by a week vacation with my kids in Virginia and my old buddies in North Carolina. It was a good, if tiring, whirlwind. I shared a room with my little granddaughter Savannah and fell asleep to the soft sounds of her breathing. It was hard to come back and it is wonderful to be here. We will all be together again for Strawberry over Labor Day. All of us, including Spot, camping in the Sierras and listening to bluegrass. Not

too shabby. I'll take another week off when my newest granddaughter, Sadie Grace Mondeel arrives. That is her "working" name. She is due in early December. I'll take my final two weeks in late February when it will be important to rest. I have thought of going on a silent retreat as a contrast to my busy study leave, and I may. But, is a silent retreat really just another way to be busy? Getting up at four in the morning and sitting until nine at night? Can I exist without being busy and without trying to get better? Though I would be hard-pressed to tell you really "better at what."

I have given a tremendous amount of thought to what it means to be a minister and how I want to do ministry now that I did survive my first year. I think that will have to be another sermon. I did tell everyone who asked that it is the best life I can imagine.

Let me close by saying that through it all, I missed being here. I missed each one of you and the work we do together. Staying away was a spiritual exercise in itself. And I wasn't perfect at it. So far in my life, I haven't been perfect at anything. Unless perhaps through accident. But I keep watching and enjoying the questions themselves. I crave order and resolution but I also notice that I treasure the messiness which is life unfolding itself.

Blessed be.