

MINDFULNESS

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Sermon II in a Year-Long, Twelve-Part Series:

“12 Gates To The City: Spiritual Pathways for Entering the Holy City of Your Own Life”

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach, Florida

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“Only that day dawns to which we are awake” – Henry David Thoreau

Well, dear friends, I might as well be right up front this morning with where I want to take you spiritually and intellectually. I am deeply convinced – and some of you may have heard me say this before – I am deeply convinced that the greatest spiritual danger in American life today is simply...distraction. You and I live in a distracted and a distracting culture, with way too much spin, activity, clutter and noise...and unless we are very intentional and attentive – unless we learn to live with a purposeful mindfulness, we can find ourselves living on the jittery surface of things, unable to be fully present to life’s quiet richness...and profligate holiness.

Let me say this another way, by way of a story. One day a few years ago now, I was driving down that particularly grimy, industrial portion of the New Jersey Turnpike – you know, past all those ugly oil refineries spewing their rancid flames and odors outside of Newark – when I spied this huge billboard advertising a gambling casino in Atlantic City. Blazoned across the billboard was a towering 20-foot likeness of the casino’s famous owner – Steve Wynn is his name – grinning broadly, holding handfuls of green cash, and the accompanying quote read, “*You’ve got to be present to win!*” I was instantly struck by the absurdity and emptiness of this gambling mogul’s advertising pitch.

Now I’m sure it is true – on the surface of it – that if you are going to be able to “win” money, in spite of the odds being incredibly rigged against you at a casino gambling table, you must indeed be physically “present” at that business establishment. But as I read the billboard’s “pitch line,” a much larger and more useful spiritual thought instantly came to me, which struck me as a kind of spiritual epiphany and has endured with me ever since. And that is the obvious yet tricky truth that to “win” – to truly succeed – at “the business of life,” you must be regularly and truly “present” – mindfully present – to the precise place and moment you are in...and (all deference to Mr. Wynn aside) a windowless, glitzy, noisy, crowded casino seems the last place on earth for such deep, enriching connection with your life and world.

The spiritual truth, dear friends, is that in these fragile and fleeting lives we are given we must be present to win. Every day we must each strive to be fully and mindfully engaged with life right where it touches us, in all its subtly, intricacy, charm and grace. This is why mindfulness... everyday, ordinary, routine mindfulness...is perhaps the most important spiritual possession any human being can have...because without it, all is lost – literally and figuratively.

This morning, I am offering the second sermon in my year-long series on “*12 Gates to the City*” in which I am reflecting on the various spiritual pathways which I believe will enable us to enter in “*The Holy City*” (“*The Sacred Space*”) of our own lives. The affirmation which lies at the center of this sermon series is the idea that we human beings were intended – built from the ground up, if you will, from right out of “the primordial soup” – to experience “*The divine traffic*” – “*the sacred flow*” – of this life which is ceaselessly and faithfully swirling around, and through and within us. I am passionately persuaded that Mindfulness – which the simple human ability to pay attention and wake up to the intricacies of life just where they touch us – is perhaps the

first and foremost gate into “*The Holy City*” – that place of satisfaction and fulfillment – of your own life. Because if you are not focused on the world that is at hand...if you are not keenly using your eyes, ears, nose, and tongue to take in what is around you...you are essentially “sleep-walking” through your days...and you are going to miss most about this creation of ours, which has the power to bless and enliven and enrich you.

This, of course, was the point of my asking us to all share in this morning’s simple “Meditation of the Senses.” I wanted to remind every one of us, with a simple exercise of focusing and paying attention to an ordinary piece of fruit, about how simple mindfulness (the process of purposefully slowing down...and fully tuning and awakening your senses...and your heart...to what is truly at hand) has the power to help us to experience and be blessed by the beauty and sacredness of ordinary moments and things.

