

Right Relationships: A Spiritual Path
Unitarian Universalist Society of Martha's Vineyard
Vicky Hanjian
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Readings:

Judaism "The Commandment To Love," *Tales of the Hasidim*, Martin Buber, Schocken Books Inc., New York, 1975, p. 190

A disciple asked Rabbi Shmelke: "We are commanded to love our neighbor as yourself. How can I do this, if my neighbor has wronged me?"

The rabbi answered: "You must understand these words aright. Love your neighbor like something which you yourself are. For all souls are one. Each is a spark from the original soul, and this soul is inherent in all souls, just as your soul is in all the members of your body. It may come to pass that your hand makes a mistake and strikes you. But would you then take a stick and chastise your hand, because it lacked understanding, and so increase your pain? It is the same if your neighbor, who is one soul with you, wrongs you for lack of understanding. If you punish him, you only hurt yourself.

The disciple went on asking: "But if I see a man who is wicked before God, how can I love him?"

"Don't you know," said Rabbi Shmelke, "that the original soul came out of the essence of God, and that every human soul is a part of God? And will you have no mercy on Him, when you see that one of His holy sparks has been lost in a maze, and is almost stifled?"

Buddhism RIGHT SPEECH The 3rd of The Noble Eightfold Path

In Buddhist teaching, there are 4 Noble Truths: 1st: Life means suffering. 2nd: The origin of suffering is attachment. 3rd: The cessation of suffering is attainable. 4th: The path to the cessation of suffering.

The path to the cessation of suffering expands into The Eightfold Path, a practical guideline to ethical and mental and *spiritual* (italics are mine) development. The 3rd aspect of the Eightfold Path is "Right Speech":

Right speech is the first principle of ethical conduct in the eightfold path. The importance of speech in the context of Buddhist ethics is obvious: words can break or save lives, make enemies or friends, start wars or create peace. The Buddha explained right speech as follows: 1. To abstain from false speech, especially not to tell deliberate lies and not to speak deceitfully; 2. To abstain from slanderous speech and not to use words maliciously against others; 3. To abstain from harsh words that offend or hurt other;, and 4. To abstain from chatter that lacks purpose or depth. Positively phrased this means to tell the truth, to speak friendly, warmly and gently and to talk only when necessary.

Islam "A Root In Each Act and Creature." *THE GIFT: Poems by Hafiz, The Great Sufi Master*, Translated by Daniel Ladinsky, Penguin Compass, New York, 1975, p. 190.

*A ROOT IN EACH ACT
AND CREATURE*

The sun's eyes are painting the fields again.

*Its lashes with expert strokes
Are sweeping across the land.*

*A great palette of light has embraced
This earth.*

*Hafiz, if just a little clay and water
Mixed in His bowl
Can yield such exquisite scents and sights,
Music – and whirling forms*

*What unspeakable wonders must await with
The commencement of unfolding
Of the infinite number of petals
That are the
Soul.*

*What excitement will renew your body
When we all begin to see
That His heart resides in
Everything?*

*God has a root in each act and creature
That He draws His mysterious
Divine life from.*

His eyes are painting the fields again

*The Beloved with His own hands is tending,
Is raising like a precious child,
Himself in
You.*

Christianity Matthew 5:23-24 *If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there you remember that someone has something against you, leave your gift before the altar and go; first be reconciled to that person, and then come and offer your gift.*

I felt very impressed by Judy's article in your March newsletter, addressing the issue of living in right relations with one another. To intentionally commit to the art of caring for one another with honesty and integrity is to commit to a most crucial task in the service and well being of a congregation. If that were all there is to it, it would, by itself be an admirable thing. But as I have reflected on the work of building and maintaining right relations, I have become more and more aware of the deep spiritual underpinnings of such a work. The discipline and practice of living in right relationships has broad implications, not only for the congregation, but also for the world beyond the finite circle of relationships that comprise the Unitarian Universalist Society of Martha' Vineyard.

So - -with your permission, I'd like to follow the lead in the newsletter and go a little more deeply into the spiritual call – the yearning, if you will, the commitment to live in right relations with one another.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro has written a book titled *"The Sacred Art of Lovingkindness: Preparing to Practice*. In the introduction he asks *"How can I write a book about something which I myself have not mastered? When it comes to the sacred art of lovingkindness I am not a Rembrandt or a Picasso. I am more like a kindergartner with finger paints."* I might ask the same question. "How can I give a talk about the spirituality and practice of right relations when I haven't mastered the art myself?"

But the sense of "right relations" being a "practice" implies that the healthy and harmonious relationships that we desire are something for which we practice in the way that we might practice a musical instrument. We don't start out being masters of the instrument. We may never become masters. But we practice anyway. In the process of the practice, we become more skilled in the art. So we practice living in right relations by giving conscious attention to our interactions with one another. We develop a discipline of right relations. We may not become masters, but we will enjoy a more satisfying life together by virtue of our practice.

It comes as no surprise that the major traditions in Western religion – Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as Buddhism from the East, all have something to say to us about loving and respecting one another. What is interesting is how deeply similar they are - - and how the practice of right relations is so fundamental to all of them.

In my exploration, I went first to a collection of Hasidic Tales edited by Martin Buber. Both Jewish and Christian traditions admonish us to love one another - - to love our neighbors as ourselves. In the Hasidic story: “The Commandment to Love” the most fundamental question for right relations is laid down when the disciple asks the rabbi “How can I love my neighbor if my neighbor has wronged me?” The Rabbi answers: “ You must understand these words aright. Love your neighbor as something you yourself are. For all souls are one. Each is a spark from the Original Soul, and this soul is inherent in all the members of your body. It is the same as if your neighbor, who is of the One Soul with you, wrongs you for lack of understanding. If you punish him, you hurt yourself.”

