

The Path, Part 3  
“Ritual - The Half That Makes Us Whole”  
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When my now-grown son Sam was a toddler, we had a cherished bedtime ritual. After the grime of childhood had been wiped from his cheeks and paws and he was tucked into his cozy bed, we'd read Goodnight Moon together aloud, alternating the pages. He was too young to actually “read,” but he loved to turn the stiff board book pages and had memorized the order over time.

One morning, after we'd shared this ritual for some months, I heard Sam in his room upon waking myself. His sweet voice carried down the hallway as I heard: “Good morning sun, good morning Murray (his lovey, a magpie puppet), Good morning blocks, good morning pillow. And then a bit later, good morning toothbrush, and so on. His world was enchanted, like the world of many middle-class toddlers, and even brushing his teeth had taken on an element of ritual.

How often do you brush your teeth? It sounds like a silly question, and your answer is, most likely: every day. You don't really think about it (and I doubt you chirp good morning to your dental floss); it just happens like clockwork. As a result, you have a prettier smile, less tooth decay and gum disease, and far fewer dental bills. In other words, this simple daily ritual is perpetually transformative whether you notice it or not.

The renowned Yogi Bhava Ram underscores the point, noting that as adults in an over-stimulated and stressful world, it's difficult to create more meaningful rituals like our everyday ones. We often feel powerless to control what's going on in our heads, much less stay focused and disciplined enough to make big life changes or commit to daily spiritual practices.

We drink the January resolutions Kool-aid and feel like a failure by March (or maybe by today, February 16th). Advertisers and social media plant slick mantras in our minds, seducing us into believing that

we can be happier, more successful, and sexier without making any deep genuine intentions or commitments – just join a gym or earnestly sign on to the Paleo or Keto diet, strap on a fit-bit bracelet, buy a yoga pass you might or might not use before it expires, consume an endless array of products, like the green smoothies shilled by Gwyneth Paltrow on her insufferable GOOP network, or the earnestly chirpy strategies promoted by Oprah to have “your best life ever” in 2020. (yep- and it helps, I reckon , to have a *kazillion* dollars and a private chef!)

As a result, we’ve become at least partially estranged from our inherent power to heal, grow, and manifest our fullest potential. And in spite of all the relative material abundance in our lives or our heartfelt goals to deepen or improve, we may still despair over what feels like a half-lived life. We suffer.

Whether we’re able to access and articulate it fully or not, many of us seek greater wholeness; a communion with a more authentic and soulful existence. One of the ways we pursue that is through our embodied (and progressive) faith here at Beacon UU. This is a sturdy foundation, but it is not enough. The pursuit and practice of a spiritually mature life isn’t a Sunday morning, do-it-yourself spiritual craft project.

So, what can we do? What tools can we access to deepen into ourselves? In his book, *The History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects*, the scholar S. Brent Plate offers some clues. He lays out how our ancestors before us have sought wholeness, connection, and spiritual grounding through five simple tangible familiar things – **stones, incense, drums, crosses (and other religious symbols) , and bread.**

In his introduction, Plate explains that the “½” in his title stands as a symbol of our incomplete natures, the need for the human body to be made whole through something outside itself. He argues (and I agree) that modernity and distraction create disconnection from our surroundings, from each other, from our sacred sources, from the natural world and from our senses, and as a result, we have become floating islands.

Professor Plate’s 5 objects are pathways to finding our other “half,” the non-physical; the spiritual dimension that completes us as

human beings. Like the writer, Annie Dillard, Plate wants to help us wake up, find our buckets and shovels, honor the grove and the mountain, and say to the Universe, “Now I am ready, Now I will stop and be wholly attentive.”

He begins his inquiry with ***Stones*** and asks us to reflect on our relationships with the natural world. So, I ask you: Have you sustained a connection to the non-built environment? Do you walk among trees or by water, breathing in brisk winter air or warming in summer sunshine? Do you have a relationship with your food? Where DOES it originated? How HAS the earth created it? Do you understand the crisis and challenges of climate change and how it affects our immediate surroundings, the longevity of the planet and humanity?

Annie Dillard tells a quirky story about a reclusive neighbor Larry who keeps a stone on his shelf and he is ritualistically teaching the stone to talk. (we heard excerpts from this book earlier). No one is sure how he is going to do it, but Dillard speculates that this activity is more about the need to *listen*, to *hear silence*. Yet, the reverse is also true. Stones teach *us* to talk.

Sure, you can go get a stone from a mountain trail or from the New Age superstore (there are dozens down the canyon in Sedona), pick it up, put it on your desk, admire it, pass it among this congregation to collective communal energy (a lovely ritual, but not during flu season). But, more importantly, you can decide to touch the earth and let it touch you back. You can speak to and for the earth and listen for an answer.