So cultivating mindfulness is what I want to focus on this morning. But before I delve more deeply into how we can tune ourselves into the lives that we have, let me say a bit more about the problem of distraction in American life today. In his wonderful book “*Coming To Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness*” – and yes, I do recommend it to you despite its \$25 cover price – American Buddhist teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn makes the case that as a people we are losing our capacity for life-enriching focus and calm. In a chapter entitled “A.D.D. Nation,” he describes the attention deficit disorder we Americans so readily and regularly fall victim to. I quote him at some length:

“[Our] entire society suffers from attention deficit disorder...and it is getting worse by the day...Much has changed for us in the last 100 years, as we have drifted away from intimacy with the natural world and a lifetime connectedness to the community into which we were born.....and this change has become even more striking in the past 15 or so years, with the advent (and virtually universal adoption of) the digital revolution...[through our]...home computers [and lap tops]...fax machines [pagers and] beepers...cell phones [with] cameras [and instant text messaging]...[i-pads, androids and BlackBerries]...24/7 high speed conductivity, [the nearly infinite channels of cable television]...the [nearly infinite reach of the] internet and its world wide web, and of course e-mail.....[All these technologies, despite their] undeniable convenience, usefulness, [and] efficiency...[have] already irreversibly transfigured how we live our lives, whether we realize it or not.....

“This new way of working and living has inundated us all of a sudden with endless options, endless opportunities (for interruption and distraction)...and a kind of free-floating urgency attached to even the most trivial of events [or communications]... We are continuously bombarded with information, appeals, deadlines, [and] communications...We find ourselves responding willy-nilly to the increasing volumes of e-mail, voice mail, [tweets], faxes, pages, and cell phone traffic coming in from all corners of the planet....We are literally being driven to distraction by our delicious opportunities and choices...[This] technology itself undermines any time we might be inclined to take for reflection...It has given rise to a dance of inattention and instability of mind...[there is so much] more to pay attention to...it is now harder to pay attention to any one thing... The relentless acceleration of our way of life over the past few generations have made focusing in on anything something of a lost art... Things come at us fast and furious, relentlessly...These assaults on our nervous system continually stimulate and foster desire and agitation rather than connectedness and calmness...and, if we are not careful, [they] rob us of time, [rob us] of our moments....So many of us feel trapped [by this crazy acceleration] yet at the same time also addicted to the speed at which our lives are unfolding. Even our stress and distress can feel oddly satisfying or outright intoxicating. So we are reluctant to slow ourselves down and give ourselves over to the present moment, to attend fully [to what is so richly before

us].

Now...I don't know who first coined the phrase, but the other day when I was, I will admit, rather hurriedly surfing the web while preparing for this sermon, I came across numerous articles describing a new American disease that, according to the authors is reaching pandemic proportions...and that disease is Hurry Sickness. Hurry Sickness is the disease (and churning, distracting, disquietude) that arises in our psyches and our bodies with symptoms like elevated heart rate and blood pressure) when we allow ourselves – in this fast-paced culture which values and validates speed at every turn – to go faster and faster and faster – on the highways...in our workplaces...at home...on our computers...and most importantly in our minds.

I quote Dr. Ann McGee-Cooper, *“Hurry Sickness is more than just feeling rushed and wanting to get relief from [our] pressure cooker lives. Just as Pavlov’s dogs learned to salivate inappropriately, we [Americans] have learned to hurry inappropriately. Our sense of urgency is set off not by a real need to act quickly, but through learned cues [in a hurry-crazy society]. Our [Pavlovian] ‘bells’ have become the watch, the alarm clock, the morning coffee, [the computer beep telling you have just received more e-mail], and the hundreds of self-inflicted expectations [for speed] we have built into our daily routine. The subliminal message [we receive is] time is running out...life is winding down...(so) please hurry.”*

One new way countless Americans proudly hurry through their lives these days is by [quote, unquote] “Multi-tasking” – that is, doing multiple things simultaneously, at work, at home, at the gym, even (God help us!) while driving! So new is this phenomenon of doing 2, 3, or even 4 things at once) that only dictionaries published in the last handful of years even include the word. And “multi-tasking” (which hardly existed as an idea, let alone a lifestyle, just a single generation ago) is sadly not a negative or judgmental word in our current culture...in fact, many of us wear it as a badge of honor! In today's fast-paced America, anyone who wants to consider him or herself a bright, capable and ambitious player is, of course, capable of multi-tasking all the time, right? I mean, how else are we going to get everything that needs to be done, done? To me, the widespread American practice and acceptance of “multi-tasking” (and being “plugged in and on-line” 24/7) is the prime symptom of our culture's “Hurry Sickness.”

