

THE STILL SMALL VOICE
Rev. Kit Ketcham, Dec. 7, 2008

Every year about this time, I become much more deeply aware of my craving for spiritual experience. It's a time of year when my own reservoirs have often been drawn down by the desire to serve others, to rise to the occasion once again when another person needs my help, to find new meaning in my life so that I can share it with others.

This experience of needing to refill one's spiritual reservoirs is common to ministers and others in helping professions. It's also common to caretakers, to people in transition, moving from one stage of life to another, to people who are grieving, to anyone who needs new meaning in life.

We get the message in a variety of ways----some of us withdraw from others, some of us get sick, some of us go into therapy or spiritual direction, some take up a hobby, some may even become addicted to one thing or another.

When we find ourselves craving solitude or cringing when someone needs us to do something, when we find our behavior out of bounds for some reason, being more irritable, more tired, more overwhelmed, more needy, these are often signals that our spiritual reservoirs are low and we need to replenish them.

Recently someone mentioned to me her yearning for more spiritual connection and experience during worship. And I suspect many of us come to worship hoping to find a place where we are not only intellectually stimulated but also emotionally touched, where in the quiet times or in the music, we hope for a sense of something bigger than ourselves, a sense of connection to others, a moment we can carry away into our workaday week.

The need for spirituality in our lives is a common but tricky thing because it is such a personal experience. For one person, it might be an insight triggered by a poem or a speaker's words or the music; for another, it might be an emotional sense of gratitude for an act of kindness. For others, these might not be particularly significant at all.

But I have noticed over the years that we can become more attuned to the moments in our lives which offer spiritual experience, whether they come during worship or during an ordinary day. We often have to train ourselves to recognize them. We may even have to re-structure our lives to be more open to them. We may have to go looking for them. But we learn that we can't usually expect them to be administered by someone else, like a dose of medicine; we have to be open, within ourselves, to the experience.

Paula sent me a little vignette that I think fits here, recounted by the late French author Andre Gide. while he was in Africa years ago. He wrote:

"My party had been pushing ahead at a fast pace for a number of days and one morning when we were ready to set out, our native bearers, who carried the food and equipment, were found sitting about without any preparations made for starting the day.

Upon being questioned, they said quite simply, that they had been traveling so fast in these last days that they had gotten ahead of their souls and were going to stay quietly in camp for the day in order for their souls to catch up with them. So they came to a complete stop."

We human beings are constantly in a state of movement of some kind--in our life stages, as parents, in marriage or singleness, in job changes, just to name a few. It's important to recognize that the changes in our daily lives affect our spiritual lives, just as the African workers knew and addressed, when they needed to.

We are sometimes so busy and preoccupied with those changes, both big and little, that we are not able to be as mindful of or open to spiritual experience as we might be at a different time.

Just recognizing our hunger for spiritual experience is a positive step. Just realizing that something that gave us spiritual sustenance at one time is no longer so powerful---that's a huge insight in itself. It may not feel good but it's a sign that a person is ready to grow and is starting to look around for ways to nurture that growth.

It can be helpful to look back over our lives and recognize the times in our lives when we had an experience we might call a spiritual experience.

For some people, it's the birth of a child; for others, a deep love felt for another being. It can be a moment in the woods or on a mountain top or in deep snow or on a stormy beach. It's a time when we experience a sense of connection that may be new or familiar but gives us a chill of recognition--so this is part of what it means to be alive.

Let's take a moment together to reflect on those moments in our lives. I invite us to enter into a time of silence, to look back in our lives to a time that was particularly meaningful in a way that felt bigger than ordinary moments. It might have triggered goose bumps or a sense of recognition of something important. Let's be silent for a little while. (1 minute or more; chime)

One of my earliest spiritual experiences was sitting on a cold, windy hilltop out in far eastern Oregon with friends from our Baptist Youth Fellowship, singing the old hymn "O Worship the King", as I watched the sun come up on a stormy early spring morning singing these words:

*"O tell of his might, o sing of his grace,
whose robe is the light, whose canopy space;
his chariots of wrath the deep thunderclouds form,
and dark is his path on the wings of the storm.*

and

*Thy bountiful care, what tongue can recite?
It breathes in the air, it shines in the light,
it streams from the hills, it descends to the plain,
and sweetly distills in the dew and the rain."*

I know that my experience may mystify some of you. I can't adequately explain this experience to anyone else, which is very typical for spiritual experience. And I recognize that music has long been a spiritual pathway for me, whereas it may not be so for others.

So I've been thinking this past week about how to help people notice the signal that they need to replenish their spiritual reservoirs and then to help them find a pathway to spiritual experience that is meaningful to them.

I have learned that one thing that has helped me has been to have a regular spiritual practice. Like going to the gym every morning helps me stay fit for my physical life, a spiritual practice helps me stay in shape for my spiritual life.

Prayer is part of my spiritual practice, but mindfulness is an even more important part of it. When I pray that I will be a good minister, a good person, my prayer reminds me to be mindful to look for the meaning in my life, because it is there that I find my spiritual sustenance. Mindfulness means listening for the still small voice that comes when I am touched by the spirit, the inner wisdom that comes when I am open to it.

In our story for all ages today, I told about an ancient prophet who needed wisdom and guidance in a troubled situation. He prayed for the spirit he called God to advise him; he believed he would know what to do if he just listened.

And as if to test himself, when a great wind came and swept through the trees, damaging them and causing rockslides, he wondered if his answer was in the wind. But it didn't seem to be there. Nor was the answer in the earthquake which shook the mountain where he was standing, or in the fire which swept through the brush and rocks around him.

