

Reading from Stephen Batchelor, author of *Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening*

“We...are impressions left by something that used to be here. We have been created, molded, formed by a bewildering matrix of contingencies that have preceded us. From the patterning of the DNA derived from our parents, to the firing of the hundred billion neurons in our brains, to the cultural and historical conditioning of the 20th century, to the education and upbringing given us, to all the experiences we have ever had and choices we have ever made: these have conspired to configure the unique trajectory that culminates in this present moment. What is here now is the unrepeatable impression left by all of this, which we call ‘me’...a story that has never been told quite this way before.”

## SYNCRETIC BECOMING

A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton

All Souls, New York City

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It feels especially poignant for me to lead a service about my spiritual journey on Father’s Day. I understood my father’s spiritual life from the standpoint of a reverent daughter, then a rebellious daughter, and then an indulgent but somewhat disinterested daughter, and finally a daughter frantic with pastoral and existential questions. My father died 30 years ago, sadly before I became a daughter who was truly curious about his spiritual life. How I wish I could talk to him about it now.

I was a fully indoctrinated Catholic girl—I wore a veil for my first Communion, kept a prayer book and rosary beads on my nightstand, and I took confession very seriously. My father, my three siblings, and I dressed up and loaded up the car every Sunday, to drive 45 minutes to Saint Mary’s where my dad liked the priest. Saint Scholastica was nearby but the priest had talked

about politics in his homily and my dad wasn't having it. At Sunday Mass we genuflected and knelt and stood and knelt and prayed and knelt, I felt the comforting and instructive presence of a higher power. By the age of 10 I started hearing talk of Women's Lib. I sensed a discord in my religious life, but I felt it was something I could manage by adapting the ending of prayers from Amen to Awomen (I obviously hadn't researched the Hebrew origin of the word) and by abstaining from Communion for a little while I waited for the Pope decided that women could be priests. I could tell that my father found great solace in his religious life, especially when he knelt to pray during Mass. His example and the abundance of the Catholic rituals provided a solid foundation for me.

At age 23 I was engaged to my first husband, Michael, a Philosophy student who was well trained in metaphysics and epistemology and took his atheism seriously. He had grown up at Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a church where most of the ministers are ordained Unitarian Universalists though it is not a UUA member congregation. I no longer considered myself a practicing Catholic at that point, but I respected my father's wish that a Catholic priest preside over my wedding. Father Connelly needed proof that Michael and I had been baptized. We did some digging and we found a little card from Michael's 1964 dedication at Fountain Street Church. All I can remember is the first sentence: "We do not perform this ritual out of slavish obedience..."

That was my first exposure to Unitarian Universalism. A dozen years later...my marriage had ended, my father had died, and I found myself regularly attending Sunday services at All Souls. I don't fully know why I landed here—I believe in the mystery of the "bewildering matrix of contingencies" that comprise our life stories. I do know that the gift of my Catholic upbringing and the

anguish that set in at that time of my life led me to find a home here.

Fast forward another dozen years, and I found myself a student at a liberal Christian seminary. I considered myself a Unitarian Universalist with a burgeoning curiosity about Buddhism. Again, I won't venture to try to explain the evolution of my spiritual life—there were catalysts, and there was luck, of course. What I can say is that my spiritual life was becoming more and more important to me and I was developing solid faith in my potential to transform my life and the world around me.

As my spirituality has developed over the past 30 years here at All Souls, I appreciate more and more the sophistication of our Unitarian Universalist Principles and how they provide guidance for us to lead our lives in the service of all beings. Our Principles are not absolute, they are not commandments. They're dynamic; the current version of the Seven Principles was adopted in 1985, revised in 1995, and delegates will vote on whether to change them at the UUA annual meeting this month.

An important aspect of our identity as Unitarian Universalists is that we believe in deeds not creeds, but that doesn't mean we don't take our Principles seriously. In *Buddhist Voices in Unitarian Universalism*, Wayne Arnason, Unitarian Universalist Minister and Zen practitioner, writes, "Some people out there in the world seem to think that Unitarian Universalism is 'religion lite.' Nothing could be further from the truth. The Unitarian Universalist Way of Life is not an easy path...It's not a path that you realize because you sign a membership book, but because you... embody and teach values like freedom of thought, tolerance of differences, justice-making, and depth in spiritual practice."

Spiritual practice is what enables me to uphold the Unitarian Universalist teachings on freedom of thought, tolerance, and

justice-making, but I rely on Buddhism for these practices. Guidance for spiritual practice is nebulous in Unitarian Universalism and can therefore be overlooked altogether. Thankfully we welcome influences from other traditions and spiritual practice can include all sorts of meditation, prayer, mindful walking, certain types of yoga, and journaling. Arnason continues by telling the story of how he and his wife, also a Unitarian Universalist minister, start their mornings with meditation, he in the Zen tradition and she in the Christian tradition. I start mine in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and I know other Unitarian Universalists rely on Jewish, Pagan and other traditions. Spiritual practice is taking time to cultivate our values in stillness and silence; we check in with ourselves to see our anger, our reactionary behavior, and our biases.

