

Spiritual Intelligence

A Sermon Offered by The Rev. Hilary Krivchenia
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At Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist, Palatine, IL

Readings

From *The Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot

Midwinter spring is its own season
Sempiternal though sodden towards sundown,
Suspended in time, between pole and tropic.
When the short day is brightest, with frost and fire,
The brief sun flames the ice, on pond and ditches,
In windless cold that is the heart's heat,
Reflecting in a watery mirror
A glare that is blindness in the early afternoon.
And glow more intense than blaze of branch, or brazier,
Stirs the dumb spirit: no wind, but pentecostal fire
In the dark time of the year. Between melting and freezing
The soul's sap quivers.

From *Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James

When I say "Soul," you need not take me in the religious sense unless you prefer to; for although such language is instinctive in such matters, yet Buddhists or Humians can perfectly well describe the facts in the phenomenal terms which are their favorites. For them the soul is only a succession of fields of consciousness: yet there is found in each field a part, or sub-field, which figures as focal and contains the excitement, and from which, as from a centre, the aim seems to be taken. Talking of this part, we involuntarily apply words of perspective to distinguish it from the rest, words like "here," "this," "now," "mine," or "me"; and we ascribe to the other parts the positions "there," "then," "that," "his" or "thine," "it," "not me." But a "here" can change to a "there," and a "there" become a "here," and what was "mine" and what was "not mine" change their places.

Also From *The Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot

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Sermon

I have two primary sources of keeping up with the news. There's the BBC World news, my home page when I go onto the Internet and the other is National Public Radio. We also get the Tribune delivered four days a week and I subscribe to the New York Times online for free. Oh yeah, if I'm home in the evening during the week we watch Chicago Tonight. I don't want to pretend I have an extensive understanding of current events – but I consider it a professional responsibility to be know some of what is going on in the world – what is affecting our lives – all our lives.

Still, it only takes a cursory glance at the news to know that we're in a crisis time. You don't need me to enumerate the news that makes up this picture! Unless you've been living in complete retreat in a galaxy far, far away you know the bad news yourself. The complete retreat is tempting – but it doesn't really change things...

Some years ago I attended a five day retreat with Thay Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese teacher of Zen meditation. During that time he taught something called the Five Mindfulness Trainings. The Fifth Mindfulness Training is:

“Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I vow to cultivate good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking and consuming. I vow to ingest only items that preserve peace, well being, and joy in my body, in my consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family and society. I am determined not to use alcohol or any other intoxicant or to ingest foods or other items that contain toxins, such as certain TV programs, magazines, books, films and conversations. ...”

It's more of an aspiration than an actual accomplishment – but it's made me think hard about all the directions from which we're bombarded by junk. I avoid a lot of it – like too much news or really stupid television. In theory, this helps to clear the mind so that you can live in balance and not be clubbed into docility by the idiocy that pours from hundreds of television channels in every moment, torn to shreds by grief, anxiety, and despair, or programmed into constant consumption to numb the pain and mask reality.

I appreciated the gift of permission of that peace from the constant bombardment. To be honest, I practice it devoutly by avoiding Fox news and MSNBC. As well, there are times when the grief and challenge in our own lives is so overwhelming that we cannot bear to and should not have to bear more suffering blaring at us from tv, radio and newsprint. And yet, what I want is the ability to bear some witness to the realities of diverse people around the world without becoming overwhelmed and then paralyzed.

To do that takes either a manic dedication to a cause – you know the idealogue who'll shame, batter, and topple any opposition in service to their ideas. To them the end is more important than the means. Or you can get through with emotional deadness – a cutting off of the reality of what you hear and see – so that the news flickers around you but does not touch your heart. To me – this is a sort of premature death – cut off from reality, from the world in all its beauty and terror and its awful uncertainty.

But there is another option – an option in which we're not set apart from the world but are able to live more deeply in it. It takes a groundedness – one that I've discovered through a life in which there have been times when I have felt lacerated by the suffering in the headlines. More than headlines. I suppose for many ministers the turning point is during Clinical Pastoral Education when we serve as Chaplains in a hospital setting. It becomes our job to bring the possibility of comfort in the form of

religious presence to people who are in lifequaking crisis – like the woman in her early thirties been diagnosed with a brain tumor. She'd become so profoundly anxious that, with the unsteadiness the tumor caused her and her degenerating vision she'd become unwilling to walk – not one step. Her legs were fine – though they were growing weak and no one could get her on her feet. For two days we visited, I read to her from children's books and I talked with her about the strength she had inside her that was hidden. And then, as I held her hand she took her first steps again. She'd found something solid within her – and around her – in the midst of terrible uncertainty. I knew she had it in her – even if she couldn't find it alone.

I found a new term for this groundedness recently: Spiritual Intelligence. I didn't coin the expression myself. It's from a book that our own Dan Wiseman and his friend Mike Murschel are using for their program of spiritual companioning. I looked into it.

