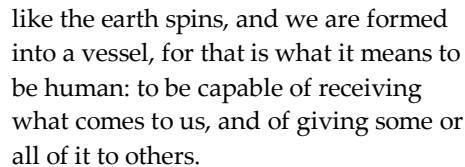




October 2026

Wisdom Story



Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland

Unitarian Universalist minister, Ralph Helverson, in a beautiful piece called *Proem* in his 1964 meditation manual *Impassioned Clay*, wrote, “We have religion when we stop deluding ourselves that we are self-sufficient, self-sustaining, or self-derived.” He then added, “We have religion when we have an abiding gratitude for all that we have received, including our own life and a universe to sustain it....” Helverson understood that to be human is to be, as he called it, impassioned clay.

At birth, it is as if we are immediately thrown onto a potter's wheel, and there we remain throughout life. We spin, just



Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland
a retelling of a traditional story

Before you were born, before your parents, or grandparents were born, almost before time itself, all of the earth was covered by a vast ocean. At that time, there was an oyster that lived at the bottom of the ocean. She found herself alone and didn't even know that there were other oysters, although there were. When she was very small, she could swim. As she grew, her shell formed and she could no longer swim, but she could walk from place to place, dragging herself through the sand and mud using her foot. Walking was much slower than swimming, but she didn't seem to mind. She was looking for a place that she could call home, a place that was safe. After a long search, she found the perfect rock and attached herself to it in a way that no fish could see her when they swam by. She lived on that rock for a long time. Slowly the oyster grew larger.



One day, her world was turned upside down by a terrible storm. It churned the water so much that she was ripped from her rock. She went around and around in the swirling water, as one wave after another pushed her toward the shore. The oyster had no idea where she was because the water was dirty and she could not see.

When the storm passed she found herself close to the shore. When the tide

Formation & Letting Your Life Speak

The Rev. A. Powell Davies wrote, "Life is just the chance to grow a soul." Between nature and nurture, who and what we become is a lifelong process. We are both the raw material and the artist. Every experience becomes part of the material with which we can work. Every person we meet is a possible partner in a mutual collaboration of formation. To be sure, we can stop the process by settling, by letting the clay of our being harden, but the wiser choice is to remain pliable. And the goal? To complete our life before it is ended by death. The people that we tend to admire are those who kept growing and changing throughout their life, first by addition, and then by subtraction as they shed layer upon layer in search of their essence.

Touchstones is committed to exploring liberal theology. This journal is supported by subscriptions from Unitarian Universalist congregations. For daily meditations, photos, and more visit/like Touchstones at <https://www.facebook.com/Touchpossibility/>

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Let Your Life Speak

The Circle of Light

(Continued from page 1) **Wisdom Story**

went out, she lay on the sand. It was in the middle of the night. It was then that she saw the light from a full moon. She had never seen anything so beautiful. She felt drawn to the light, and slowly she opened her shell. As she bathed in the light, a small piece of sand washed into her shell. It remained there, when she closed her shell.

As the tide returned, she was again surrounded by water. She found herself in a riptide and it pulled her away from the shore. The water became deeper and deeper, and the moonlight disappeared. But she did not forget the beauty and power of the light as she felt the sand begin to slowly form into a pearl. With each passing year, the pearl became larger and smoother.

Still alone, she attached herself to another rock, and lived there for many years. One day, there was a strange sound. She did not know where the sound came from or what it meant. It was from a dredge that a fishing boat was dragging on the bottom of the ocean floor to pull up oysters and other shellfish. The dredge caught her and ripped her from her rock. She was terrified and had no idea what to do. Then the dredge was pulled to the surface and she, along with other oysters, was dumped onto the bottom of the fishing boat. Night fell. It was then that she felt the moonlight wash over her shell. She opened her shell to see the light. It was even more beautiful than she remembered.

