

First Unitarian

Mothers Day May 12, 2018

Each Sunday when we gather, we ministers lead you—and ourselves—in meditation and prayer. Beginning with remembering our bodies, breathing, giving our weight to the chair. Settling. Noticing whatever the noise in our heads sounds like, or what our bodies are holding.

Right about then I remember that my shoulders are an inch or two closer to my ears than they need to be, and I let them relax a little. Make some space. If yours have inched back up sometime between the prayer and the sermon, go ahead and let them sink down again. Make some space.

We ease our way toward meditation. Sometimes there is a quote or a reading. I say, “We continue in silence.” And then... maybe your forehead itches. You feel a cough coming on. Three crayons roll off the edge of the children’s activity table in the back and land on the floor with a clack, then a chair scrapes backward to retrieve them.

There is a sneeze, then a coughing fit. You notice that you are not even silent in your mind, instead you are replaying a conversation you had earlier—this time with better comebacks— or you are thinking of what to eat for lunch. Someone roars down Carlisle without a muffler. And then the meditation song begins.

“Continuing on in this peaceful spirit, let us lift up some names.”

Right? I know.

Well, it is earnest of us to try. Gutsy even! But mostly, it is really, really *real*.

It’s real because isn’t that the way life really is? We are spiritual beings having a human experience, and the human part is noisy. Or, as I like to think of it, it’s *lively*. We are alive! And life is a noisy, bustling thing.

Quiet is relative. Like really relative. In Washington state, Microsoft has built a room called an anechoic chamber—a room that is so insulated from outside noise and so sound absorbing of inside noise that the volume of the room clocks in at negative 20.6 decibels.<sup>1</sup> To put that in perspective, a whisper is about 20 decibels (positive). The sound of our breathing is about 10 decibels. The human ear can hear down to 0 decibels—below that we are talking about sounds humans cannot perceive.

The sound of air molecules colliding with each other is negative 26 decibels. Did you know air molecules are noisily colliding together all around you? The air molecule collisions clock in at negative 26, and the sound level in the anechoic chamber is negative 20.6. When you stand in there with the door closed, you can hear the blood rushing through your veins and you notice that your eyes make a squishy sound

when you blink. People find it intensely uncomfortable to experience that level of silence.

So quiet is relative. But even relative quiet can be elusive. Some of us live in quiet places with ample time for contemplation and maybe even a garden. But some of us are the guardians of boisterous young children, or we are people with more-than-full-time jobs (or two or three jobs), or over-subscribed volunteers, or living in multigenerational households with two dogs and a rescue parakeet, or living on a busy city street.

Quiet comes and goes as we move through different phases in our lives. Sometimes it arrives uninvited, with the loss of a job or loved one, and we long for the old familiar noise. And sometimes when we are in a noisy phase, we may forget to notice their particular kind of beauty and spiritual value.

I'll admit that churches may bear some blame for this, with our reverence for moments of silence.

The writer Jamie Wright tells about her experience as a new mother, and a new church-goer, in a Christian church. The church had a lot to offer a frazzled mom of three boys. When she first walked into the congregation's mom group, she says, "I knew without a doubt I was surrounded by my people—women with spit up stains on their shoulders and chicken nugget chunks in their hair."<sup>ii</sup> They had dark circles under their eyes and purses littered with granola bars and loose gummy bears.

I've been there. And I have to say that now that my kids are grown, I see that there's a working professional version of this—five lipsticks, an empty protein drink bottle, coupons I meant to use, the gym bag that rides around in the car until the deodorant melts, smart phone dinging and two or three hundred emails per week. All of this is just to say it isn't only moms. So you've probably got your version of it, or had one, or have one coming up soon and you just don't know it yet. Life involves a measure of chaos, from time to time, or prolonged periods of busy-ness and noisiness.

When Wright found the church mom group, she found a bunch of people who were trying their best to keep their wits in all the noise, with the help of a platter of muffins and big pots of coffee or tea.

It wasn't perfect—she had a few doubts about some of the church teachings. But she kept that to herself. Until they got to a teaching about quiet time.