From the Hasidic tradition in Judaism, we get the notion that right relations are fundamentally a spiritual practice through which we relate to one another as members of a Greater Soul that, indeed, enlivens us all.

The Jewish notion of each of us being “a spark from the original soul” can ultimately be traced back to the early verses of Genesis where the Holy One creates humankind in the image and likeness of the Holy One. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks interprets the words “Image” and “likeness” as two very distinct things. To be created in the image of God means that in some essential way, we are God - -manifesting the God-self - - in much the same way that a wave is the ocean extended and expanded in time and space. Each one of us is the Holy One extended in time and space. We are the **image** of God. To be created in the LIKENESS of God, on the other hand, means that we have the potential to act in a Godly manner – to **act like God**, that we have the capability to extend graciousness, kindness, forgiveness and compassion to

others and to all creation. Being in the likeness of god, we have all of these attributes hard-wired within. However, it takes a lot of practice in order to be able to live these attributes fully and skillfully.

So often it is our speech that determines whether or not we are in right relations with one another. It is our speech - - our words uttered without mindful attention that often skew our relationships. In Buddhist practice, the 3rd tenet of the Noble Eightfold Path has to do with Right Speech. It has been called the first principal of ethical conduct in the Eightfold Path that guides Buddhist practice. It is amazingly close to the Jewish warning against “the evil tongue” as the primary source of much human suffering. Both traditions warn us about negative speech to or about each other - - about foregoing words that hurt each other. Both traditions echo the high value in Christian teaching - -that we learn to speak the truth in love - - that we do it in friendly, warm and gentle ways - -and that we speak only when necessary.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist master is so practical in his teachings. He recognizes that we don't start out seeing each other as holy. For him, the recognition of another's suffering may be the starting point in the practice of right relations. To understand ourselves and each other from the perspective of the pervasiveness of human suffering - - is a spiritual practice that can inform how we relate to one another. If we cultivate the ability to understand that every human being is suffering in some way we may find ourselves more readily able to see the holiness in each other. This in turn, has the possibility of energizing us to relate to one another with compassion. Seeing one another with compassion may engender the ability to create kindness when we must speak the truth to one another. When this happens, forgiveness and reconciliation may flow through newly opened channels between us. Seeing and understanding each other as people who suffer is a spiritual practice that leads to right relations.

In one of his teachings on suffering, Thich Nhat Hanh offers this thought on suffering: *When another person makes you suffer, it is because he suffers deeply*

within himself and his suffering is spilling over. He does not need punishment; he needs help. That is the message he is sending. When you say something unkind, when you do something in retaliation, your anger increases. You make the other person suffer more, and he will try hard to do or say something back to get relief from his suffering. That is how the conflict escalates.

This beloved Buddhist master reminds us that *“The source of love is deep within us and we can help others realize a lot of happiness. One word, one action, one thought can reduce another person’s suffering and bring that person great joy. We are here to awaken from our illusion of separateness.*

The poetry of the Sufi masters in the Islamic tradition simply reinforces this notion that we are, indeed, from the same source - - whether we name it God – or the Great Spirit – or the Mystery - - or whether we affirm that we have our origins in the stars. We are part of a whole. The way we live out our uniqueness affects that Whole. This is as true in the microcosm of the church as it is in the macrocosm of creation. The Sufi poet says *“God has a root in each act and creature from which He draws his mysterious divine life.* When we relate to one another out of compassion and lovingkindness, we become a healthy root from which the Holy draws life.

In a snapshot of Christian thought about right relations, the Gospel offers a glimpse of the priorities of the practice of right relations. A person comes to the temple to make a sacrifice to God on the altar. He remembers that he is not in right relationship with another member of the community. Jesus taught that our worship is lacking in authenticity if we are in disharmony with others. We have great difficulty bringing ourselves comfortably into the presence of the holy if our relationships are fractured. In the teaching from Matthew, Jesus sets the priorities in order. Healed and restored relationships are more important than any worship we can bring to the Holy One. Better to forgo the outer trappings of worship and go and make our relationships right. This is, indeed, the highest form of worship.

To come full circle, there is sacred value in practicing to live in right relations with one another. It affects us and reverberates in expanding circles into the world around us. The Jewish mystical tradition asserts that the critical tipping point for maintaining human life on the planet is the presence of 36 people practicing the art of lovingkindness – of living in right relations at any given moment. These 36 are called *mensch*es or *lamed vavniks*. If even one should fail in their practice of lovingkindness, the world would crumble. Rabbi Rami Shapiro hastens to remind us that it is not the same 36 people at each moment, but rather throughout creation 36 people are continually and eternally stepping into and out of the role at any given moment. The great sage Hillel said “Where there is no mensch - - - be a mensch.” Indeed, the well being of the world may depend on how we live in right relations with each other. May we be blessed as we practice together.

Closing words from *Practicing Right Relationship*, by Mary K. Sellon and Daniel P. Smith, The Alban Institute, 2005, P. 11-12.

Right relationships are messy. They require intentional, deliberate work that will be uncomfortable at times. They demand that we learn new skills and practice them. But these new skills can be learned. The difference they make for us as individuals, for the greater systems we are part of, and for the world makes it worth every ounce of effort.