Then something magical happened. The Pearl-Maker appeared, picked her up, and opened her shell even more. "I have been waiting many years for your pearl," said the Pearl-Maker. "Without it, I would never be able to complete the eternal pearl necklace. Thank you for this gift."

Then, the Pearl-Maker ascended into the nighttime sky. She placed the pearl into the pearl necklace that encircled the earth. With the last pearl in place, all of the pearls began to glow with a beautiful light. To this day, the wise ones say that the earth is surrounded by a halo of pearls that glow in the nighttime sky.

Spiritual Formation

Transforming Resentment

Henri J. M. Nouwen

Nouwen explores the process of formation in moving from resentment to gratitude. Formation works with the clay of our life to mold us in positive ways, but it also reforms our all too human shortcomings to support us in becoming our best selves.

...The opposite of resentment is *gratitude*.... Gratitude is the attitude that enables us to let go of anger....

...True liberation is freeing people from the bonds that have prevented them from giving their gifts to others. This is true not only for individual people but also ...for ...ethnic, cultural, or marginalized groups.

...Moving away from resentment requires moving toward something more life giving, and that something is the attitude of gratitude. Resentment blocks action; gratitude lets us move forward toward new possibilities. Resentment makes us cling to negative feelings; gratitude allows us to let go. Resentment makes us prisoners of our passions. Gratitude helps us to transcend our compulsions.... Resentment exhausts us by complicated jealousies...., stirring up destructive desires for revenge. Gratitude takes our fatigue away and gives us new vitality and enthusiasm.

...How can we break through the chains of resentment and free ourselves from the passion that paralyzes us? Resentment has ...deep roots in our human condition and is not easily cleared away.

...Spiritual formation is the way by which resentment can slowly be transformed into gratitude. Through the spiritual practice of letting go of jealousy and bitterness, and forgiving and affirming others, we can make rivals into friends and competitors into companions.... Servanthood ...asks for ...recognition that our life is not our own to be defended, but a gift to be shared. All we have has been given to us. Our part is to be grateful and to give thanks.

Source: <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/20067>

Life Over?

The Problem with Midlife

Ali Schutz

I often hold 40 as a turning-point year.... I listen to the myths and the word on the street, I hear the poems..., and I watch the people in my life turn 40 (and 50, 60, ...80). Through it all I wonder what really goes on ...in one's bones at that moment of life. How does one's meaning in life and one's purpose shift?

...The problem with midlife is that we think life is over. Likewise, the problem with "failure" is when we've attached our self-worth to something not succeeding as we had planned. Shouldn't we have accomplished more, or something, by this point? Lest we think midlife means the doors are closing on us, there's a whole new set of doors opening....

...James Hollis notes, it's a time in which you're "summoned to leave behind the controlling powers of your history" ...[and move] into a phase that's more fitting.... Noting how much our protective measures and complexes don't fit us, Carl Jung said, "We all walk in shoes too small for us."

Passing through middle life means becoming more and more what wants to be expressed through us. At midlife, one is honed and hammered by all the experiences that came before.



...James Hollis writes...., "We are here to be eccentric, different, perhaps strange, perhaps merely to add our small piece, our little clunky, chunky

selves, to the great mosaic of being. As the gods intended, we are here to become more and more ourselves."

Until we're masters at it.

Source: <https://onbeing.org/blog/ali-schultz-the-problem-with-midlife-is-that-we-think-life-is-over/>

Readings from the Common Bowl



Day 1: "The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous

formation through choice of action."