She writes, "Mothers of young children are famous for trying to fit quiet time in during nap time, which also happens to be laundry time, dishes time, shower time, and stare-off-into-space-in-stunned-silence time." It rarely works out.

She was feeling this pretty acutely when the group read a book that offered a straightforward solution for busy moms. All they needed to do, the book said, was get up earlier. Just get up earlier, the book said. No big deal. "You can sleep when you're dead."

It said that.

*You can sleep when you're dead!*

Well. That was just too much. And when the group leader responded by saying quiet time does need to be quiet, Wright erupted with what she describes as “an unexpected volcano of molten outrage.”

I'm going to read what she said verbatim, because it's just so quotable.

“Oh for Christ's sake,” she told her fellow Christians,

Then call it 'loud time!' Call it 'chaos time.' Call it what it's supposed to be, which is 'intentional time'! But do not tell me that God entrusted three kids to my care and protection—knowing full well what a total energy suck they are—with the expectation that I would keep them all alive and, oh, *also* get up before the [bleep] crack of dawn to 'be quiet with [God],' because 'I can sleep when I'm dead.'

She was using air quotes. “I don't think that's how it works,” she continued,

I think God is *with us*. Like, day in and day out, in the chaos and the noise and the silliness of life... I mean if you have the bandwidth to get up an hour earlier every day, with your twelve-dollar scented candle and your fancy French press, good for you! You should totally do that! But... I will *not* be getting up earlier. Nope. I'm gonna honor God in my sleep... I will listen for God's voice in the wilderness, and at the water park, and under McDonald's indoor play structure because that is my daily *loud time* and God is faithful to meet me in the chaos. If that makes me a bad Christian, *then I guess I'm a bad Christian*. But tomorrow I'll be sleeping in. And I'm not even gonna worry about it because I'm pretty sure I'LL HAVE PLENTY OF QUIET TIME WITH GOD WHEN I'M DEAD.

Her book is called, “The Very Worst Missionary: A Memoir or Whatever.”

There is a lot to love about this tirade. But what I want to lift up from it right now is the phrase “intentional time.”

What characterizes a spiritually rich life is not quiet, but presence. Intention. Maybe during busy, noisy phases you long for stillness and you do find a way to make it happen. Or maybe what you need is a spiritual practice *in the noise*. A practice of breathing while you are on the go, on the floor, on the phone, or whatever.

A practice of bringing your awareness to the present, in all its amped up lustrous liveliness. To the spirit of life bursting forth in the questions, shouts, hops, and inch-per-month growth of a child; or to the flow that we exist in and help shape with our responses to it.

So my gift to you on this Mothers Day, whether you are a mother or not, whether you live with young children or multiple generations and two dogs and a parakeet or not—is the advice to trust your intuition about what you need spiritually.

Sometimes our spiritual practice is embracing noise.

On the flipside, sometimes our spiritual practice is *making* some noise. I've been talking about the intimate spiritual realm- family, mind, consciousness. Now I want to turn our attention outward. After all, Mothers Day originated as a call for peace. And not peace and quiet, but peace among nations.

Shalom, as it is written in the scriptures, but there it doesn't mean only the absence of fighting. Shalom means peace, wholeness, and completeness. The kind of peace that cannot exist when a few benefit at the expense of the many because there is no wholeness when only a part of the whole is allowed to thrive. Shalom cannot exist when some humans are treated as though their lives are worth less, or even worthless.

So we are a long way from shalom in our country right now. There has been progress over the years. But we are not at shalom yet. And this is a deeply spiritual matter.

Right now, if you were to listen to the religious voices on TV in America, you would think church-going Americans are concerned primarily with: ending abortion, making it harder to get birth control, preventing gay and transgender people from participating fully in society, instituting school prayer, being on guard against Muslims, expelling immigrants, and defending the right to buy as many guns of any kind as you want whenever you want.

What you don't hear from the religious voices on TV is concern about ending child poverty, caring for the outcast and vulnerable, providing healthcare, and ending the interrelated sins of racism and mass incarceration. Which is strange because most of those voices are Christian, and Jesus spoke all the time about the poor and the outcast. He personally demonstrated overcoming one's own prejudice and honoring the worth and dignity of all people, and he healed people right and left and never made them file bankruptcy for it or even scrape together a copay. He just made them well. And he did all unarmed. Am I right?