What is Spiritual Intelligence? It's a problematic phrase for me because it implies its opposite – spiritual stupidity. But the authors of the book – *Connecting with Our Spiritual Intelligence*, Danah Zohar and Dr. Ian Marshall, hold that there is a basic capacity for this specific intelligence. Based upon research – cited in the book and various models of the brain and the psyche – they've developed this idea of Spiritual Intelligence – which they call SQ. We're all familiar with the idea of an Intelligence Quotient – IQ – by which we measure an individual's ability to think analytically and academically – to connect ideas. In recent years the work of Howard Gardner has opened up the idea that there are other kinds of intelligences. Daniel Goleman has written a number of books on Emotional Intelligence – EQ – which has to do with having insight about emotion, empathy for the feelings of others, and flexibility in working with one's own feelings. According to Zohar and Marshall Spiritual Intelligence helps to integrate the other forms of intelligence and ground them. This intelligence is harder to talk about because it has to do with experiences and understandings that often defy words.

Words can be a hindrance – but they're a necessity. Zohar and Marshall define Spiritual Intelligence as “the ability to access and use our experience of higher meaning and value... those very qualities of ourselves and our experience that make us feel more human.” (69) Another way that this is described in the book is by recounting the idea of the fish that spends its life swimming without ever thinking of water as anything other than the nature of the world. It is no more seen nor need to be named than air. The fish swims in the ocean all unnoticed until the fish leaps out of the water and then sees it.

I don't know how many of you caught the Colbert Report this week as he interviewed Steven Johnson, author of the *Invention of Air*, which tells about Joseph Priestley who realized that the space in which we move isn't empty but full of air. I was watching – this very antithesis of mind numbing television – or may be that's just a rationalization -- with my daughter Chava. I turned to Chava and said – you know Priestley – she interrupted “Don't tell me he was Unitarian?!” I said - oh yes. He had a church in England where he was a minister in the 18th century and he had a laboratory in which he experimented to identify air. The laboratory and his home were destroyed by a mob angry at his Unitarian views and Priestley moved to America where his good friends Jefferson and Franklin lived. Sure enough Johnson mentioned that Priestley helped found the Unitarian Church and we got lampooned and honored at the same time – as usual. For people like Jefferson, Franklin, and especially for Priestley the workings of

science pointed directly toward an experience of awe, wonder and an underlying sense of meaning in the cosmos – in many ways beyond words and traditional labels.

Zohar and Marshall point to this thing called the God Spot that's been uncovered by researchers who have found that accompanying experiences of the unity of being is a measurable activity in the brain. Conversely, when this area of the brain is stimulated subjects report feelings of expansive understanding, an experience of connectedness, and, according to their own theological grounding – experience a transcendent presence. This can be expressed in theological terms, it can be grounded in traditional religious language – but – as William James noticed about this sort of experience when he published his *Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1902 – it can take place without traditional language attached to it at all. James pointed to Walt Whitman – who said in a less poetic moment: "There is, apart from mere intellect, in the make-up of every superior human identity, a wondrous something that realizes without argument, frequently without what is called education (though I think it the goal and apex of all education deserving the name), an intuition of the absolute balance, in time and space, of the whole of this multifariousness this revel of fools, and incredible make-believe and general unsettledness, we call *the world*; a soul-sight of that divine clue and unseen thread which holds the whole congeries of things, all history and time, and all events, however trivial, however momentous, like a leashed dog in the hand of the hunter. [Of] such soul-sight and root-center for the mind mere optimism explains only the surface."

The root center for the mind. Somewhere in every person is a center – it doesn't require a particular religious faith to exist – but religious faith is heartless without it. It deepens religious experience and enriches what we've called secular experiences of awe and wonder and makes each one of us an integral part of all of being. Meditation, prayer, Sufi dancing, all help to peel back the petals of our busy minds and open us to this center. A couple weeks ago Rev. Giles talked about peeling back masks. If you're patient and skilled in doing so what you'll uncover is an openness – a fundamental spaciousness – a center of possibility out of which experience can be simply observed and understanding can arise that that allows each person to see their belonging to the whole. The center of the self is a portal through which the world is seen as it truly is... unified.

This profound recognition of the inherent worth and underlying unity of all of life has been born out by science – as weather, human agency, plant life, water quality, the interlocking nature of eco-systems have been shown to be intimately connected. It's been born out by every religion – which have differing languages but all point, in some way or another to the oneness of the Ground of Being, the unity of life. There will always be people who, as Zohar and Marshall point out, will be spiritually – umm – we can just call them spiritually challenged. People who can neither reason nor intimately experience that all life is connected. People who need to see humanity as set apart from the rest of life, see the Divine as over and above and apart from life, see salvation as taking place in some other life and not here. There will always be these people – but each one of us is born with the mental capacity to see and experience the interdependent web of all being – from the farthest star to the person sitting beside you – from the darting atom to the gazelle on the savannah – from the wellbeing of the stream that runs by your yard to the quality of life of someone on the other side of the world.