John Dewey

Day 2: "Spiritual formation is character formation. Everyone gets a spiritual formation. It's like education. Everyone gets an education; it's just a matter of which one you get." Dallas Willard

Day 3: "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." Søren Kierkegaard

Day 4: "Choice forms the divider which is responsible for the formation of all futures that can be possible." Stephen Richards

Day 5: "The man who is wise, therefore, will see his life as more like a reservoir than a canal. The canal simultaneously pours out what it receives; the reservoir retains the water till it is filled, then discharges the overflow without loss to itself." Bernard of Clairvaux

Day 6: "...the ancient human question, 'Who am I?' leads inevitably to the equally important question 'Whose am I?' for there is no selfhood outside of relationship." Parker Palmer

Day 7: "Though our character is formed by circumstances, our own desires can do much to shape those circumstances; and what is really ...ennobling... is the conviction that we have real power over the formation of our own character." John Stuart Mill

Day 8: "In later life, as in earlier, only a few persons influence the formation of our character; the multitudes pass us by like a distant army. One friend, one teacher, one beloved, one club, one dining table, one work table...." Jean Paul Richter

Day 9: "Life's challenges are not supposed to paralyze you, they're supposed to help you discover who you are." Bernice Johnson Reagon

Day 10: "Everyone is in a process of spiritual formation. ... The direction of our spiritual growth infuses all we do with

intimations of either Life or Death." M. Robert Mulholland, Jr.

Day 11: "[I]n many ways a focus on spiritual formation fits what a new generation is really seeking. Transformation is a process, a journey, not a one-time decision." David Kinnaman

Day 12: "[E]ducation is a holistic endeavor that involves the whole person, including our bodies, in a process of formation that aims our desires, primes our imagination, and orients us to the world—all before we ever start thinking about it." James Smith

Day 13: "[E]ither the Bible is a textbook for the status quo, ...or it is a recipe for social change and transformation. There are churches dedicated to each point of view, ...but what is good news for some is often bad news for somebody else." Peter J. Gomes

Day 14: "The purpose of all major religious traditions is not to construct big temples on the outside, but to create temples of goodness and compassion inside, in our hearts." Tenzin Gyatso

Day 15: "Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent." Parker Palmer

Day 16: "Life is a process of becoming, a combination of states we have to go through. Where people fail is that they wish to elect a state and remain in it. This is a kind of death." Anaïs Nin

Day 17: "What if education ... is ... about the formation of hearts and desires? ... What if education was primarily concerned with shaping our hopes and passions—our visions of 'the good life' ...? What if the primary work of education was the transforming of our imagination...? ...What if education wasn't first and foremost about what we know, but about what we love?" James K.A. Smith

Day 18: "In the process of telling the truth about what you feel or what you see, each of us has to get in touch with himself or herself in a really deep, serious way. Our

culture does not encourage us....

Consequently, most of us really exist at the mercy of other people's formulations of what's important." June Jordan

Day 19: "Since every individual is accountable ultimately to the self, the formation of that self demands our utmost care and attention." Frank Herbert

Day 20: "Because there is no way out of one's inner life, one had better get into it. On the inward and downward spiritual journey, the only way out is in and through." Parker Palmer

Day 21: "Insight, I believe, refers to the depth of understanding that comes by setting experiences, yours and mine, familiar and exotic, new and old, side by side, learning by letting them speak to one another." Mary Catherin Bateson

Day 22: "Listen, are you breathing just a little and calling it a life?" Mary Oliver

Day 23: "There are some things you learn best in calm, and some in storm." Willa Cather

Day 24: "Education has for its object the formation of character." Herbert Spencer

Day 25: "I am convinced that, except in a few extraordinary cases, one form or another of an unhappy childhood is essential to the formation of exceptional gifts." Thornton Wilder

Day 26: "The formation of one's character ought to be everyone's chief aim." Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

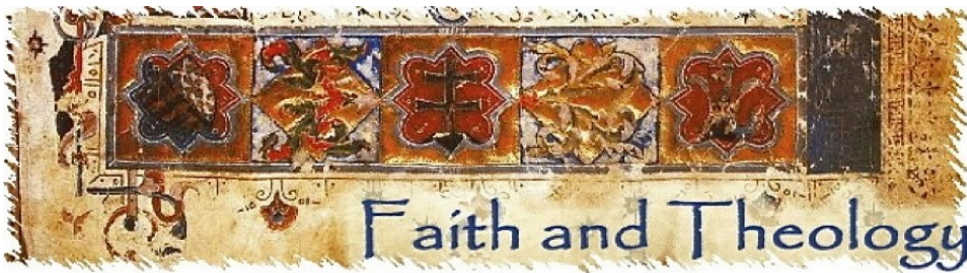
Day 27: "Spiritual formation is for everyone. Just as there is an 'outer you' that is being formed and shaped all the time, like it or not, by accident or on purpose, so there is an 'inner you.'" John Ortberg

