

## **“An Inward Fermentation”**

*A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May*

*First Parish in Wayland*

*February 12, 2017*

*[note: This sermon was delivered in three parts and interwoven with prayer, meditation, and sharing joys and sorrows.]*

We are living in a stressful and divisive moment. And there remains much to say about injustices that permeate our news feeds and, more importantly, the lives of too many. As individuals and as a community, we are all wrestling to make sense of the fast-moving changes to our social and political landscape. Far from being a distraction from our mission as a congregation, moments such as these are why we gather in religious community. We need places and experiences that anchor us beyond the shifting sands of political policies and government actions. We need to be reminded again and again of larger purposes and deeper values that give shape and direction to our lives.

I do not believe that worship or First Parish should be a haven from the world. Rather, I want worship to help us live in the world—to be a source of insight and strength, comfort or challenge to help us walk the paths of our lives. Whether it’s the music of the choir, the words of the sermon, congregational singing of hymns, a story, joys and sorrows, a moment of stillness, or coffee hour, my hope is that each of us finds an element that helps strengthen our capacity to love and be loved, to pursue the good, and to support the vulnerable. Life can be beautiful and wonderful, but it can also be incredibly difficult and downright confusing. We need places like this, communities like this, where we find support to live well and with purpose.

In our gathering together today, we will explore how the spiritual practices of prayer, meditation, and sharing joys and sorrows can be this kind of support. With all that we carry within our hearts and minds, we need ways to build connections to what is within and to sources of renewal beyond ourselves.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian preacher, Henry Ward Beecher, wrote: *“I pray on the principle that wine knocks the cork out of a bottle. There is an inward fermentation, and there must be a vent.”* I think the experience of an inner fermentation and a longing for expression underlies the practice of prayer, meditation, and the sharing of joys and sorrows. Longings to speak out, to name, to do something. Longings to express oneself, to demand a response, to find a sense of peace and calm. Yes, we are rational beings. But we are also creatures of many desires and longings. We are persons with inner lives that are often complex,

complicated, and confusing. We are people with a lot of noise around and within. What we need then are ways to find some clarity, to rest in moments of inner peace, and to connect with our deepest longings.

In this first part of the sermon, we begin with prayer. For many of us, the language of prayer is the most familiar. Christians, Muslims, and Jews all pray. Within these traditions, prayer is understood as a means of communication between humanity and the divine. Sometimes the prayers are extemporaneous cries of joy or gratitude and other times pleas for help and intervention. Christian author Anne Lamott writes that there are basically three kinds of prayer: help, thanks, wow.

Help. These are the prayers that we might cry out over the sick bed of one we love or when faced with a difficult decision. Help this person to find peace. To get better. Help me to know which direction to go. Help . . . a soul-deep cry of one's limits. An acknowledgment of need. An expression of longing for a certain outcome—for healing or clarity, for strength or peace. Such prayers simply spill out of us sometimes. Help. I need help.

When we pray for help, do we have to address a God that we believe can intervene? Certainly for many this call for intervention is exactly what prayer is. Yet, for others, the cry for help may not be to a personal deity, but rather to the force for good or the energy of love. Or, prayer may simply be a practice of expressing our needs or longings for what we hope will happen. . . whatever the source of that outcome may be. Put differently, maybe sometimes prayer doesn't change God. It changes us. It teaches us to notice our hopes and our longings. It opens us to recognize our needs and to reach out to those offering help.

Of course, many times prayer is not even about 'help'. Prayer can also express 'thanks'. Thanks for the help that arrived. Thanks for the gifts of our lives—the people we love, the food that sustains us, the many different things that bring us joy and make life *good*. In these ways, prayer is a practice of gratitude . . . of acknowledging our dependency upon and appreciation for so much that makes life good and even possible.

And prayer can also be a chance to say, Wow! Such prayer expresses the sense of reverence for wonder of life, of nature, of the universe big and small in which we dwell. The glittering sun on snow swept slope. The smoothness of a newborns skin. A passionate kiss that takes our breath away. *Wow*.

Our lives are so full of longings for help, for a way to say thank-you, for a way to say wow. We may have different ways of framing these expressions—addressing them to God or to the universe or simply to ourselves. We may pray silently alone or be present in a group. We may give voice to whatever words come to mind or lean into the familiar words of a

ritual prayer. Or, we may pray not with words but with actions—with fingertips that create art to express one's sense of wow, with arms that embrace another in gratitude, or with an offer to help someone in need.

Prayer may take many forms in different religious traditions and in different people's lives. What I believe underlies all these forms is the need for a way to express our longings and our appreciation for the kind of life we desire for ourselves, for others, for the world we share. Prayer provides a moment in which we seek to connect both with our deepest longings and with a sense of being a part of something so much larger than ourselves—an experience some call God. But prayer is not only for theists. Prayer is for all of us who long and listen, who desire and seek. Prayer is a way of building connection.