But he kept listening and after the fire, in this ancient Bible story, there came a still small voice. And in that still small voice he found his wisdom and guidance.

We often hope to find our spiritual experiences in big moments, in times of great drama and tension. And often we do find spiritual meaning in those moments. But even more can be found in the moments when we are still, when we take time to contemplate our lives, when we are alone, when we are able to be honest with ourselves, when we are open to hearing a still small voice.

Let's return to the silence for a few moments and let the quiet of this room seep into our minds and hearts. Even though there may be slight sounds coming from outside the room, let's enjoy the peace of this time and allow ourselves to listen, just listen. (1 min. chime)

We may each discover some personal way that spiritual meaning comes to us. I've mentioned that music is particularly helpful to me. One way that music manifests itself in my spiritual life is that I often wake up in the morning with a song in my mind and heart. I have learned to pay attention to that song because if it's there in the morning, I know it's a

manifestation of my inner life and possibly a guidepost, a trail marker for where my spiritual life needs to go.

Because spiritual experiences are not, in my humble opinion, just nice things to have happen to us. They are trail markers, they are guideposts, they are telling us something.

One of the most powerful spiritual experiences of my life was the morning I woke up in Spokane during the big annual meeting of all UUs in the nation in 1995, singing to myself an old Sunday School song.

I know, those of you who were not raised in conservative Christian homes may not be attuned to my examples, but these old hymns are truly guideposts for me, not leading me back to an old way of thinking but leading me forward into using my old life as a resource.

The day before, I had publicly acknowledged to friends that I felt a strong call to ministry and intended to enter seminary as soon as I got back home. That night as I thought about what a life as a minister would require of me, remembering my Dad's life as a Baptist minister, I fell asleep and woke up the next morning singing this song:

*I would be true, for there are those who trust me;
I would be pure, for there are those who care;
I would be strong, for there is much to suffer;
I would be brave, for there is much to dare;*

*I would be friend of all—the foe, the friendless;
I would be giving, and forget the gift;
I would be humble, for I know my weakness;
I would look up, and laugh, and love and lift.*

For the first time I realized that what I had been called to was not an easy life of public speaking and ego gratification because of my great preaching skill and wisdom. I don't know that I had ever considered what it might mean to go into the ministry. I knew my dad had died from a combination of physical disability and the great stress of ministry.

I knew that I was older than most ministerial candidates. I knew that women were just beginning to become a strong force in UU ministry. I knew that seminary would be expensive. And I knew that the responsibilities of ministry were much greater than the responsibilities I had had as a junior high school teacher and counselor. But the sense of direction inherent in the song gave me courage to take that scary yet compelling step.

In taking that step, which was bolstered by the messages in the song, I became a new person in many ways. I turned my eyes from my comfortable retired existence, where I was free to read all the murder mysteries I wanted, to four years of hard study reading dense theological and historical tomes; I moved from a life in which I had dated freely and often, to a life in which I had to be very careful about my social life; I watched my relationships change as I became more comfortable in my ministerial identity, for many of my friends were not comfortable with my changes.

Coming to terms with this new life wasn't easy but it has felt like the right thing to do. I have never been tempted to quit. I have never felt it was the wrong thing to do. I have never regretted the money I've repaid in student loans. I have never felt sorry for myself, even though there were some very tough times. Every moment I spend in ministry, even the ones that draw down my spiritual reservoirs, feels like a great gift.

Let's spend some more time in silence together and this time I invite us to think about the times we may have heard that still small voice of wisdom and guidance and what our response to it may have been. (1 min, chime)

Recognizing our need for spiritual sustenance, listening for the still small voice, and responding to its call----these are the elements of spiritual growth.

I mentioned earlier that someone had spoken to me about her desire for more spiritual experience during worship. She recognized that she needed to replenish her spiritual reservoirs and wasn't always finding it in worship. Her still small voice prompted her to tell me about her need and when we talked, she responded to our conversation with some ideas of her own, which will become part of our congregational life.

And it's interesting to note that when she wanted to talk with me, I felt a little uneasy, a little nervous that more might be asked of me than I had to offer. But as we talked, her still small voice spoke to my still small voice and said "we can do this!" and her ideas and my ideas came together to create something new.

My introduction of periods of silence during the sermon are a partial response to the urging of that still small voice, because silence works for many of us. We may not have much silent time to spend listening for a still small voice. Worship services may be that important chance to be still and listen, even though these periods of silence are very brief.

Let's enter into one more period of silence and I invite us to listen for that still small voice again and to hear what it may be calling us to do. How might we respond to the guiding voice within that offers a light on our path? (2 minutes, chime)

As we go our separate ways today, I hope we will return in our hearts to that place of stillness where we can listen for the still small voice of wisdom and guidance that lives inside of us. We may call it God, we may call it our inner self, we may call it human nature----it doesn't matter what the words are. But that still small voice represents our best selves, guiding us to goodness, not evil; guiding us toward life, not death; guiding us to growth, not stagnation; guiding us to health, not sickness.

We are in the season of the year called Advent, in the Christian world. Advent means beginnings. May we find in times of stillness the beginnings of new spiritual life. And in that mode, let's sing together the Advent hymn "People Look East" recognizing the importance of a new life beginning. It's number 226.

HYMN

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that mindfulness of the spiritual meaning in every moment of our lives is a key to growing as spiritual beings. May we listen for the still small voice, may we heed its wisdom, and may we grow in spirit as we move forward in our lives. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.