

Practice  
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UUMSB  
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The Psalms are songs collected in the Hebrew Bible. There is no written music for the Psalms, only tradition. They ask for pardon, help, celebration, they try to explain experience, just like songs today. They are all over the place emotionally. They go back and forth between rallying cries, laments, and supplication. The King James translation of Psalm 23 is used at many memorial services and is part of western literature and culture. (“Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”) We sang a different translation today to launch us into a conversation about practice and community. In the Psalm, the writer is restored, filled, and loved by their god. “I have all I need, She makes me lie down in green meadows. Beside the still waters, She will lead.” She makes me lie down. In the most well known of all the psalms, God leads us to spiritual practice, to connection with, and appreciation for the earth. “There is nothing that can shake me, She has said She won’t forsake me, I’m in her hand.” The psalmist is in direct communion with their God, and feels supported by a net of relationship.

Malcolm Gladwell, the popular author of *Outliers*, and the psychologist Anders Ericsson, he based some of his work on, have written on the 10,000 hour rule, and deliberate practice. You may have heard or read about this before, but the basic idea is that it takes about 10,000 hours of deliberate practice to master a complicated skill, like playing violin, becoming a professional athlete, or chess master. By deliberate practice they mean, practice that is done with intention and attention, and toward the development and improvement of skills. For example, playing 10,000 hours of chess casually with people who are not challenging you, will not make you a chess master. Or playing the cello, but never intentionally working on technique will not make you Pablo Casals. Gladwell also emphasizes that in order for a person to engage in this kind of practice, it requires that one have a support network to help them in their process - the parent driving their kid to ice skating practice at five in the morning, the partner who has dinner waiting at 9 p.m., the family who arranges their lives in support of their loved one's dream.

What makes something a spiritual practice? [regular, with intention, feeds and restores, embodied, connects to inner and larger.] Spiritual practices can be things like meditation and singing, or gardening, walking, lying in meadows by water... Most important is regularity and intention. One can be spiritually fed by a variety of activities, but spiritual practice is a form of deliberate practice, requiring intention, challenge and repetition. Just like those who are working to become experts in a particular field, those engaged in spiritual work benefit from a net of community support. We serve each other as we foster community that helps us all find ways to grow in practice, to be intentional, and challenge ourselves in new ways.

We engage in spiritual practice in covenanted community. Being in covenant means we have made promises to each other. Our congregational covenant states:

We, the members of the Unitarian Universalist Meeting of South Berkshire, commit ourselves to provide support for our individual members and families of every variety in their emotional, spiritual, and intellectual lives; to promote the healthy growth of our congregation through full participation and creation of a welcoming environment for all people; and to unite in upholding and sharing the Unitarian Universalist principles.

Our covenant asks us to build and support a community that is a spiritual home for us, but also for the people who have not yet walked through the door. We serve each other so that when we

feel isolated, or in a dark and dreary land, there is a hand, a community, a net we can come to for support. To hold such a covenant in community, we must look at our stories, how we share them, what unconscious barriers we might place to people finding us and practicing with us. We also must look at the work we do *as* a community *for* the larger community. Our attention to our covenant needs to be ongoing. In my ministerial role, I work with our community to build skills, guide reflection, and represent us in the larger community, but it is all of us together that make meaning, change, and grow. We all work toward our mission to promote justice and compassion in the world.

For our congregation to engage in the deliberate and spiritual practice to be in covenanted community, we need a net of support. Deliberate practice requires infrastructure: volunteers, staff, community participation, and financial contributions. Our budget is about \$70,000 this year and the biggest portion of our budget is for our staff that supports the community, our professional ministry and our administrator Sheena, who takes care of so much behind the scenes for us, like making sure the programs are here every week no matter what, and collecting articles and notices from all over the community to produce our newsletter. Our budget is largely funded through the pledges collected in our stewardship campaign, which is kicking off next week to fund the coming year. Our shared stewardship gives us the opportunity to be deeply connected and engaged with the choices and work of our covenanted community. It also means that we rely on each other to fund the important work that we do together from offering a worship home for so many, to education programs, spiritual practice groups, support and caring for each other, fun community events, and communal work for justice.

For the past two days, I have been wearing my college administrator hat, managing Black Alumni Weekend for Amherst College. It is a three day event with speakers, shared meals, and alumni and students across generations seeing old friends and making new connections. On Friday night the college community was addressed by the President of the NAACP, Cornell William Brooks, and I got to make a fool myself shaking his hand. This year's event was lovely and there was a particularly powerful moment I want to share with you. Dean Onawumi Moss is a professional story-teller, a force of nature, and a retired Dean at Amherst. As part of Black Alumni Weekend yesterday, we honored Dean Moss' contributions to the lives of generations of students, and her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. At the reception, Dean Moss gave a speech, but it was really more like a sermon. She named for the approximately 50 gathered Black alumni and students the power of finding their voice, and of the power and inherent, in her words, royalty, in each of them. She led the group in singing Ella's Song, song Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon wrote about the great Ella Baker, who taught so many how to fight and find their voice. Sing with me. "We who believe in freedom cannot rest, we who believe in freedom cannot rest," and then she had us pause and said we would be singing different words today, "until we make it come." "We who believe in freedom cannot rest, we who believe in freedom cannot rest, until we make it come."<sup>1</sup> Dean Moss embodies her role as a leader, and spiritual and ethical teacher for her community. She came to this event on the heels of performing at a storytelling conference the night before, and danced like a 20 year-old to the happy birthday song, sung in her honor. I know that I was not alone in hoping that I might be half as vital and engaged, and in control of my voice when I am 80. She has, throughout her life, led others to see their value as individuals in community. That kind of work and attention requires and inspires practice. Practice being in covenant and right relation with others, practice speaking up, practice being quiet, practice finding the tools we need to know ourselves.

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1 Ella's Song, Sweet Honey and the Rock, Bernice Johnson Reagon

In our community, we can't wait for people to walk in the door, or partnerships with other communities to come to us, or visions to be enacted. We can't wait for enlightenment or learning, we can't wait for systems of oppression to change. We can't wait to deepen our spiritual well. We can't wait to lie down in green meadows, beside still waters. We have to make it come. We are anointed by each other, in our community, through the care we hold for one another, for the ways we provide a foundation from which each of us can be served in our practice, in our seeking. We know that our work for peace, for freedom and beloved community is linked together. We are not only a spiritual community, we are not only a justice-seeking community, we are not only an educational community, we are not only a Unitarian Universalist community, we are the Unitarian Universalist Meeting of South Berkshire. We are all these. "We who believe in freedom cannot rest, we who believe in freedom cannot rest, until we make it come."

I expect that the next year is going to be an exciting one for UUMSB, with many seeds that have been sown and a new strategic vision, which we will ratify at our annual meeting in May, helping us on our path. When you are opening up your pledge materials from the Stewardship Committee, I encourage you to consider your annual pledge in light of our covenant and our ongoing potential for building love, justice and compassion in spiritual community. I encourage you to think about practice, and what we all need to support our seeking, our free and responsible (to ourselves and each other) search for truth and meaning. I encourage you to think about the work we do to serve our broader community, to work for justice here in the Berkshires, and around the world. I am so grateful to our community for its generosity for the hand that we provide to hold one another. May we grow stronger and deeper in our commitment, and in our search.

So may it be.  
Amen.