Day 28: "Growth is the only evidence of life." John Henry Newman

Day 29: "The personal life deeply lived always expands into truths beyond itself." Anaïs Nin

Day 30: "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives." Annie Dillard

Day 31: "Many people die with their music still in them. Why is this so? Too often it is because they are always getting ready to live. Before they know it, time runs out." Oliver Wendell Holmes



Impassioned Clay

Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland

In his meditation manual, *Impassioned Clay*, Unitarian Universalist minister Ralph Helverson wrote, "We are clay, the dust of creation with the breath of life. ...The core of life is a tough residual element that is earthy and basic. Earth and air and fire and water—these conditions birthed us and sustain us."

His words recall those of Genesis in which humankind is created out of clay, made in the image of God. To be made in the image of a creative force is to suggest that fundamental to our being is the ability and the desire to create. It is interesting to note that the period of time spent in Eden, apart from the exercise of naming the animals and plants, was not particularly interesting or creative. I suspect that over time, Eden became less and less a paradise, and more and more a prison. To be forever in Eden is to be sentenced to a life of interminable boredom. It is only outside the garden that life becomes interesting because it becomes challenging. Beyond the walls of that idyllic garden, human survival demands continuous creativity. And what do we strive to create again and again? An Eden that is of our own making! But this perfect society, this global utopia, remains always beyond our creative abilities. Ironically, it cannot be achieved as an external creation; it can only be approximated through an inner creative process that forms the clay of our own lives.

Clay is both a good medium and a good metaphor for the creative process. To speak of clay is to overgeneralize, for there are many kinds of clay, each with its special properties. One must also take care in working with clay. If it becomes too wet, it cannot hold a form. If it becomes too dry, it is no longer pliable enough to do the bidding of the potter's hands. If there is air in the clay or if there is a flaw or strain in the design, the pot

might crack or shatter when it is fired in the furnace.

The potter works a piece of clay, making it ready for the potter's wheel. Placing the clay on the wheel, the creative process appears to begin. In truth, the creative process began the first time that the potter-to-be ever picked up a piece of clay and tried to make something. Years of training, of perfecting techniques, and of trial and error, all bear on the present moment as the potter positions a piece of clay in the middle of the wheel and begins again. Whatever shape this clay will take depends upon what is in the imagination of the potter and in her hands. It depends upon the possibilities of form that reside in the clay. It also depends upon this unique moment of creation. As the wheel begins to turn the mind also begins to turn. As the hands begin to shape the clay, the clay acts upon the hands and the eyes and the mind of the potter. The intended form may begin to change as the potter and clay interact. Together, the potter and clay comprise a universe of possibilities, one of which will emerge. If the clay collapses upon itself, it invites the potter to begin again.

M.C. Richards, a potter, teacher, writer, poet, and philosopher, learned from Robert Turner, her first teacher, that the most challenging skill comes at the very beginning when you are learning to throw on a potter's wheel. It is the centering of the clay on the wheel and "it took her seven years before she could, with certainty, center any given piece of clay."

In her book, *Centering*, Richards comments on some of the paradoxical realities of working with clay. As she knows, "You can do ...many things with it. ...But you can't do everything with it. You can only go so far, and then the clay resists." Richards learned from the poet Robert Colson that we come to know ourselves by becoming aware of and confronting our resistances. She also knows that what

is done to one part of the turning clay affects the entire piece. "When we are working on the potter's wheel," she notes, "we are touching the clay at one point; and yet as the pot turns through our fingers, the whole is being affected, and we have an experience of this wholeness."

