Distraction from Action.

I grew up in a manufacturing town. A company town heavily influenced by Caterpillar Tractor Company. I still get excited when I see the big yellow earth moving equipment. I grew up with big yellow earth-moving equipment meaning money and money meaning happiness. That happiness was associated with distractions. Those distractions included vacations, shiny cars, and houses with accommodations for entertainment centers and more and more expensive food and alcohol.

In that manufacturing town, I was encouraged to hire on with that manufacturer of big yellow earth moving equipment right out of high school so that I could collect things, retire young, and move to Florida. I decided not to do that, but I didn’t realize that I did that same thing. I just went after different distractions. Distractions involving collecting job titles and higher salaries. I thought I had dodged a bullet but in fact I had gone down the same path and wound up doing exactly what I had tried to escape. I wound up buying things and focusing on immediate gratification.

We live in a society that sells us a bill of goods. We are told that this is the path to happiness. The path is to work hard for these things so that we can afford greater distractions. The distractions seem to be from the spiritual and moral sacrifices we are making in order to do these things and distraction from that feeling that there is something missing. I had that feeling that my life was passing while I was checking all the boxes. I had degrees, I had job titles, I had a career path, I had investments, a house, a couple of cars, an entertainment center, and I went on regular vacations to places known for their focus on helping with escape and distraction.

So, what is the action from which I was distracting myself.

As best I can tell, the action we humans seem to be meant for is growth. Growth in multiple areas. Initially physical growth, then intellectual growth, then spiritual growth. This seems to be the action I should be taking. The distraction I’m referring to is everything, and anything which is not contributing to this action. The distraction is the stuff that makes it easy to avoid this action. I often find myself referring to my own getting caught up in distraction as a form of selling my soul. There was a time when I would hear the phrase “selling one’s soul” and I imagined big stuff. Certainly there would be a ceremony, and a ritual involving large amounts of sound and vision and a formal signing ceremony with an ornate fountain pen made of precious metals, decorated with jewels, and filled from a blood well, not an ink well. But that is not the way it happened for me. It happened slowly and it was accompanied with quiet praise for each soul-sucking action I took.

We are encouraged to engage in distractions and immediate gratification to reach goals associated with happiness, freedom, and belonging, and intimacy. We put value on that distraction, and we will pay with time off our lives for that distraction, therefore, there is a market for that distraction.
Marketing techniques are used to take advantage of our desire for distraction. Marketing techniques associate those distractions with fundamental human needs and sell them to generate money for others to finance their distractions.

The following examples are taken from some of the most effective marketing and advertising campaigns in American history.

**Lucky Strike: Torches of Freedom**
The Lucky Strike “Torches of Freedom” campaign was a campaign to get women to smoke. With the distraction of smoking and of course the very temporary lift that nicotine gives us we were not so subtly led to believe that the act of smoking is, in and of itself, an act of female defiance of the cultural restrictions on the behavior of women. **Lucky Strike: Torches of Freedom**

**The Woodbury Soap Company: Skin You Love to Touch**
An oldie but a goodie, this campaign from 1911 has the distinction of being one of the first mass media campaigns to blatantly employ sex for the purpose of advertising.

Woodbury used drawings and photos of nude models in its ads, accompanied by the slogan “Skin You Love to Touch”.

The slogan became so popular that Woodbury kept using it well into the 1940s.

Woodbury Soap contributed considerably to one of the most important lessons in marketing: sex sells.

We look for intimacy. We associate this intimacy with sex, so sex sells, and it distracts us from the hard work of building true intimacy.

**De Beers: A Diamond is Forever**
When we think of marriage, chances are that rings come to mind, and often diamond rings are depicted in wedding proposals in movies and in all forms of advertising.

Many of us don’t realize that rings have not been part of the traditional engagement and wedding tradition for very long and that rings were introduced by a jewelry company.

In 1948, the De Beers diamond company was facing decreasing sales because of the effects of the Great Depression. To increase the sales of diamond rings, they came up with advertising campaigns that pushed the idea that engagement and marriage are best sealed with a diamond ring because that ring signifies lasting commitment.
Wouldn’t it logically follow that the size and quality of the diamond would indicate the depth and sincerity of the proposal and-- of the commitment to a lifetime of dedication to a marriage. Quite a distraction from development of the interpersonal skills needed to create the intimacy, commitment, and dedication needed for a marriage that will last a lifetime. “A diamond is Forever” is still the company's official slogan.

