

Spiritual Practices for the Anthropocene
A Sermon Preached by Rev. Zenshin Florence Caplow
All Souls, New York City
February 25, 2024

I am very happy to be here for a second Sunday as a guest. It is a great honor to be with you speaking from this historic pulpit this morning. Thank you Pamela, and Galen for this invitation.

It is also truly thrilling to be part of a Sunday service where a world premiere of a new choral work is performed. Jane Hirshfield, the Zen poet who wrote “Let Them Not Say”, is also one of the women teachers I invited to contribute to *The Hidden Lamp*, and a Zen student in the lineage where I trained as well.

Many thanks to Alejandro and the whole music staff, and to Richard Einhorn for this composition.

Yesterday, 17 of us spent the day in retreat here at All Souls, exploring stories and koans for these times from the Hidden lamp.

And when I say for these times, I think we all know, in our bones, what I mean. We know that we are in a time of careening change, in so many areas – political, technological, environmental, climatological, personal, to a degree that few or none of us have been prepared for or know how to be with.

This year, in August, the International Geological Congress will meet to decide if in fact the changes we are living through are so abrupt and intense that we have entered a new geologic epoch, the Anthropocene.

This term comes the Greek word Anthrope, meaning human, and cene, which is a term for a geological epoch. The human epoch. These epochs usually last millions of years.

And each of the transitions between one epoch and another are defined by an abrupt change in the rocks from that time.

For example, the extinction of the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous is defined by the presence in sediments around the world of the metal iridium, from the meteorite that collided with Earth.

For the Anthropocene, the best candidate for such a signal are radioactive elements from nuclear bomb tests in the 1950’s, which are already detectable in sediments around the world.

But of course that is not the only signal.

There is also the immense change in the amount of carbon in the atmosphere, the abrupt changes in temperature – the great extinctions – the vast amount of plastic - and all of these in the lifetimes of many of us here in this sanctuary today..

It is a sobering thought, that geologists all over the world believe we are entering a new geologic epoch, one brought on by our own activities, visible perhaps as long in the geologic record as the earth itself exists.

I decided to title this sermon “Spiritual Practices for the Anthropocene” . Because I think spiritual practices could help us in this time. What I will share with you today comes both from my Unitarian Universalist heritage and from the wisdom of Zen and Buddhism. Please take whatever is useful to you.

Some of you may know of the late Vietnamese peace activist and Zen monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967 by Rev. Dr, Martin Luther King Jr. After the Vietnam war, when thousands of refugees were fleeing from Vietnam in small boats across the south China sea, he wrote this:

“When the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked all would be lost. But if even one person on the boat remained calm and centered, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive.

I am inviting you to go deeper, to learn and to practice so that you become someone who has a great capacity for being solid, calm, and without fear, because our society needs people like you who have these qualities, and your children, our children, need people like you.”

I don’t really believe in giving advice, because who actually follows advice, but I’m going to break my own rule this morning, since these are desperate times, and offer a little advice, **five simple spiritual practices** to help become, perhaps, a little more like that one person in the boat. I’m reminding myself, as much as you.

First, find sabbath, find ways to regularly pause, slow down and feed your spirit, just as you chose to sit here in this sanctuary this morning, listening to celestial music, and words that will hopefully give you some inspiration.

Tricia Hersey, the black activist, Bishop of Nap Ministry, and author of Rest as Resistance, reminds us that rest is a radical act in these times.

And know that you are not turning away from the troubles of the world when you do this, you are strengthening yourself for the journey.

Even a breath can be a moment of sabbath and pause, even a cup of tea or a walk in the park. You don’t have to call it meditation.

If you choose to slow down, your adrenal glands will thank you, if no one else does, but probably the people around you will benefit as well!

Second, consider a practice of gratitude. I know, it’s become a cliché, but the harder and uglier things get, the more important this simple practice becomes. Yes, you have a right to some happiness, even when things are falling apart.

The intentional practice of gratitude has been shown, scientifically, to increase baseline happiness, reduce pain and depression, lower stress, and improve sleep. If we had a drug that did all that, with no side effects, it would be a runaway best-seller.