Beyond the paradoxes inherent in working with clay, there are some deeper realities. Marjory Zoet Bankson knows the meaning of impassioned clay. She writes, "Made of stone, water, and organic slime, clay is the elemental mixture found everywhere in the world, offspring of the world itself. ...Working with clay wakes me up, calls me back to my senses, and gives my soul a tangible expression, a language with shape and size." Richards also knows the passion of clay. She recalls a demonstration given by Robert Turner. "He was centering the clay, and then he was opening it and pulling up the walls of the cylinder. He was not looking at the clay. He had his ear to it. He was listening. 'It is breathing,' he said; and then he filled it with air." Again we are back at Genesis, breathing life into clay. In a way, suggests Richards, there is a union of wills between the potter and the clay. She writes, "I must maintain a kind of dialogue with the clay, listening, serving, interpreting as well as mastering. ...[It is] the union of natural intelligences: the intelligence of the clay, my intelligence, the intelligence of the tools, the intelligence of the fire."

There are many marvelous stories of potters in ancient China. In one of them a noble is riding through town and he passes a potter at work. He admires the pots the man is making; their grace and a kind of rude strength in them. He dismounts from his horse and speaks with the potter. "How are you able to form these vessels so that they possess such convincing beauty?" "Oh," answers the potter, "you are looking at the mere outward shape. What I am forming lies within. I am interested only in what remains after the pot has been broken." For Richards, the moral of this story and the function of creativity is both simple and profound: "It is not the pots we are forming, but ourselves." We are the potter and we are the potter's impassioned clay.

Family Matters



The Velveteen Rabbit

Margery Williams, 1922

"What is real?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time not just to play with, but *really* loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up, he asked, or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because when you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

"I suppose you are Real?" said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse

only smiled.

"The Boy's Uncle made me Real," he said. "That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."

The Rabbit sighed. He thought it would be a long time before this magic called Real would happen to him. He longed to become Real, to know what it felt like; and yet the idea of growing shabby and losing his eyes and whiskers was rather sad. He wished that he could become it without those uncomfortable things happening to him.



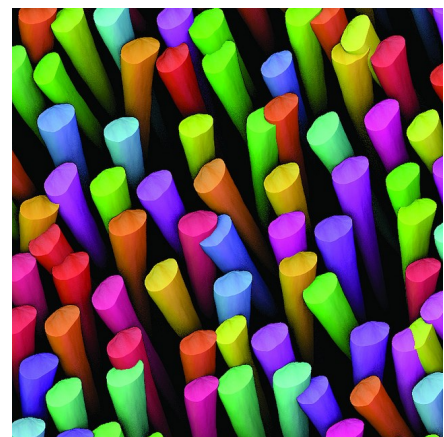
Family Activity: Bonsai

As a family, explore the world of bonsai, which is an art form about the formation of plants. There are books that you can explore like *Bonsai for Kids* by Frank Mihalic or YouTube videos like *Bonsai - Uncovering the Magic Within* by Graham Potter (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76AYHSX-PrY&index=8&list=PLDE54A9F8768AB44C>). Consider getting and caring for a bonsai plant, or consider teaching your children how to prune plants in your yard. Perhaps one of those plants could be the subject of your collective artistic expression.

Family Activity:

Impassioned Clay Animals

Consider forming a collection of animals that exist only in your family's imagination. Purchase some polymer clay sticks



in different colors. Each person begins to create an animal starting with the body. When the body is shaped, handoff it to the next person, who then adds another feature (e.g., head, legs, tail, etc.) using a different color of clay. Then handoff each creation again and again until the animals are finished.



Enlightened?