I'm not just bringing this stuff up because Jesus did. I'm bringing it up because today, in our state, and in other states all around the country, these unaddressed things are causing a lot of suffering. More than 40 million Americans subsist below the poverty line.<sup>iii</sup> New Mexico is first in the nation for child poverty. We are all just one health catastrophe away from personal economic disaster.

Meanwhile, the 400 wealthiest Americans possess more wealth than the bottom 64 percent of the U.S. population (or 204 million people). The rich have gotten richer while education and housing and food programs are cut and regular folk are told, "There's not enough." And when you pan back and look at the whole system from

the sky—from a God’s eye view—you see that “white people” as a group are doing a lot better than everyone else.

These are issues we talk about a lot here at First Unitarian. They are preventing us from *shalom*, peace, wholeness. We are hobbled as a society because of these problems. They are interrelated. Mass incarceration. Poverty. An economy tailored to the rich and revolving around seemingly endless war. Environmental destruction for the sake of profit. These issues are interrelated... and they are *solvable*.

They are solvable problems. What has to happen to solve them is that people have to come together to insist that they be solved.

This is not a matter of liberal vs. conservative politics. These issues have persisted across the years no matter who was in control of the government. People across the political spectrum have the minds, frameworks, and ability to work toward *shalom*. We need one another to get there. It’s not a matter of right vs. left, but of right vs. wrong.

Right now, all across the eastern half of our country and in a few western states including New Mexico, about 38,000 people are taking up these interrelated issues, bringing diverse people together, and is amplifying the voices of the poor.

It’s the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. It is values based, and it is non-violent. It is grounded in partnership, interdependence, and dignity. And our denomination, the Unitarian Universalist Association, is a partner in this movement.<sup>iv</sup>

Today after church I’m going to book it straight to the airport and get on a plane to Washington DC. There I’ll join other clergy and laypeople for the kick off of the campaign’s first major event: forty days of “coordinated non-violent moral fusion direct action.” The “fusion” part is about the way the issues are connected. Tomorrow afternoon, in DC and at 38 state capitols including ours, the Poor People’s Campaign will lay out a set of imperatives that cannot be ignored.

Here in New Mexico people are gathering on the east side of the roundhouse in Santa Fe at 2pm tomorrow. Susan Peck and Beth Elliot will be there, and I encourage you to join them if you can. Help us get this little movement off the ground in New Mexico. We need all the help we can get here.

Demonstrations will continue every Monday for six weeks, lifting up a series of interrelated issues along the way.

Now our nation’s leaders might try to ignore these imperatives that cannot be ignored, and that’s why after the 40 days, this new movement is going to continue and I hope it grows and grows.

Following the forty days, there will be massive voter registration and Get-Out-the Vote drives for the mid-term elections. And we will be developing and strengthening fusion grassroots organizing in each state.

Lively, life-affirming spirituality, from the inside out. That's what it's all about.

Blessings to you on this Mothers Day.

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<sup>i</sup> Gray, Richard. "Inside the Quietest Place on Earth." *BBC News*, BBC, 29 May 2017, [www.bbc.com/future/story/20170526-inside-the-quietest-place-on-earth](http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20170526-inside-the-quietest-place-on-earth). (May 12, 2018)

<sup>ii</sup> Wright, Jamie. "My Life as a Bad Christian." An excerpt from her book, published in *Christian Century*. 11 April 2018. (28-9)

<sup>iii</sup> This and the following data are from *The Souls of Poor Folk: Auditing American 50 Years After the Poor People's Campaign Challenged Racism, Poverty, The War Economy/Militarism and Our National Morality*. Anderson, Sarah et al. Eds. Sarkar, Saurav et al. Institute for Policy Studies. April 2018. <<https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/PPC-Audit-Full-410835a.pdf>> (May 12, 2018)

<sup>iv</sup> See [www.poorpeoplescampaign.org](http://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org) and [www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org) for additional info