



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Journeying Within: Writing as Spiritual Practice”

© by Participants in the ‘Writing as a Spiritual Practice’ Group

Reflections delivered on July 20, 2014

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

Listen to yourself and in that quietude you might hear the voice of god. Maya Angelou

For most of us, knowledge of our world comes largely through sight, yet we look about with such unseeing eyes that we are partially blind. One way to open your eyes is to ask yourself, “What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?” Rachel Carson

Spiritual practice takes one outside of one’s self or within one’s self. It transcends the everyday attempts to put into words that which cannot be named or spoken. Rev. Alison Wilbur Eskildsen

Introduction to Service, Myrna Adams West, Lay Minister for Spiritual Arts, Facilitator of Writing as Spiritual Practice Group

This month, as part of the Diamond JUUbilee, 60 years of liberal religion in the Athens area, we are celebrating Spiritual Arts. Today’s service focuses on Writing as Spiritual Practice, a Stepping Stone that leads participants deeper into the life of the Fellowship and deeper into one’s own spiritual and private self. You can learn more about the Diamond JUUbilee, about Writing as Spiritual Practice, and about most of the activities on the Fellowship’s website.

Writing has not always been available to the masses. Even into the nineteenth century, it was a skill and a privilege reserved for religious leaders and those who could afford to learn. It certainly was not deemed a necessary skill for most women. Like its important counterpart, reading, writing was only for the privileged few.

Yet, “language, penned to paper,” as Elizabeth J. Andrew notes in her book, *Writing the Sacred Journey*, “binds the inner world to the outer, satisfying [one’s] desire to unite with creation.”

UUFA’s Stepping Stone, Writing as Spiritual Practice, begun in 2011, has tapped into its participants’ “desire to unite with creation.” This morning, you will hear from many different voices as they share their inspiration, their words, their innermost selves.

Call to Worship, Betsy Bean

Good Morning, I'm Betsy Bean, a member of the Spiritual Writing Group.

One of our most famous Unitarian ancestors, Ralph Waldo Emerson, said “No one suspects the days are gods.” A sentiment I think most Unitarians can appreciate. But one way we can worship the days of our lives, enshrine those days, understand those days, (and, if you're like me, remember the day before yesterday), is to write about them.

Write about ourselves, our relationships, our past, our hurts, our joys, our journeys...all have been topics that Myrna has prompted us to ponder and to write about, in prose or poetry.

Today you'll hear several members of the group read their writing, (as we do each month), and hopefully, you'll be moved by what you hear, or pick up a nugget of insight or be provoked to thought or admiration, not so much for a turn of phrase but by the honesty and effort your fellow Unitarians are making to understand themselves and to honor their days in our world.

Lighting the Chalice, by Aleta Turner, read by Betsy Bean

In every UU congregation around the world a chalice is lighted during the service. Aleta Turner, one of our group members who could not be here this morning, wrote these words for today's lighting.

We come together in joy...for celebration

We come together in sadness...for mourning.

We come together in hope for better tomorrows.

As one, let us light our chalice...for love, for all in the room, for all in the world.

Reflections

Introduction to Tony's essay, written by Myrna Adams West, read by Ange Kahn

Some of you may know Anthony (Tony) Amezquita, a young man who became a member of the Fellowship earlier this year after attending for a couple of years. He joined the Writing as Spiritual Practice group soon after first coming to UUFA and brought to the predominantly female group not only youthful, masculine energy but an intellectual approach to spiritual matters. He and his wife Christina are moving to Nashville where Christina has landed her dream job and Tony will be looking for work as an engineer. Tony has already been looking at the website of the UU Church in Nashville and plans to attend. He wants to see if they have a writing group in place, and, if not, will start one. Perhaps, Nashville's writing group and UUFA's writing group will form an online connection through Tony. We will miss Tony's unique perspective in our group, but he left us a parting gift, the following essay on what Writing as Spiritual Practice has meant to him:

Writing as Spiritual Practice, by Anthony Amezquita

I have been a seeker for 27 years and the UU writing group has opened up a new level of discovery and understanding not available to me before. In fact there are four aspects I want to share with you.

The first and most surprising aspect of writing in our group has been that when I sit down to write, the information on the page just seems to flow out of me as if a higher power is writing through me. I believe this is why Wayne Dyer says that all books are written by God. This aspect of flow does not always happen, in fact the first few assignments I did not experience flow and struggled through the writing process, especially the first assignment. However with more practice I have been able to just sit and have the information just flow out of me. I can tell I have reached a state of flow when my fingers are just typing away and my conscious awareness is just observing the process without thinking about what I am writing or how it is evolving. As I get more practice what I write requires less and less editing of the content as well.