On Cushion & Off Cushion

Jane Vennard

For students of Buddhism, on-cushion practice is formal meditation time set aside regularly for the solitary or communal practice of mindfulness. Different methods of meditation may be used, but this discipline of time apart is at the center of Buddhist practice. However, the real purpose of meditation practice is to take what is learned on cushion into everyday life. Buddhists see every moment off cushion as an opportunity to practice mindfulness.

A teaching story is told about the man who meditated diligently, spending years in solitary practice in a mountain cave. He finally broke through all that was holding him back and became en-

(Continued on page 8)

Composing Our Life

(Continued from page 1) **Introduction**

hidden like a shy flower hiding under a larger, leafy plant along a woodland path? Our essence is different than our body, but our body is essential to its formation. However well we like or struggle with our body and/or our body image, the prospect of waking up in a different body tomorrow morning would be disorienting beyond imagination both to us and to others.

Our essence is different than our personality, but inextricably dependent on our personality. It is different than our worldview, beliefs, prejudices, hidden assumptions, experiences, and personal history, but informed and formed by each. Our essence is also formed by our loves and our losses, each of which we carry with us in our bones, in the very structure of our being.

Our essence is formed by all that we have come to terms with and, as a result, found peace, and all that remains unresolved, undone, unhealed, conflicted, the stuff of dis-ease in us, the things that haunt us and give rise to nightmares. These influences, these pressures, these caresses, these inputs, these histories handed down to us across the generations attest to the complexity of what it means to be human, of what the process of formation involves, of what it means to grow a soul, of what it means to complete our lives before they are ended by death. We are always a work in progress, always evolving, which is why our third principle, "encouragement to spiritual growth," is foundational.

According to Stuart Hall, a British sociologist and cultural theorist, we are made who we are less through a process of socialization and more through complex processes of formation. This happens, suggests Unitarian Universalist poet, e.e. cummings, by "...placing carefully there a strange thing and a known thing there ...and without breaking anything." The number of hands who have had a part in forming us is countless.

We begin our lives with endless possibilities. While not infinite in number, there are more possibilities than we could ever live into being. How did you find

your way to today? Did you select a single, immutable goal and move resolutely toward it day by day? Or have you made your life up as you have gone along, guided by some deep commitments, but always composing, improvising, and creating?



Composing a life involves both self-invention, creating ourselves anew, and self-discovery, coming to know our own voice as we stride deeper and deeper into the world. Mary Catherine Bateson reminds us that the undiscovered self is often both an unexpected and powerful resource. The word *compose* comes from the Latin and means to place (*com-*) together (*poser*). As e.e. cummings knew, we compose our lives by placing different things together, creating new possibilities. It is this juxtaposition of the familiar and the strange, the known and the unknown, that becomes the basis for composing our lives. The word "compose" has another Latin root, *pausa*, which means to pause. To compose our lives, we are also advised to pause from time to time, to stand still, and to reflect on who we are creating.

Mary Catherine Bateson writes "...I see the way people live their lives as, in itself, an artistic process. An artist takes ingredients that may seem incompatible, and organizes them into a whole that is not only workable, but finally pleasing and true, even beautiful. As you get up in the morning, as you make decisions, as you spend money, make friends, make commitments, you are creating a piece of art called your life."

We only have to go back a few generations to understand that replacing rigid role expectations that used to exist with the artistic freedom to shape our life into something with beauty and meaning is a liberating notion. It is also frightening because it means that we must continue to move beyond ideas about nature and nurture to the acceptance of a growing responsibility for our own life.

We are formed by many hands, including our own, by experiences remembered and forgotten, by, says Adrienne Rich, all that happened to us before we had either language or understanding. Which, is why, we must study our lives for awareness and understanding, as we try to make sense of who we have become and of what is possible in the next moment or the next year. Part of us is the earthen vessel uncovered by the archeologist or therapist. Part of us comes into awareness through journaling or meditation or telling our story yet one more time to a friend who listens us into awareness.