In truth, the entire Judeo-Christian heritage was originally rooted in this idea. The most ancient of religions are earth-based and earth-centered. Native Americans venerate the earth and all beings. Chief Seattle reminds us: “This we know, the earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth.” Stones teach us that the process of awakening our “other half” involves intimacy with and stewardship of the natural world. Will you set this intention?

Although the spelling isn’t quite right, the word *incense* (our next object) could be viewed as two words – *In sense*, as in one’s senses. Personally, I have many associations with incense from time spent

time in yoga studios and Buddhists dojos and the hippie shops of my 1970's youth. But the one that first came to mind for me is the memory of arriving home when my son (my Goodnight Moon lad) was a teenager; opening the front door and being smacked in the face with the scent of Nag Champa, a particularly potent incense variety. You can guess, as I did, that the incense was not some lofty accompaniment to meditation, but rather a cover up of other Cannabis-related aroma-generating activities.

In his chapter on **Incense**, Professor Plate asks us to consider how we might come to our senses, *literally*, by sharpening our sight, taste, touch, hearing, and especially, smell.

Perhaps you know that the olfactory sense (the one associate with smell) is the directly connected to the limbic system, the most ancient and primitive part of the brain, which is thought to be the seat of emotion. But smell is also a cultural and religious phenomenon.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> c, philosophers deemed sight the superior intellectual sense while smell was considered lower order and primitive. The emotional potency of smell was felt to threaten the impersonal, rational detachment of modern scientific thinking. But in non-western cultures, smell is paramount. Some tribes people greet one another not with "How are you? But rather with the question: how is your nose?"

This helps explain the religious allure of smells and bells from Old Testament commands in Exodus to the Iroquois burning braids of sweetgrass, cedar, tobacco and sage to the Agarbatti of Hindu sacred sites to the swinging orb of frankincense in the Catholic mass.

Incense is a sacramental used to venerate, bless, and sanctify. Its smoke conveys a sense of mystery and awe. It is a reminder of the sweet-smelling presence of the sacred; the smoke symbolizing transcendence through prayer or practice. It is meant to bring us to our senses.

So, how is *your* nose? Ask yourself: are you smelling but not inhaling? For that matter, are you looking but not seeing? Hearing but not listening? Touching but not feeling? Eating but not tasting? Are you rushing around all day or staring into a screen with nary a deep breath

along the way? May your answers guide you on a path towards your other half.

In his chapter on **Drums**, Plate tells us that Charles Darwin surmised that the beats, tones, and cadences of music preceded language on an evolutionary scale and brought beings together. Perhaps this is why the drum is one of the most essential and widespread musical instruments in the history of human culture.

Drumbeats knit us into a cosmic fabric, into the social fabric of families and friends, into the rich textures of religious traditions, invoking deities, protecting people, creating rain, uniting communities, and bringing tribal dancers to the point of ecstasy. Rhythm is deeply rooted in human bodies, and thus in consciousness itself. The drum and the beat are intimately intertwined, and as the drumbeat reaches the human body, it begins to move- dancing, tapping, praising.

Ask yourself: are you in your body or is your energy inert? Are you connected to a passion and to the rhythm of being fully alive? If not, how might you make that connection? Is your other half waiting for you in a bright, hot drum beat?

The author then moves on to **Crosses** and the objects connected to religious tribes. The symbolism of the cross is clear enough. Yet, the different branches of Christianity reflect their theologies in the distinct crosses they bear and this is not merely a matter of design. Catholicism is associated with the crucifix including Jesus on the cross, because they practice a Good Friday faith centered on the crucifixion; conversely, Protestants favor the empty cross as a reflection of their Easter faith, with its a focus on resurrection.

The Jewish Star of David (Mogan David) is a symbol of modern Judaism dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century in eastern Europe, although it is inspired by a protective amulet known as the Seal of Solomon that was adopted by mediaeval Kabbalists. You may not know that the star and crescent of Islam is also quite modern (with ancient underpinnings), emerging into popular use in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a symbol of the Ottomon empire.

When we encounter someone wearing one of these symbols, a cross, a Mogan David, a crescent and star, we can fairly surmise the

tribe this person belongs to; so devotedly, in fact, that they are wearing the symbol around their necks (although, as an aside, I've found diamond encrusted cross necklaces a bit of a spiritual oxymoron.)

As you can see, I am wearing the symbol of Unitarian Universalism today – the Chalice. And like the cross and Mogan David, its origins capture something fundamental about our free faith and our values and its lit presence on our chancel table is a half that makes us UUs whole.

Two ancient archetypes—a drinking vessel and a flame, were brought together as a Unitarian symbol by an Austrian artist, Hans Deutsch, in 1941. Living in Paris during the 1930s, Deutsch drew critical cartoons of Adolf Hitler. When the Nazis invaded Paris in 1940, he abandoned all he had and fled to the South of France, then to Spain, and finally, with an altered passport, into Portugal.

