

OUT OF THE MOUTH OF BABES, Or MINDFULNESS, DANGER AND UU THEOLOGY

By Janelle Gray

I feel more than a little unqualified giving a talk on mindfulness! I am one of the least mindful people I know – always thinking ahead, or remembering behind. Apparently, Janet was just that desperate to fill in all the slots this month... Of course, she couldn't have known of all the examples of my unfitness: I used to cringe and practically crawl out of my skin in a long-ago yoga class when the instructor used the word "equanimity". Doesn't always bother me, but it did in that setting. I tend to be planning hours, days, weeks – even years ahead – during moments when I should actually be present! This is at least partially how we got our UU gardens ... Oops! And I further identify with the writer of an article I read recently, who – learning that a positive attitude did not, in fact, equate to higher survival rates in breast cancer patients – stopped trying to change her gnarly nature and developed her own "meditation" practice, which was to do yoga when she got anxious, but only until she got bored. At which point she figured she was over it!

But the truth is, I did, in fact, volunteer to give a talk during this mindfulness month. And I did have my reasons.

On our 37th anniversary (we're now headed to our 40th), Phil and I calculated that the majority of our marriage has been lived under the cloud of cancer. In 2016, that became metastatic, and therefore, incurable. For my kids, most of their lives have commenced with this grim reaper in the room. I hesitated to do yet another talk that touched on this, but the diagnosis of my terminal illness has been the most profound and transformative event of my life. And it has certainly taught me about mindfulness. So I'll simply apologize for sounding like a broken record, and forge ahead.

One day, when Eliana was maybe 6 years old, we were not quite keeping our concerns to ourselves and she picked up on our mood. She wrote me a note. At the time, she was just learning to spell, so it was phonetic and required a bit of interpretation (I've actually brought it today). She said, "I wish you were alive for your life." "Alive" she spelled U-L-I-V. Well, of course she was saying she didn't want me to die, but the way it came out was certainly profound.

I've kept it, and framed it, because it was so perfectly said, and a good reminder. I actually came to a similar conclusion near the beginning of this saga, which I reckon was about 1999. I put it to myself as: do it now. Don't wait to get to that bucket list, to

make the changes you want to make. Do it now. This manifested in prosaic ways in our lives. We were always quick to travel with the kids, and now the grandkids—to make memories in places like Disneyland, Hawaii, San Diego. We made a priority of our wilderness trips in the summer, and spent some cash on all of these endeavors. We took off when the kids had school breaks, even though it meant leaving my brother and business partner in the lurch when it was very busy at Landon's.

But there have been deeper, more profound effects of this diagnosis for both Phil and I. If I had not had death thrust in my face, I would have assumed that I had all the time in the world, and I would not have looked at things the way I do. I would have continued to take my life for granted, to squander the amazing opportunities I've had. I would have had less compassion for others' suffering, and would have been even more intolerant and judgmental than I am (something I'm working on). These days, there are many, many times when I experience a deep sense of gratitude just to be alive, to still be standing; gratitude to the point, really, of euphoria, what Joseph Campbell called, in today's opening words, "...the rapture of being alive." And while Phil wishes the cancer had never happened—even though he agrees that many good changes arose out of it—I find that I do not. I am actually grateful for the diagnosis and can't imagine my life differently. Although I wouldn't say no to a cure....

So, despite my seeming unfitness to talk on the subject of mindfulness, I do, in fact, look at life with a deep appreciation for each living moment.

Besides an intense sense of gratitude I experience whenever I call it to mind—and I think the practice of gratitude is really a version of mindfulness—being in the moment gets me through that horrible anticipation when results from blood tests or scans are about to be revealed, and I imagine, rightly or wrongly, that the news will be bad. I will say to myself: I am still here. I am alive today. I am alive right now. I can still breathe or walk or cross-country ski or garden. Most times this helps, sometimes it does not and the fear must be lived with. As Brene Brown says in 'Atlas of the Heart', "Practicing mindfulness . . . is not pushing away emotion because it's uncomfortable, but feeling it and moving through it." After long experience, I know I will ultimately be able to live with the fear, so I can tolerate it when it is still raw. I don't really have a choice. I arrived at this practice by accident, out of sheer necessity. I did not, in fact, mindfully set out to be mindful! But it helps, however I got there.

Last August, we were on our annual camping trip with Eliana and Madix when we learned that Stacy had died. The kids were terrific. "You can cry if you want, grandma," they said. They gave me hugs, and they patiently listened to Stacy and

Roger stories that we told on a few of our hikes. On the drive home, we must have been talking about Stacy again, because Eliana said, with a heavy sigh, “I sure wish I knew what happens when you die.”

Oh, kiddo. You nail it every time! We used that moment to talk about the way various religions, including UUism, view death. Or really, view what happens after life. Or really, really-- view the why and the way to live life...

