

TO WEEP, TO SING
Sermon by Audette Fulbright
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All Souls Church, New York City

“[A few] years ago, Camille Parmesan, a professor at Plymouth University and the University of Texas at Austin, became so “professionally depressed” that she questioned abandoning her research in climate change entirely.

Parmesan has a pretty serious stake in the field. In 2007, she shared a Nobel Peace Prize with Al Gore for her work as a lead author of the Third Assessment Report of the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\)](#). In 2009, *The Atlantic* named her one of 27 “[Brave Thinkers](#)” for her work on the impacts of climate change on species around the globe. Barack Obama and Mark Zuckerberg were also on the list.

Despite the accolades, she was fed up. “I felt like here was this huge signal I was finding and no one was paying attention to it,” Parmesan says. “I was really thinking, ‘Why am I doing this?’” Parmesan certainly isn’t the first to experience some sort of climate-change blues. From depression to substance abuse to suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder, growing bodies of research in the relatively new field of psychology of global warming suggest that climate change will take a pretty heavy toll on the human psyche as storms become more destructive and droughts more prolonged. ...For scientists like Parmesan on the front lines of trying to save the planet, the stakes can be that much higher. The ability to process and understand dense climatic data doesn’t necessarily translate to coping with that data’s emotional ramifications. Turns out scientists are people, too.”¹

As are we all. Living in a period of rapid change, where information technology outpaces our human ability to process, we’re inundated. We learn about the minute-by-minute erosion of our democratic norms and standards even as we hear the news of another mass shooting and a typhoon on the other side of the world – a place where we may have relatives, or we have traveled for work. If we are still working, the expectation that we should be available at any time by email, text or phone is often intense. We may be juggling personal illness or the illness of a loved one, and then word of rising drug prices, increases of over 900% in 2019 alone, or the stress of knowing that the Trump administration is working with Republican governors to have the ACA struck down at last, an outcome widely expected to cause chaos in an already profoundly flawed health insurance system is omnipresent. And if you are like me, your heart is breaking, knowing that children and adults are being caged like animals, separated for the sake of cruelty, deprived of showers, sleep, and every human comfort in our name... it can be overwhelming.

We are each trying to survive. But we long for far more than that – not just to survive, but to thrive. Many of us are hungry, searching for a way forward that will include all of us; a

¹ “Climate depression is for real. Just ask a scientist,” By [Madeleine Thomas Grist](#), Oct. 2014.
<https://grist.org/climate-energy/climate-depression-is-for-real-just-ask-a-scientist/>

sustainable world, a world of justice, and freedom, and a future for all the children of all species on Earth.

How can we be, in the face of serious odds, resilient and hope-filled?

We need a healing of our spirits. We need spiritual practice, and spiritual community.

As Unitarian Universalists, we often need a lot of defining of terms before we can let down our guard and breathe into terms like “spiritual.” What, for example, is a “spiritual practice?”

The shame and resilience researcher and author Brene Brown, after studying the question, came up with this simple definition: *“Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion.”*²

At All Souls, we affirm that we all come from the same source, we are all on a journey together, and wherever we’re going, we’re all headed to the same place. As Unitarian Universalists, this same idea is expressed in our seventh principle, the interconnected web of all existence, of which we are a part.

Spiritual practices are those things we do, faithfully, to nurture ourselves in ways that are not merely physical, and which are not exclusively intellectual. It is to care for ourselves in our wholeness. We may play tennis, or swim, or box to exercise and strengthen our bodies. We may study, or see a counselor for our intellectual or emotional wellbeing. Spiritual practice is care for that which connects us to our sense of being a part of Life or to God, and which increases our capacity to love and be loved.

There are literally millions of viable spiritual practices. Science nudges us toward time in nature, time in silence, music-making, or enjoying, meditation. The profound benefits of prayer are well documented. Reflective reading, known sometimes as *lectio divina*, is powerful, as is journaling. So is creating art or dancing.