There, he met the Reverend Charles Joy, executive director of the Unitarian Service Committee (USC). The Service Committee was new, founded in Boston to assist Eastern Europeans, among them Unitarians as well as Jews, who needed to escape Nazi persecution. From his Lisbon headquarters, Joy oversaw a secret network of couriers and agents.

Deutsch was most impressed and soon was working for the USC. He later wrote to Joy: “There is something that urges me to tell you... how much I admire your readiness to serve, to sacrifice all, your time, your health, your well being, to help, help, help.”

Ask yourself now: Is being a UU a big enough part of your life? Do you intentionally walk our seven principles, or the mission and covenant we recite each Sunday? Do you carry the chalice flame within you as you walk through life?

And if not, why not? Are you connected to this place, this faith, enough so that you would wear its symbol around your neck? If so, there are lovely collection online. If not, how can you get more connected? And how might that connection bring you into deeper relationship with the half that makes you whole and with the world around you?

And finally, there is **Bread**. Mohandas Gandhi once speculated that with so many hungry people in the world, when God next comes to earth it will be in the form of a loaf of bread. My guess is that this loaf will be a simple one, as close to the integrity of grain and water as it could be. Not like the fancy loaves we've come to crave from the plethora of specialty bakeries in our midst –these days, our daily bread may very well be the sun dried tomato and olive loaf; the harvest bread studded with currants and walnuts, the gluten free wraps, the buttery brioche, the sourdough French with herbs.

Yet, the sacred (whatever its form) will come to us, *does* come to us now and act through us, in the shape of the most unpretentious bread with the most common ingredients –the water of humility and the grain of compassion, kneaded by our justice-seeking hands, activated by the yeast of love, and baked in an oven of grace and gratitude.

This past week, as I was pondering this sermon, the evening news included a heartbreaking report of children still being intentionally detained on the border with meager rations. I had just finished my dinner during which I fretted over portion control and calories! And, I was reminded of the question Jesus asks in the Gospel according to Matthew: “Is there anyone among you, who, if a child asks for bread, will give a stone?”

Bread can and does unite us. As an aspect of the communion it is an ancient ritual. Sharing Matzoh is the Jewish version during the Passover Seder. I'd like you to consider whether your portion of bread (your abundance) feeds those beyond your own tribe? Is it all croissants and brioche and crusty baguettes for you and yours alone?

From this pulpit and in casual conversation, I have spoken often of my ultra colloquial childhood, with all Jewish friends, very little bridge crossing or sense of life outside my little shiny modern-day shtetl. I could not have really known then, as I do now as an adult, how deeply segregated my home town really is and how difficult it can be to cross over, even to share one's bread, even when you yearn to do this and to figure out how.

The same appears to be true here, and in many of our home towns and adopted towns. Yes, we serve meals at the Flagstaff Food

Center and partner with local groups doing important community work. And I admire this tremendously as a form of service. Even so, in our persistently segregated American places, where might we create a genuine welcome table that embodies equality within relationships.

I am going to ponder hard and long this year how to make friends, real friends, outside my current colloquial world of mostly white, educated liberals. The truth is that my life now is not looking all that different to me from my life as a child in Squirrel Hill and that troubles me. I am hoping that the image and promise of bread will help lead me to this important other half. Will you join me in this intention?

About now, you may be muttering under your breath “Thanks Rev. Robin – more to do –swell! Thanks bunches.” But, really, this is not a to-do list. It is intended as a way of becoming whole, in small degrees, with intentionality. Remember my motto – “Small things often.”

Of course, it can't be all ecstatic connection with the rhythm of the drums in a haze of Nag Champa. We still need to eat and sleep and brush our teeth and pay bills and work and shop and wash our clothes. The best way to quiet the mind and unlock your inner power is to start small when creating new daily rituals. Here are five bite-sized steps from Yogi Bhava Ram: 1. Set the Intention; 2. Start With a Small Victory; 3. Use a Power Symbol; 4. Honor the Ritual, and 5. Release the Outcome.

I encourage you to find ways to embrace ritual and to enchant or re-enchant your life in 2020 with these small steps, and to inquiry within: “How might I come to my senses, talk to a stone, be enlivened by a soulful rhythm, set a welcome table, embrace my tribe, sing good morning to the sun and softly bid goodnight to the moon?”

Like Annie Dillard, you may glance up one day and see by your headlamp “the canary keeled over in its cage. You may reach into a cranny for pearls and touch a moray eel. Then, you will yank on your rope and pull yourself to the surface. Your heart beats like a drum and you do not lay down. You dance.”

So may it be for us. Blessed be. Blessed we.

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