The other aspect is that writing has allowed me to go deeper. As I write I have been able to make a lot more connections and discoveries than I did before I started writing. As I write I start to see that perhaps what I thought I knew before was a limited aspect of the whole or that I was not on the correct path. The process of writing has allowed me to know when I am on the right track and when I am not. Somehow my intuition takes over and I have a way of knowing instead of just believing and speculating.

The third aspect is that of refinement. As I make more connections and discoveries I have been able to refine and fine tune my understanding and communication of what I get in touch with. The different topics that parallel the services have been an inspiration for me in the refinement of my understanding of the deep questions in my process of individuation and transcendence.

Finally, the fourth aspect is that I have learned so much from the writing of others, in fact at times we seem to complement each other with our writing as we go around the room sharing what we have written. The wisdom and experience in the room when we share our writings has been a source of even more learning and discovery for me. I appreciate so much the wisdom from the more mature members of our class; growing old does not always mean psychological maturity yet in our writing class I have found that many people have done both.

In short writing in our UU group as a spiritual practice has opened up a whole new way to grow and share my spiritual path with others.

Two Poems by Diana Torell

Wear Me Down

Wear me down like rock to sand. Wear me all the way down to the wood. Rock back and forth in the very same spot. Leave a mark. Wear a rut where we stood. Kiss me good bye in the parking

lot, long kisses in the bright light of lunch. Build a monument there, that I thought that I saw when I passed the first years past the punch. Last memory of memories, the trail turns to smoke. While we're here, use me up. Wear me down. Leave a rut. This is it. Make your point. Wear me down.

along the way

I came to peace along the way from glitter and applause. I puddle jumped a dozen loves dissecting every cause. I fell and wandered the valley alone and have no wisdom to share. I came to peace along the way with happiness and despair. I came to peace along the way with compliments and stars, and when it's done I am alone and leave to pack my car. The joy is in the music made, the spark from eye to eye. I came to peace along the way with interrupted highs. I came to peace along the way with the sinking ache, searching for the reasons why as I lie wide awake. I never see love sneak back in except in afterthought. I came to peace along the way despite the wars I've fought.

Writing as Spiritual Practice Sermon Reflection, by Barbara R. McLaughlin

I have written, and used journals for almost 40 years to help me record and later recall the musings that come from deep within during the day or in my dreams.

The biggest challenge for me with my writing is how to confront my inner critic. The word confront comes from the Latin and means “to be strong with”. The same professor, who taught me that in graduate school, also spoke of compassion which is “to suffer with” and console which mean “to be alone with”. As a theology student, I understood those definitions as ways to minister to others, how to help people. With honest reflection, I learn that these words apply more deeply to my own spiritual journey.

We all have inner critics. That voice that judges us blames us and holds us back from being our true selves. Writing helps me confront that inner critic, to be strong in her presence, not yell or run away, but to be alone with her. Who am I when I am alone with myself? What is that inner critic saying? What does she want me to avoid or not discover that will help me to become more fully who I am? How can I grow from the physical pain, emotional pain, spiritual pain that I sometimes face? All of these questions come from deep within and regularly my inner critic tries to keep me from listening to the still small voice within, the part of me that I am slow to embrace, that I judge and often try to ignore. Writing helps me to trust that true voice and to listen without fear. To know that I am OK because Sophia, my name for the sacred, is with me on my life journey.

The most important part of writing for me is to breathe. Yes breathe. It slows me down and helps me to listen. Listen to what, or who? For Thomas Merton, the Cistercian monk, God was the still small voice within. It is the process or the act of listening that is central to spiritual practice. To be with the thoughts or words or memories that come. The regular practice or discipline of writing helps me to listen to that still small voice. Some days that voice cannot stop and other days it is silent. Silence is not absence, it is silence. For me, silence allows me to listen. Breathing slowly,

in.....then out.....in....then out, helps me to listen so that I might hear. Listening I often hear the gentle and wise voice of Sophia, she does not judge me. She sits with me and walks with me as I go deeper into my soul, the essence of who I am. Writing helps me to connect with her, with that still small voice within. I learn to accept and not judge my thoughts and actions. To return again and again to my true essence, to be with myself.

Gunilla Norris in *Inviting Silence* says that we need 3 things: an awareness of our inner longing...., the courage to act on behalf of that longing...and a sense of community to support and maintain our inner journey. Writing as a spiritual practice gives me that awareness, that courage and a sense of community that sustains me as I travel my inner journey.

Benediction, by Susan Curtis, an autobiographical response to our session on time:

Time Changes

Time waiting for impact as my car slides in front of a tractor trailer

Time waiting for meditation to work

Time waiting for a pdf to download

Time waiting for the oven repair parts to be delivered

Time waiting for a great nephew to arrive

Time waiting for the cat to move

Time waiting for a new Carl Hiaasen novel

Would time change if waiting slipped into acting?

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What is your spiritual practice? Why?
2. How might writing your thoughts down help you understand yourself?
3. Has writing your thoughts down ever helped you clarify your beliefs or concerns? When? Why?