Meditation and mindfulness allow me to nurture a life in which I don't just believe in the Principles, but I do my best to live them. For example, the First Principle is "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." I find it a challenge to live this even though I agree with it wholeheartedly in theory. The First Principle is the very core of Universalism, that we are all worthy of love and belonging without exception. It's easy for me to apply to most people, but it can feel inauthentic to apply the Principle to people who are unkind to me or those who I think have opinions that are dangerous for this country or the world. A Unitarian Universalist friend told me a story about his congregation. In a community building workshop they were asked "Who would you like to sit next to in church so that you'd have the sense that we're truly a welcoming and expanding community?" Some participants answered that they'd like to sit next to more people of color, a trans person, and a blind person. My friend answered that he'd like to sit next to a person with political views very different than his. There were objections by other participants.

The challenge of living the First Principle is actually believing that the people who we disagree with, who make us angry, have inherent worth and dignity. So I lean on the Buddhist teaching that every person has what we call Buddha Nature which is the potential for goodness at our core. It's not a question of developing our goodness, it's an unveiling of what's already inside us. If we're going to reduce suffering in our own lives and the lives of others, Buddhists believe that it's a matter of removing the blockage that hides our Buddha Nature. When I struggle with seeing a person's inherent worth and dignity, I have to know myself well enough to recognize the challenge, the idea of Buddha Nature reassures me it's in there.

There's a second aspect of the First Principle that Buddhism has clarified for me: the inherent worth and dignity of others is predicated upon seeing my own inherent worth and dignity. It means having conversations with my inner critic, pausing to explore my anguish and its sources. We have to develop self-awareness before we can truly do our best to apply the First Principle with sincerity. Otherwise our anguish gets in the way—we're too much in our own heads to break through to the more challenging applications of the Principle. Think about who you are when you're at war with yourself compared to who you are when you recognize your anguish and take care of it as best you can. The dignity of others is so much more clear when you have self-compassion.

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When I picture the stereotypical Unitarian Universalist, I see them in a crowd of other Unitarian Universalists, mouths open, hands in the air, surrounded by banners or signs with justice messages. When I picture a stereotypical Buddhist, I see a lone meditator, eyes closed, focused internally. The Unitarian Universalist out there in the world taking action and the Buddhist quietly focusing on their own spiritual development have a lot to

teach each other. In his essay “Confessions of a Zen Teacher and UU Minister,” James Ishmael Ford writes “I think a real shadow for Unitarian Universalists is action without a spiritual context. I’m unmoved by the notion that social justice is my religion. This view lacks grounding, and I’ve seen the impulse go awry in any number of ways. A genuine interior life, a real spiritual practice needs to be manifested...My UU [predisposition] to be engaged meets my Zen Buddhist practices & perspectives that ground what [my] actions might best look like. Out of that meeting, I find a whole life. Or pretty darned close.”

I’ll end with a story I heard in a conversation between the world renowned Vietnamese Zen monk and peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Brother David Steindl-Rast, the Austrian-American Catholic Benedictine monk known for his interfaith work and his teachings on gratefulness. They were dear friends and collaborators.

Nhat Hanh and Brother David were invited to join a peace march here in New York City in 1982. They were protesting nuclear proliferation. They were a small group of 60 people amidst about half a million. They said they’d accept the invitation only if they were allowed to walk peacefully. This meant walking slowly. As the march got underway a crowd accumulated behind them, and they got angry with the pace of the group walking with Nhat Hanh and Brother David. The frustrated marchers shouted, “Can’t you walk?” as they overtook the peaceful walkers. Nhat Hahn said about this experience, “We are doing peace. We are being peace. We are not demanding peace. If you are not able to be peaceful and happy in every step, a peace march is not a peace march.” The two monks laugh as they recall that partway through the march, the organizers showed them a shortcut. They found themselves at the head of the line again, and when some of the other marchers caught up they stared in disbelief at the reappearance of the slow group in front of them. Nhat Hanh concluded the story, “The

peace movement should be a practice community. Peace is a practice.”

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I am grateful for our tradition of Opening Words at All Souls. Zoe's this morning are a perfect example of the magnificent mix of faith and curiosity that brings us all here together. If I don't know about your path, please set up a time to talk with me. I've told you a little about mine, and I want to know about yours. May we remain open to the example and teachings of all traditions, Catholic, Buddhist...all of it, all of you. How wonderful that we have chosen a community that offers guidance such as our Third Unitarian Universalist Principle: acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. Thank you for accepting and encouraging me in my spiritual growth.

Peace be with you.