This feeling/experience/knowing is Spiritual Intelligence: integrating body, intellect, emotion, and the world within and without. It is a soul-deep grasp of one's own

life within what the authors call “the largest framework of meaning.” Even more than James in his time, Zohar and Marshall in ours recognize that this framework is beyond any one religion. Each person may translate it into their own language of meaning.

It is this Spiritual Intelligence that can address and help to heal our despair and set our anxiety to rest. Danah Zohar describes a visit she made to a prison to talk with sex offenders. As she stood in the room with them she felt physical revulsion and fear. She made herself stay and dialogue with them. Then she said, her revulsion began to fade and she could see the human brokenness in front of her – the tears in the fabric of their souls that had caused them to commit acts of cruelty. They had never known their own human center and could not identify the humanity in others. But as they talked she not only began to see them differently and the guards began to see them differently -- they began to see themselves differently. It did not change what they had done. But it enabled them to just begin to face their lives and actions through a lens that could change them.

Spiritual Intelligence can't release us from the paradox of the human condition. As we look at the world and ourselves we seem quite small – not masters of the universe – only part of the universe. At the same time we're no longer limited to this one skin and life – but are intimately part of all lives here and gone, human and non-human. We're part of the great arc of history as well as the minute moments of the present. In our Scripture class on Thursday we talked a bit about this human paradox – that, as Whitman put it – a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars. He could put so well our predicament of being no greater than a leaf of grass and no less great than a brilliant sun or a great ruler. We're caught in this dangerous paradox. One moment our glory twists us into thinking we're greater than all other life. Our minuteness can drive us to arrogance. At the same time we can mistakenly see the human being as lowly, sinful, and impure because, reflected against the size of the cosmos or measured against Gods of which we can have no part. We may swing between arrogance and shame – but with Spiritual Intelligence – we can see that we're blessed to be poised between the cosmic connectedness and awe and humility that makes a spotted owl king.

Spiritual Intelligence will not mask suffering nor diminish the scope of the crises that we face. Global or personal we still witness the pain in the world. But the ability to see that we are in this together – human and non human – finite and infinite – delivers us into an embrace like the arms of a loving parent – that cannot heal the pain of a broken arm or a broken heart – but lets us know we are not alone. Like the arms of a parent we may have known or perhaps have never known.

It can inspire us to be those arms for others. I think of the woman I heard on NPR two weeks ago who started schools all over Afghanistan by starting small and teaching teachers. I think of Mohammad Yunus who found a way for small sums of money to make huge differences in the lives of thousands of people. I think of Daoud Nassar, whom I met two years ago outside Bethlehem on his Olive Farm. As settlers tore down his fences, stole his animals, destroyed his buildings he has continued offering summer camps to young people to teach the values of non-violence based upon the teaching of Jesus and Gandhi, continued to bring people together from around the world to work together to harvest crops and to grow understanding, connectedness and peace. Listening to Daoud, I could see in his eyes that he was filled with a sense of love and connection that could not be beaten down or frightened away. On the hills of the holy land he had been given a vision of a loving world and he was going to create it in the present. He

knew how small he was – one of the most humble people I’ve ever met. But that did not keep him from believing that he could make a difference. That is Spiritual Intelligence.

You can intone the notion of an interdependent web of all being but the part of your brain that can bring your consciousness to experience being a part of all that being is your Spiritual Intelligence. It is more than intellectual but it embraces the intellect. It is more than emotional – but it embraces emotions. It is the ability to leap out of the water like the fish, to see the water and to slide back into the water and to celebrate it while swimming in it. It is here within you.

It is self- awareness and consciousness. It is awareness of all that is and consciousness within all that is.

Spiritual Intelligence makes all of our other intelligences work together to see large patterns and to know ourselves to be part of those patterns. And, while it contributes to our own well-being it harnesses all our other intelligences for the well-being of the world. In this way you can know that you belong to the world and yet cannot be destroyed.

In this way you can, with practice, face challenges and uncertain times with some real bedrock within you. You can, with practice, face bad news and create good news. You can, through this center of understanding, face a shrinking world or a shrinking wallet and find an expansive sense and values worthy of everything you have and are.

At the risk of sounding like a preacher – I say to you – that this is the good news – and you are the good news. And the next time you click onto your news site, open the paper, listen to the news you can know that whatever the news there – it can give you determination instead of despair. The next time you are stunned by a headline if you practice, and focus and remember, if you engage your spiritual intelligence you will have a better head, heart, body and soul line – ready to write into the world – with your life.

Closing words

From Danah Zohar and Dr. Ian Marshall

We are not alone. Each one of us is part of the long human quest for meaning and of the traditions, symbols, associations, holy places, and images that have given expression to the quest. Even our language is, as the German philosopher Martin Heidegger said, ‘a house of being’, and we all dwell within that house. We carry the whole history of the universe itself within our deep unconscious, which is part of the collective unconscious of humanity. Each of us is part of the larger human community, and most of us are also part of a smaller personal community of friends and family. We can draw on all these things. As a Tibetan Lama once said, we can even find the meaning of life through drinking a glass of water if we do it in the right way.