What makes a spiritual practice work is practice. We are shaped and are made more whole by practicing faithfulness. Whatever practice we engage, it is the practice that helps build our resiliency, helps us find and maintain a greater balance in our lives, and prepares us for the possibility of greater compassion and connectedness.

But personal spiritual practices are only a part of what helps us be more consistently and persistently fully and beautifully human. It is in our connectedness to one another, in our ability to love and to trust and to open our circles of inclusion wider, that we truly are able to thrive -- not just as individuals, but as communities, and perhaps, as a species.

That is why coming to church is a profoundly significant act. It is to leave your separate sphere and step into a community of practice. All Souls is many things: it is a workshop of wonder, in worship and music; it is a temple of learning, where great minds and wise hearts have offered their best for generations; it is a home for meditation, prayer and play. But most of all, it is a community of practice. It’s that place where we come to meditate on kindness, to feed the hungry, to seek inspiration, to make friends. We say, each Sunday in our Bond of Union, which is the closest thing All Souls has to a covenant of community, that we come together in the spirit

² “Defining Spirituality,” Brene Brown. <https://brenebrown.com/articles/2018/03/27/defining-spirituality/>

of love. Love takes practice. Love takes time. It takes showing up, making mistakes, miscommunicating, being wrong, being forgiven, forgiving. It requires being there for one another in good times and in bad. It means being together on a journey of learning - which almost always requires us to change.

Belonging to a church community is to take seriously the care of the soul, and to be genuinely invested in working for a better world – because churches always require risk-taking. As communities of accountability, a healthy and vibrant church people ask each other to not just speak the truth, but speak the truth *in love*. They are the places where we learn that our preferences are just that, preferences. What we build together may require compromise, conversation, commitment. Living churches ask us to step out of our comfort zone and show up for those who need us: children in cages, people struggling with addiction, the broken-hearted. A church community is the place where we practice not being alone. Sometimes, that's hard. It's hard, because we've all been hurt before. It can be tough to let down our guard, and become part of a community where we can both laugh and weep without fear, without holding back. But more than almost anything else, this is what we need to survive and to be whole, and resilient. We need a community of love, where we speak love, where we let go of fear, where we are both the comforter and the comforted.

There is always more to do, always more to learn or news of the day to chase after. If we practice being overworked, over caffeinated, overwhelmed by the news of the day, we are also practicing being tense and feeling constricted by circumstance. If we compensate by drinking too much, or numbing ourselves with television or other mindless activity, if we seek to manage our worries or navigate our fears by being controlling, presenting ourselves as the expert, or insisting on our own way, we block relationship. We are what we practice. That is why we need a place where we are welcome to weep, to sing, to practice love and forgiveness, and to forge deep ties with one another in a community of practice... like All Souls.

Because a practice community practices, because a risk-taking community takes risk, and because we build relationship through moments of trust, I'd like to end this sermon with a small moment of connection. I have a beautiful poem called "Blessing" that I would like to share with you. Before I do, I'd like to ask that you gently take hands with your neighbor, or, if some hands need more care for their hurts, perhaps place a hand on a shoulder or elbow. A few people may need to say that they should not be touched; we honor that. But many, many of us need and are strengthened by a small, simple connection like holding hands. As we do this, I will share Barbara Pescan's "Blessing."

We spend so much time running from ourselves
Fleeing from what we know
About the goodness in our hearts
We think we can escape
The intelligence of our loving.

Imagine
You are standing before a bodhisattva
Jesus, Buddha, the first mother -
It does not matter what you call the holy one -
He has dust on his shoes
Chaff clings to her
The smells of being alive -
Shining from their faces is the bean of

All their questions
The compassion of their living.

Can you see yourself through those eyes?
Can we know one another like this?
(we, who no longer believe in messiahs
Can hardly believe in each other.)
Can we know ourselves seen
And know each other this same way
Until our restless hearts
Learn to abide
In this knowing and this love?
Can we live in this gaze of blessing?

I hope you will gaze at one another today with eyes to see the blessing that each one of you is.

Amen, ashe, blessed be.