In particular, we talked about Salvation in This Life. This is one of the Five Jagged Rocks, theological points developed by our own Mountain Desert District Reverends Nancy Bowen and Mike Morran, who were expanding on the five smooth stones of religious liberalism coined by theologian James Luther Adams'. I encourage you to google both the Smooth Stones and the Jagged Rocks. The Five Jagged Rocks inform our principles, and we metaphorically struggle to summit them over a lifetime.

“Salvation is in this Life” is probably my favorite. As UU's, we focus on the here and now, not some distant hope of heaven. We believe that all we can know is this life, heaven and hell are possible right here, right now. It matters intensely how we live, right now. We focus on bettering ourselves, our communities and the world in the present, not on behaving well to gain a pleasant afterlife. The point of life is to live. If that isn't Meta, and I'm spelling that M-E-T-A, Mindfulness, I don't know what is!

Sue pointed out in her first talk of this month, about Metta – that's M-E-T-T-A – mindfulness, that Loving Kindness informs our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Kari Gottfried, in a sermon about the Five Jagged Rocks, explores how the idea of Salvation in this Life influences particularly what I call our social justice-y principles, namely *Justice, equity and compassion in human relations; The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large; and The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.*

She says: (Quote) “While most other faiths believe in an afterlife, as Unitarian Universalists as a whole we understand that no one belief is guaranteed to be true. Each person can still have their own truth, but what's more important to us than what happens after we die is how we live. Maybe we go to heaven, or are reborn, or cease to exist. Maybe our fate is predetermined, or maybe our actions add up to determine whether we make it into The Good Place. But what can we do now? What can we do to make the world a better place, not because of some future reward, but because our lives now depend on it? Because our liberation is tied up in one another's, because we are connected and when one of us is in pain we are all in pain, because none of us are free

until all of us are free? There is no salvation for us in this life unless it is for all of us.”
(End Quote)

Basically, we don't let social justice slide until it can be corrected in an afterlife.

Michelle touched on the mindfulness connection to our principles in her talk about the Eight Fold Path of Buddhism. She pointed out that Path #4, Wise Action, might have suggested the Good Samaritan *fix* the Jericho Road, rather than—however admirably-- simply help someone who'd been hurt on it.

Like Cal, I believe our 7th principle, *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part* is also tied to mindfulness. While he sees it as confirming that we're ineffably connected, that we're all just walking each other home as it were, I think it also relies on valuing everything else that is here, now. If the afterlife is the main thing, why ever would we care about all the varied life and beauty around us? Thoreau was an expert at mindful moments in nature. He said, “What business have I in the woods if I am thinking of something out of the woods?”

I found certain parts of Sue's Metta meditation difficult: in particular, the “May I be Free of Pain” and the “May I be Safe”. Part of this, of course, is a tendency that I share with many of us to have trouble with self-compassion. But for me, it also just plain impossible. As far as safety, I'm not safe, and wouldn't be even without this diagnosis. I've become fascinated with a concept expressed in a book called “Run Towards the Danger”, by Sarah Polley. Running towards the danger means facing your fears. Pooley wonders if she can “run towards the danger at the same time as being present in the moment?” But, she says, “I will become weaker at what I avoid, ... what I run towards will strengthen in me.” “Run towards the danger”, she concludes, “is a treasure, a spell, a sword.”

So I think, for me, I'll change that part of the Metta Meditation to: May I face my fears and arrive safely on the other side.

And I will not be free of pain. That's the reality of this diagnosis. I am right now, but I won't be ultimately. In fact, pain, for all of us, is a fact of life. Phil's hip was hurting during that meditation and he described how he just tried to relax his shoulders, be present for it. The pain ebbed, became less intense, but still there. So Metta, even in that brief exposure, helped. But maybe I'll say instead: May I be Able to Handle the Pain when it comes, to face it with. . . can't believe I'm gonna say this! . . . equanimity. Sorry, couldn't resist!

It seems fitting to close my talk with the words of the Buddha: “Every experience, no matter how bad it seems, holds within it a blessing of some kind. The goal is to find it.”

OPENING WORDS:

“People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.”
Joseph Campbell, ‘The Power of Myth’

READING FOR REFLECTIVE SILENCE:

“The bittersweet side of appreciating life’s most precious moments is the unbearable awareness that those moments are passing.” Marc Parent

“The little things? The little moments? They aren’t little.” Jon Kabat-Zinn

CLOSING WORDS:

From Doorways to the Soul, Edited by Elisa Davy Pearmain

“The Buddha told this parable:

A man traveling through the mountains suddenly found himself being chased by a huge hungry tiger. He ran and ran until he came to the edge of a cliff. There, with nowhere else to go, he caught hold of a thick vine and swung himself over the edge.

Above him the tiger growled. Below him he heard a sound, and looked down to see another tiger waiting for him at the bottom of the vine.

Two mice, a white mouse and a black mouse, scrambled out from the Cliffside and began to gnaw at the vine. The traveler could see they were quickly eating through it. Then in front of him on the cliff side a delicious smell caught his attention. Ah, a luscious wild strawberry! Holding onto the vine with one hand, he reached and picked the berry with the other.

How delicious!”