The biggest problem with multi-tasking and being “plugged in and on line 24/7” is, of course, that human beings really aren't wired neurologically for such distracting frenzy! While we like to think of ourselves as a terribly advanced species, the fact is – dear friends – that it was just a few thousand years ago that we homo sapiens jumped out of the Savannah Trees! I have an evolutionary psychologist friend, who studies the progress of human brain, who points out that despite the incredible advances and speed-up in human technology, we are still neurologically wired the rather primitive way we were when we were living in trees, hunting wild meat and gathering nuts and berries, and discovering the usefulness of fire! Don't believe me? In this morning's *New York Times*, there is an article which points out that recent hands-on studies reveal that only 2-3 percent of us are capable of successfully multi-tasking. Most of us are much more competent, efficient, and sane when we pay attention to things sequentially...taking in our world one focused bite at a time! The science is in...we human beings are not generally capable of competently doing 2 or 3 things at once (or functioning day-and-night with just a few hours sleep) and also moving through life with any sort of focus, calm, excellence, reflection or enjoyment. Multi-tasking (and all the craziness that can come with it) is simply asking too much of us human critters who are primitively wired – not that distantly from the primordial soup!

Just one concrete example of the dangers and folly of multi-tasking, if I might...driving a car!

Several recent studies on highway safety all reach the same conclusion – drivers who multi-task behind the wheel (that is drivers who while they are operating the vehicle also attempt to talk on their cell phone...change the CD player...eat lunch...drink coffee...watch the kids in the back seat...apply make-up or read – I have actually seen drivers here on the Treasure coast flying down I-95 reading the daily newspaper and drinking coffee!) multi-tasking drivers are distracted drivers who are dangerous both to themselves and the rest of us on the road. Again, we are not wired to successfully do several things at once. According to a new study by the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center, an estimated 285,000 distracted (multi-tasking) drivers are involved in serious crashes each year. So being distracted is not only spiritually dangerous, it can be physically dangerous, too!

I don't know about you, but if I am in my office here at the Fellowship some ordinary morning, for example, and attempt to multi-task (say, simultaneously reading my overnight e-mail and drinking coffee and talking on the phone to one of you – while also thinking about next Sunday's sermon, chances are that I will do all these things badly! Again...while we all get away with it every once in a while, generally speaking we human beings are not wired for multi-tasking...and the sooner we intentionally slow down...and focus on one important thing at a time, the healthier, happier, and safer we will be. Surely it is as novelist Henry Miller put it, *"The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself."*

The more we Americans hurry and multi-task across the various venues of our lives, the less calm and focus we have in our minds. Buddhism has for many centuries had a word for this spiritually unwise, distracted State, Dukkha [Duk-Kha], which is variously translated as *"suffering, anguish, stress, malaise, dis-ease, or unsatisfactoriness."* Many Buddhist teachers also use a more colloquial phrase...monkey mind. Everybody in this room knows what it is like to have a monkey mind. You have a monkey mind when (because of the crazy, cluttered, distracting pace you are keeping in your neurological life) multiple thoughts are racing willy-nilly in your head, much the way a monkey scurries frenetically and aimlessly in some high jungle tree. When you have monkey mind, it's hard, if not impossible, to settle in and enjoy the day.

Now...I am sure that a few of you out there this morning have regular, disciplined meditative practices in your lives that help you maintain purposeful calm and focus in your lives...and bravo to those of you who really work on intentional mindfulness. But let's be honest with ourselves. How many of us in this room right now really succeed in never falling victim to Hurry Sickness and monkey mind? All of us -- if we are to find the kind of deep, life satisfaction and focus I believe we were as human beings designed to experience – all of us must become more intentional and more disciplined (in this distracted and distracting culture I have described) in regularly bringing more mindfulness quietly and calmly into our hearts and minds.

So...with all this said about distraction in our lives...what exactly is mindfulness...and how do we achieve more of it in our daily living? Well, the first thing I must observe is obvious, but very important to remember...mindfulness is always a matter of degree. Being "mindful" in your daily life is not an "all-or-nothing" proposition like, say, a pregnancy is. Mindfulness is a variable quality of our daily human being which we can cultivate, nurture and expand...it is something which, through intentionality and practice, we can bring evermore to flower in our lives.