There are a thousand ways to practice gratitude, to, as Rumi said, to kneel and kiss the ground. ...but like most practices, it does not need to be elaborate.

Two of the easiest practices are savoring and awe. Savoring is to fully experience small pleasures and comforts, like your morning coffee, or how it feels to get into bed after a long day.

Awe is our response to something vast or amazing – something seen, heard, or witnessed. Awe can also arise from witnessing kindness, or an act of great courage.

I have had a lot of awe in my ten days here in NYC – hearing classical guitar echoing under a bridge in the park, standing in front of the massive hand stitched images of women in labor at the Judy Chicago exhibit, or now, two Sundays in a row, hearing the music in this church.

This is one of my favorite quotes from the Rev. Howard Thurman, the founder of the first intentionally interracial church in America, the church for the fellowship of all peoples, from his Thanksgiving Prayer, which starts with these words:

*Today, I make my Sacrament of Thanksgiving.
I begin with the simple things of my days:
Fresh air to breathe,
Cool water to drink,
The taste of food,
The protection of houses and clothes,
The comforts of home.
For all these I make an act of Thanksgiving this day!*

Third, and this may seem strange to a bunch of well read UUs, but it is at the heart of Zen, and incredibly helpful in uncertain times: consider a **practice not knowing**.

What do I mean by that? We are so sure we KNOW.

Our thoughts about the world and where it's going can literally drive us crazy, but they are just thoughts, and when we realize this we can act with greater inner peace. Thich Nhat Hanh used to tell his students to ask themselves, always, "Am I sure?"

For instance, perhaps like you, I am sometimes filled with dread about our collective future, but the reality is that I don't know the future, and no one does, not even the wisest pundit writing in the most prestigious publication – apologies to any pundits in the sanctuary!

I can ask myself, "are you sure" and then still act for what I believe in, without being certain of the outcome.

This is the practice of Active Hope that we heard from Laura Cohen in the reading earlier., if this practice intrigues you, I've heard a rumor there is a three week class coming up on Sunday afternoons.

Fourth: Remember to Stay together, remember that you are not alone. What brought me to ministry was witnessing – and being a beneficiary of – the tremendous care and love, even for strangers, that can be expressed in a UU congregation. What actually brought me to UU ministry was stumbling into a congregation in a new city, sad and unwell, and being embraced, almost before they knew my name. Come to think of it, I experienced awe when that happened!

There is power and encouragement that comes from showing up for each other. Acting for the world, standing in a picket line or marching for justice, not alone, but together. This is one of the many reasons I think progressive faith communities will matter all the more in the coming years, despite what the pundits say. We need each other. We can't do this alone.

I want to share a poem that has been important since my teen years, written by the beat poet Gary Snyder, in 1959.

For the Children

*The rising hills, the slopes,
of statistics
lie before us.
the steep climb
of everything, going up,
up, as we all
go down.*

*In the next century
or the one beyond that,
they say,
are valleys, pastures,
we can meet there in peace
if we make it.*

*To climb these coming crests
one word to you, to
you and your children:*

*stay together
learn the flowers
go light*

Fifth, practice love, fiercely, radically. Love is at the heart of our UU values, of the universalism in our tradition. And we can love each other, and this world, human and non-human, no matter what our future brings.

My mother is 95 years old, and I know our time together is limited. Do I love her less for that? Of course not! If anything I love her more.

And on a lighter note, a little bonus advice from the great satirist Kurt Vonnegut, his last words of advice – who knows if anyone listened? to an audience in 2007 :

“And how should we behave during this Apocalypse? We should be unusually kind to one another, certainly. But we should also stop being so serious. Jokes help a lot. And get a dog, if you don't already have one ...

If even one of these spoke to you, I invite you to bring it more fully into your life.

So, to review, here are some simple spiritual practices for the Anthropocene. to pause, remember gratitude, practice not knowing, stay together, love fiercely no matter what, and don't forget to laugh now and again!