**Marlboro Cigarettes: The Marlboro Man**

The “Marlboro Man” is the ultimate representation of the rugged, free-spirited, hyper-masculine, male gender identity. The “Marlboro Man” was a means of popularizing filtered cigarettes among those who sought that gender identity.

With the distraction of smoking and the mood elevation provided by the nicotine, we are led to believe that the act of smoking this brand is an act of rugged, free-spirited masculinity. This effectively distracts us from deeper ponderings on masculinity and on gender.

The campaign worked exceptionally well, Marlboro became the world's top-selling brand of cigarettes in 1972.

**Dos Equis: Most Interesting Man in the World**

More recently, the Dos Equis line of beer commercials, has become a classic of the internet age. The campaign was based around the larger-than-life exploits of a worldly-gentleman.

No doubt the reduced inhibitions associated with alcohol consumption provides enough distraction for us to draw the conclusion that larger-than-life exploits result from consumption of this brand of alcohol.

**Old Spice: The Man Your Man Could Smell Like**

This campaign presents that an aftershave or deodorant is what distinguishes that good man and implies that having the distraction of that special smell is significant whether the man is that man or not.

Old Spice did this with videos that did not seem concerned with making sense but provided the distraction of being entertaining to watch and easy to remember.

So, given these examples of how we are bombarded by distractions, how do we spend our time? In 2018, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported the following:

Work Time: Full-time employed persons averaged 8.5 hours when they worked on weekdays and 5.4 hours on when they worked on weekend days.
Maintenance of Our Material Possessions: On the days we did household activities, we averaged 2.3 hours.

Watching TV, the leisure activity that occupied the most time: Americans averaged 2.8 hours per day.

Socializing and communicating, such as visiting with friends or attending or hosting social events, accounted for an average of 38 minutes per day.

Time spent reading for personal development varied greatly by age. Individuals age 75 and over averaged 48 minutes of reading per day whereas individuals ages 15 to 54 read for personal development on the average for 10 minutes or less per day.

We are busy but what about spiritual growth-related activities!

What are these activities!

I have noticed something about the Unitarian Universalist sources. You know, the ones listed right up front in our hymnal. I was delightfully surprised to find that the information listed in the Unitarian Universalist sources actual provides guidance on where we may want to consider putting our focus to engage in actions to promote spiritual growth in ourselves and in the world.

When we originally encounter these sources, it would seem as though they are just telling our history and how we developed into a denomination. On a closer look at these actions we can see that they not only tell us where we have found our sources of inspiration but, within the description, they identify what actions are identified within these sources. Within this information we find guidance on what actions we can take to maintain and enhance our spiritual growth. These are the very actions from which we are distracting ourselves. These are the actions needed to avoid becoming stagnant from all our distractions and the markets created from them.

As stated at the front of our hymnal:
Unitarian Universalist congregations affirm and promote seven Principles, which we hold as strong values and moral guides. We live out these Principles within a “living tradition” of wisdom and spirituality, drawn from sources as diverse as science, poetry, scripture, and personal experience. These are the six sources our congregations affirm and promote:

The first source listed is:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;

  This source encourages us to engage with things that move us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;

The next source on the list is:

- Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
This source encourages us to take actions that challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;

The next source on the list is:

- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
  
  This points us to engage with that which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

The next source on the list is:

- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;

  This source points us to act to pursue a deeper way of experiencing love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;

The next source on the list is:

- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;

  This source points us to act on the guidance of reason and the results of science, and to avoid idolatries of the mind and spirit;

The final source on the list is:

- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

  The sixth points us to celebrate the sacred circle of life and live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

This is Good News!

This tells me that even if we have become distracted from action, we can positively affect our lives, our communities, and the planet by turning to the actions clearly listed in our Unitarian Universalist Sources.

We can make a difference by turning our focus to renewal of the spirit and openness to the forces which create and uphold life; we can find ways to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and love; we can engage with that which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life; we can actively pursue efforts to love our neighbors as ourselves; We can heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and we can begin today to celebrate the sacred circle of life.