The undiscovered regions of the self are vast, as are the vistas in front of us that will shape us as we journey forward. Undiscovered or about to be experienced, each is a path to wholeness.

What lies behind us is solid like the earthen vessel uncovered for the first time, a part of our history, a part of who we are. But this does not mean that we know the true meaning of our past experiences. Some remain an unknown hieroglyph, waiting to be deciphered to help us understand more of the puzzle of who we are.

What lies behind us is solid, a foundation on which to build, but what lies ahead of us is new clay, moist, pliable, waiting to be formed by new experiences, by new hands, as well as by our hopes and dreams and desires.

Unitarian minister Arthur Graham reminded us that, "Each of us is an artist whose task it is to shape life into some semblance of the pattern of our dreams. The molding is not of self alone, but of shared tomorrows and times we shall never see. So let us be about our task. The materials are very precious and perishable."

We Have Religion When...

Proem

Rev. Ralph Helverson
from *Impassioned Clay*, 1964

Deep in our selves resides the religious impulse. Out of the passions of our clay it rises. Yet religion is not a froth of emotion nor a pure detached deduction of the head. We have religion when we stop



deluding ourselves that we are self-sufficient, self-sustaining, or self-derived, and when we come to look upon life as something more than merely a biological twitter.

We have religion when we keep faith in life and its inherent goodness, when we hold some hope beyond the present, some self-respect beyond our failures, and when we remember that there is something unique in us called in ancient language "the image of God" and in modern thought our freedom or ...dignity....

We have religion when our hearts are capable of leaping up at beauty, when our ambition takes fire as if some inner spark were aflame, when our nerves are edged by some dream in the heart.

We have religion when we feel the urge to be our best, to seek well doing, and when we sense that ultimately life is not a trap and the business of living is not a farce.

We have religion when we have an abiding gratitude for all that we have received, including our own life and a universe to sustain it; and when we refuse to accept the gift of life as our automatic right, but seek rather to express our gratitude in the quality of our life and the depth of our compassion.

We have religion when we look upon people with all their failings and still find

in them good; when we look beyond people to the grandeur in nature and to the purpose in our own heart, which inspire us to acquit ourselves ...[with nobility].

We have religion when we shoulder responsibility for ourselves, and yet really care about those around us, and refuse to accept as final the typical defeats of life and rise to meet fear with courage, danger with daring, and despair with faith.

We have religion when we have done all that we can, and then in confidence entrust ourselves to the life that is larger than ourselves, this mysterious clay that is our heritage, this marvelous order that sustains us, aware that this world is not our private ordeal or pleasure, but that life will go on long after we have departed this temporal scene.

A Process of Change

When We Grow

Alice Walker

Some periods of our growth are so confusing that we don't even recognize that growth is happening. We may feel hostile or angry or weepy and hysterical, or we may feel depressed. It would never occur to us, unless we stumbled on a book or a person who explained to us, that we were in fact in the process of change, of actually becoming larger, spiritually, than we were before. Whenever we grow, we tend to feel it, as a young seed must feel the weight and inertia of the earth as it seeks to break out of its shell on its way to becoming a plant. Often the feeling is anything but pleasant. But what is most unpleasant is the not knowing what is happening. Those long periods when something inside ourselves seems to be waiting, holding its breath, unsure about what the next step should be, eventually become the periods we wait for, for it is in those periods that we realize that we are being prepared for the next phase of our life and that, in all probability, a new level of the personality is about to be revealed.

Source: Alice Walker, *Living by the Word: Selected Writings*, 1973-1987

One More Step

Make the Road by Walking

Brian McLaren

As we walk..., we pass through different kinds of terrain. We walk through beautiful valleys where life is full of joy and we feel like dancing. We walk on long uphill climbs where we seem to slide back two steps for every three steps of ascent. We walk along slippery trails where it's easy to fall, and through swampy patches where we can get bogged down. We walk through dark passages where we can easily lose our way, and across flat terrain where nothing seems to change mile after mile. We walk through dangerous territory ..., and in peaceful places where we can breathe free. Through it all, we need patience, endurance, and perseverance so that no matter what happens, we'll keep putting one foot ahead of the other.