I again quote Jon Kabat-Zinn, *"Fundamentally," he writes, "mindfulness is a simple concept... mindfulness means paying attention [in your life] in a particular way...on purpose...[to] the timeless beauty and richness of the present moment...openheartedly...and not judgmentally... Mindfulness is none other than the capacity we already have to know what is actually*

happening as it is happening...it is a vast and spacious awareness of both heart and mind...We have already noted how out of shape [we Americans are] when it comes to exercising our innate capacity to pay attention. [But] mindfulness...can be refined through systematic practice,” and then Kabat-Zinn gets to something I feel is crucial for us all to understand; he writes, “...and since there is nothing particularly Buddhist about paying attention or about awareness, nor anything particularly Eastern or Western, or Northern or Southern for that matter, the essence of mindfulness is truly universal....Mindfulness is the final common pathway for what makes us human, our capacity for awareness and self-knowing.”

I would like nothing more, this morning, than to spiritually and intellectually succeed with all of you in de-mythologizing mindfulness, and persuading you (deep to the heart) that mindfulness is not just something achieved by some wise and venerable guru sitting for hours on end on a beautiful tapestry pillow high in the rarified atmosphere of some Himalayan mountain peak...but is rather something each of us, right here in the midst of our undoubtedly intractably hectic American lives, can achieve – right where we live...here and now...in ordinary moments nestled in our daily routines...with life-saving and life-enhancing regularity.

Even though he himself teaches classic Buddhist sitting meditation – you know, sitting on a pillow for 30 minutes twice a day to bring greater mindfulness and focus into your life – Kabat-Zinn himself says it, “*Meditation is best thought of as a way of being, rather than a technique or a collection of techniques.*” This Unitarian Universalist, who is for better or worse as busy and fast-paced as the next American most of the time, really finds this idea spiritually helpful and liberating.

Mindfulness is simply a way of being...a way of purposefully paying attention to the moments of the life you are in. Mindfulness is not esoteric or complicated...it is simply catching yourself when you find yourself getting distracted or scattered...and intentionally calling yourself, your senses, back by using your innate capacity to be fully and joyfully present in your own life, right where it is touching you. I deeply believe, as I have already said this morning, that you and I were intended – straight out of the star dust of which we are all composed, friends – with an innate capacity for deep and satisfying mindfulness. All that you or I need to do to obtain the riches of the mindful life and the deep satisfactions that come with the, is to practice mindfulness... again, and again, and again...in all the small ways that make such a big difference in our lives and in our relationships.

Let me say all this a little differently, using an image familiar to all of us as American drivers. On many streets and roads all over the United States and the Treasure Coast, traffic engineers at the behest of our elected leaders and neighborhood associations have laid down asphalt ridges, called speed bumps or traffic calming strips, to force drivers to slow down for their own safety and enjoyment. So it can be in your own day-to-day life, my friends! You can be your own traffic engineer, purposefully building calming barriers and sane practices that slow you down...creating more mindfulness and focus in your daily routines, so that you can truly notice the “divine traffic” that is everywhere around you. Again...everyday mindfulness is choosing to slow yourself down and focus on one thing at a time...it’s refusing Hurry Sickness and multi-tasking and monkey mind so that you can more fully be a part of each moment that so miraculously comes your way.

And please remember...it is as I and Jon Kabat-Zinn have already observed...mindfulness is more a way of being than a particular set of meditative techniques. There is nothing esoteric or complicated about becoming more mindful...greater mindfulness, through intentional focusing, is available to bless each of us, no matter how distracted we sometimes get. We can always

call ourselves back to singular focus, and wake up to that which is directly at hand. Let me close this morning, by giving you one more concrete image of how important it is to be increasingly mindful in your everyday life. When I was growing up as a boy in rural Wisconsin, I remember seeing signs like this one everywhere in the countryside at every unguarded railroad crossing. :

[A PICTURE OF A RAILROAD CROSSING SIGN THAT READS STOP! LOOK! LISTEN! IS PROJECTED ON THE SCREENS.]

These were life-saving signs...literally life-saving because they reminded people who were going to drive over the active tracks to stop...look...and then listen for the barreling train...so they could go safely on their way.

All I am reminding you of today is that on the respective roadways of our daily lives, we need to do the same thing. We need to refuse distraction...refuse Hurry Sickness...refuse monkey mind ...and choose instead wide and spacious and soul-saving mindfulness. Just like with an unguarded railroad crossing, if you are to go safely and joyfully through your lives, dear friends, you simply must, must, regularly and with purpose:

Stop...look...and listen...

Stop...look...and listen...

Stop...look...and listen...

Only then can you enter the Holy City of your own life...one precious moment at a time...

Amen.