

Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

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Quarantine as a Spiritual Practice

Blessed be the words of Jack Kornfield, and thank you to Chris Bailey for reading them for us. That piece was called “The Bodhisattva Response to the Coronavirus” and the author was Jack Kornfield.¹

My topic this morning is “Quarantine as a Spiritual Practice.” As I begin, I have a disclaimer. Because not all of us are in quarantine or isolation right now. This health crisis affects our society in different ways, and a lot of that has to do with how much money you have and what kind of job you have. The luckiest ones are those who can keep their jobs and work from home. That includes me. And I admit that that’s who I was thinking of initially with this topic: quarantine as a spiritual practice. How do we embrace this isolation in a way that feeds the spirit instead of crushing the spirit?

But this moment is very different for those who have lost their jobs to the pandemic. They might have time and isolation on top of fear and hardship.

And then there are those who are still working: those who work at WalMart and Target and Ric’s and Home Depot, who are supposed to keep doing their jobs like normal even though nothing is normal; and those who work in hospitals and emergency rooms, especially in Detroit and New Orleans and New York City, where work is a mad dash every day for survival and saving lives.

Quarantine as a spiritual practice. I want to make my words fit everyone and everyone’s experience—but I know best my own experience of being isolated in this time and facing from behind the walls of my quarantine the pandemic that’s unfolding.

Spirit

What do I mean by spirit? Because I know that many of us, as Unitarian Universalists, are of a mindset that puts primary value on reason and science. Some of us are not comfortable with the language of God and Spirit. I use Spirit to refer to that which connects us to something beyond ourselves, beyond our everyday consciousness. The spiritual is that which connects us to one another from me to you and across all humanity. Jack Kornfield says,

This is a time of mystery and uncertainty. Take a breath. The veils of separation are parting and the reality of interconnection is apparent to everyone on earth. We have needed this pause, perhaps even needed our isolation to see how much we need one another.

One thing that I hear him saying here is that this crisis offers us a lesson and an opportunity. He says that we are connected—we have always been connected, but this crisis shows us this truth in a way that we can no longer deny. It’s no longer the famine in Africa or the tsunami in Japan, a crisis affecting someone else. This is all of us facing the same disease.

Spirit is the part of us that shows us that we are connected, and the simplest word for that is love. Another word is compassion.

Spiritual practice

Next I want to talk about spiritual practice. I say that it is healthy at all times

take care of your spirit, just as you take care of your body. A practice, a routine is a good idea. A routine of exercise for your body and a routine of spiritual practice for your spirit. It might be journaling, walking, gardening, prayer, or meditation.

My commitment this week is to do 10 minutes per day of meditation to feel love filling me from Mother Earth. This is my spiritual practice. I don't always practice what I preach, but this is my practice this week. Feeling love fill me from the base of my spine to the top of my head.

Jack Kornfield says to take a breath and feel the connection with all human beings. But that's not all. He also says, and I'm paraphrasing here: Take a breath and acknowledge your feelings, your fear. Thank your fear for protecting you. I think that's interesting. What I think he means is that fear is part of our emotional system to protect us from harm. But there is a big difference in the nature of the potential harm. For instance, if a bear is threatening you, fear is useful because it gets you ready to fight the bear. But when a pandemic is threatening you, the fear doesn't help in the same way. So we acknowledge the fear. It is real. And we do our best to let it go, and we remind ourselves that it is OK now.

That's a spiritual practice that we all could use: breathe into our bodies, see the fear, don't run from it, and know that You're OK right now. Right now! It doesn't mean there won't be pain and illness and death later, but we can't do Later right now. We can only do Now now.

Right action

And there is a 3rd spiritual task that Kornfield calls us to do. The first was to feel the connection with all of humanity; the second was to be in the moment. The third is to ask ourselves how we can help. He says:

Sit quietly again and ask your heart: what is my best intention, my most noble aspiration for this difficult time?

This is a spiritual task. Your heart knows better than your brain does. There will be another part of you called to act, the warrior part, once you discern in your spirit what must be done. It might be to make the face masks. To help the elders. To drop off food for the families. Action is undertaken by the conscious, thinking, goal-driven part of ourselves—but discerning right action is a spiritual task. We need to get in touch with the deepest best part of ourselves.

Blessing

My blessing for you, and for myself, and for the whole world with no exceptions: for those of us working from home. For those of us out of work. For those of us still going to work. For those of us directly fighting this deadly disease.

May we be alive to the spirit within us. May we see what this pandemic is showing us: that we are all connected. May we acknowledge our fear but not be paralyzed by it. May we find the best deepest part of our humanity within, our Bodhisattva nature, and ask ourselves, what must I do? How am I called to respond? May we be filled with love, and let this love direct our actions.

May it be so.

¹Kornfield, Jack. "The Bodhisattva Response to the Coronavirus." Retrieved at <https://jackkornfield.com/the-bodhisattva-response-to-the-virus/>