*[Prayer:*

*To the God of our understanding—  
That sense of something more in which we dwell,  
We now turn our attention and our hearts.*

*On this dreary winter day,  
We are grateful for the warmth and humor,  
Joy and love within this community.*

*As we are gathered in comfort and warmth,  
We pray for those without shelter  
That they will find homes.  
We pray for those living in sites of violence,  
That they will find a place of peace.  
And we pray for those who fear deportation  
That they will find relief or sanctuary.*

*We pray also for wisdom as we search  
Our paths of action and response  
Within this difficult moment.  
May we learn when to speak up  
And when to reach out,  
When to risk conflict  
And when to build bridges.*

*As we now enter into a moment of stillness,  
May we listen for the longings of our spirits,  
For the inner fermentation*

*Seeking a vent in words or actions.  
And in that listening,  
May we silently pray.]*

## *Part 2*

Like prayer, meditation is a spiritual practice that builds greater awareness of our longings and inner thoughts and feelings. Perhaps like some of you, I once thought meditation was about learning to not think . . . to create a blank mind. This seemed like an impossible endeavor. Stop thinking?! Ha! Why even bother trying?!

As I understand meditation now, it is a practice of training our attention. Meditation is literally a way to *practice* controlling your attention. Our minds are noisy and often easily distracted. Especially in our media saturated society, information and ideas swarm our attention. How do we respond to this swarm? Do we chase after each idea, each thought? Do we lock on to an idea only to dissect it with a fierce analysis that crowds out any other thoughts? Do we have any control over our minds or are we at the mercy of wherever our attention chases after or locks on? By training our ability to control our attention, meditation is not simply trying to not think. Rather, meditation changes our relationship to our thoughts.

A couple years ago, I took a meditation workshop led by renowned meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg. She knew that many of us struggled with keeping our attention on our breath or mantra or whatever we were using to keep our focus while meditating. She taught us that the test of whether or not meditation is working does not lie in on long we can stay focused. Rather, the test is how we treat ourselves when we notice that our mind has drifted. Do we berate ourselves for our failures? Or, do we notice our thoughts, notice what has grabbed our attention, and then let it go as we refocus our attention back to the meditation? The test of meditation's impact is also how it shows up in our lives. Can we let go of our thoughts about what went wrong at work when we walk through the door to be with our family at the end of the day? Can we be present to what a person is telling us without racing through a thousand other thoughts in our mind?

If prayer is response to an inner fermentation, then I wonder if meditation is a response to mental rumination. Meditation can help unstick the mind from ruminating—teaching us instead to notice that there is a mind, a person beneath the thoughts. Yes, we think . . . a lot. But the thoughts are not all of who we are. We quiet our mind in order to notice the person beneath. The one who is thinking, feeling, noticing. We quiet our mind and notice the breath of our body, notice our body. We quiet our mind and learn to just be.

In a world awash with images and ideas grabbing for our attention, it is so easy to chase the streams of news hour after hour. Or, with lives full of responsibilities to pick up groceries, drive the kids, pay the bills, or finish a project, our minds can easily fill up with to-do's and tasks. Meditation can be a tool to slow oneself down, to let go of the racing thoughts for a few moments, and to remember to just be. And, for some, meditation not only reconnects them to oneself, but also to an awareness of a shared sense of being, of being connected to others, of being a part of a larger oneness. Meditation, like prayer, is a way of building connection.

*[Meditation:*

*I now invite you to prepare to enter into a time of meditation.*

*Find a comfortable seated position—  
perhaps place your feet on the floor...  
close your eyes or lower your gaze...  
And take a deep breath in and out.*

*Now allow your mind to focus—  
You may wish to count 5-4-3-2-1, 5-4-3-2-1  
Or to simply focus on the mantra: just be.*

*If you notice your mind has drifted,  
Simply notice this,  
Then return again 5-4-3-2-1 or just be*

*In a few moments, I will chime the bell again  
To end our meditation.]*

### *Part 3*

In the Unitarian Universalist tradition, many congregations engage in some form of sharing joys and sorrows. In some congregations, such as ours, people are invited to an open-mic time of sharing. In other congregations, people light candles in silence or they write down their joy or concern to be read by a worship leader. In whatever way a congregation chooses to organize this time of the service, the underlying intent is to bring our experience of living to one another. And while each person's story is their own, we also recognize the shared experience of life with struggles that can break our hearts and celebrations that renew our spirits.

In speaking or in listening, we honor the need to be connected to others through all of it . . . the joys and sorrows, the heartbreak and the hope. Such a moment is not a time for simply making announcements, nor is it the right moment to offer detailed analysis of the situation. Rather, sharing joys and sorrows is a ritual of prayer. It is a moment to express the fermentations and longings of one's heart. It is a moment to honor and receive the wondrous gift of life with all of its complexity. And, like both prayer and meditation, sharing joys and sorrows is a spiritual practice of building connection. Connecting to both our inner life and to the sense of a something larger beyond ourselves.

We all are trying to make our way through life. Seeking to love and be loved. Striving to understand the right thing to do. Hoping for the courage to do the right thing even when it is so hard to do. Far from being outdated or irrelevant practices, prayer, meditation, or sharing joys and sorrows tap into a deep need we all have to connect what is within to what is beyond. How we each do this will vary in both form and frequency. But my hope is that each of us will find a way to vent those inward fermentations of the spirit. To know our longings for ourselves, for those we love, and for the kind of world we want to share. Such an endeavor is not a one-time event, but an ongoing practice of building connections within and beyond. Such practices help to support us as we make our way through life—whatever that life may bring on this day or the next.

*[An invitation to share Joys and Sorrows]*