...Sadly, lots of people get distracted and lose their way. Instead of continuing to walk..., they slow down to look back proudly on how far they've come. ...Pretty soon, they come to a standstill and brag among themselves, comparing themselves to others who haven't walked as far or fast or cleverly as they have. They form little encampments, sitting around day after day, quarreling about this or that fine point of walking theory. Pretty soon they're so out of shape they give up walking altogether and specialize in talking about the way others walk.



That's their choice. But for us, ...let's keep walking. Let's keep on the road. However far we've come, there's far more ahead to explore.

Source: <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/26384>

Small Group Discussion Guide

Theme for Discussion Formation

Preparation prior to Gathering: (Read this issue of the journal and *Living the Questions* in the next column.)

Business: Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

Opening Words: "If life were an art lesson, we could describe it as a process of finding how to turn this mud into that porcelain, this discord into that sonata, this ugly stone block into that statue, this tangle of threads into that tapestry. In fact, however, the stakes are higher than in any art lesson. It is in the school of ...[life] that we find ourselves enrolled and the artifact that is being made is ourselves." J. I. Packer

Chalice Lighting: (James Vila Blake) (adapted) (In unison) *Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.*

Check-In: How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

Claim Time for Deeper Listening: This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

Read the Wisdom Story: Take turns reading aloud parts of the wisdom story on page 1.

Readings from the Common Bowl: Group members read selections from *Readings from the Common Bowl* (page 3). Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

Sitting In Silence: Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions*).

Reading: "Over the years I have developed a picture of what a human being living humanely is like. She is a person who understand, values and develops her body, finding it beautiful and useful; a person who is real and is willing to take risks, to be creative, to manifest competence, to change

when the situation calls for it, and to find ways to accommodate to what is new and different, keeping that part of the old that is still useful and discarding what is not." Virginia Satir

Living the Questions: Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving on. What are your earliest religious or spiritual experiences? What has been their impact on you?

What core religious values have inspired you/formed you (e.g., gratitude, generosity, trust, compassion, forgiveness, humility, beauty, awe, hope, etc.)? In what experience(s) are these grounded? How have these values supported you? What negative life-experiences (from childhood or later) have you encountered (e.g., death of a loved one, broken home, significant illness, loss of a dream, etc.) and what was their impact (e.g., brokenness, despair, abandonment, evil, fear, sorrow, grief, etc.)? What were some of the earliest and/or most significant instances of injustice that you experienced or witnessed? What impact did they have? How did they change/form you? Which of your life choices have supported your formation as a person?

Where have you found community and companions for the journey of becoming your best self?

The facilitator or group members are invited to propose additional questions that they would like to explore.

Deeper Listening: If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person who claimed time.

Checking-Out: One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together exploring the theme.

Extinguishing Chalice:

(Elizabeth Selle Jones) (In unison) *We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.*

Closing Words: Rev. Philip R. Giles (In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*

Enlightened?

(Continued from page 5) **On, Off Cushion** lightened. He arose from his cushion, left his cave, and strolled blissfully down the mountain. When he reached the marketplace he found himself surrounded by busy, rushing people. When a woman accidentally stepped on his foot, he struck her. On-cushion practices by themselves do not necessarily integrate the fruits of practice into daily life.

For spiritual practices to guide our awakening, we need time and attention on cushion and off cushion. Although we usually think of formal on-cushion practices leading to informal off-cushion practices, I believe this movement is not linear, but circular. The structured periods of formal practice lead us to informally practice awareness in our daily lives, and the spontaneous moments of practice can guide us back into formal intentional practice.

Source: *Fully Awake and Truly Alive: Spiritual Practices to Nurture your Soul* by Jane Vennard (2013)

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