

Sermon: Navigating the Tides of the Spirit
Sunday, October 4, 2026
First Unitarian Church
The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart

This summer, my son and I kayaked with a group of boats into Castine Bay at night. After an hour's lesson on shore from the group leader, we settled into our two-person boats. We paddled across the harbor, past the training ship for the merchant marine, past the yachts and their anchors on long chains. In the dark the journey became extraordinary. We floated into a cove where the bioluminescent micro-organisms attached themselves to our paddle blades and even our fingers, if we drew them through the water. That flash of life making its way up where we could see it, evolved over the millennia to keep themselves from being eaten. It was evidence of just how amazing our planet really is.

A little while later, we kayaked into the dark passage between two islands to look up into the Milky Way above us. We held onto one another, boat to boat, to keep ourselves together, and as still as we could, and we lay back, our heads against the cushion of our life jackets, to stare up at the stars. By looking off to the side, just under the North Star, the Andromeda galaxy came into view, a smudge on the edge of my vision. It is the only other galaxy visible with the naked eye from Earth. I felt it in my bones, then: I am a speck of a living thing on a tiny blue marble orbiting one star among septillions, in one galaxy among one hundred billion, in an ever-expanding universe. I do not matter more than anything else; and yet, in my life, I feel a connection to a source of goodness that assures me I matter as much as anything else. My spiritual life

is tethered between those two truths, and it is the steady star that guides my life in the direction it ought to go.

A boat on the wine-dark sea is a good metaphor for the spiritual life. Surrounded by mystery and wonder, we have the tools to navigate and connect to one another. Alone, we feel our own contingency and connection to all that is. With our companions, we communicate our experiences and look out for each other. We acknowledge our responsibility to our neighbor. And by experiencing the wonder together, our worship and awe become more profound. Prayer or meditation alone; the human connection of small groups; walking alongside those in need; and shared worship: these are the components of a spiritual life.

Let's begin with solitude and silence: cultivating time to be present with a spirit greater than ourselves; nurturing our relationship with God. As your Unitarian Universalist minister, I'm not usually prescriptive but this is a truth I have learned for myself: There is a connection to your inherent worth and dignity that can only come in solitude and quiet. There is a space inside of you that is yours; it is the holy of holies where you encounter the divine. Think of it as your own boat, which will bring you closer to the divine. From this boat, you can even choose to dip your hands into the water, the mystery itself.

When I sit in silent prayer, I sometimes picture myself sinking down into water. In this vision, I have an old-fashioned diving bell and an oxygen line, and both the oxygen and the water are the Source of compassion and acceptance. In that place I learn that I am not what other people think of me; I am not my accomplishments; I am not even my thoughts and feelings. This source may be felt when we are in the natural world,

outdoors, where we become a creature among creatures. I am beloved as a living being, as is every other living being.

There is a piece of wisdom I love about this silent connection, coming from the Buddhist tradition.

When we practice [meditation] our mind always follows our breathing.

When we inhale, the air comes into the inner world. When we exhale, the air goes out to the outer world. The inner world is limitless, and the outer world is also limitless...When your mind is pure and calm enough to follow this movement, there is nothing: no “I,” no world, no mind nor body; just a swinging door (Suzuki 29).

The value of the present moment is one we share in Unitarian Universalism. We are not waiting for the day of judgment or the arrival of the kingdom of heaven. This world is where we are, and the present moment is our most blessed possession. Worry and distraction take us away from this treasure. Meditation or prayer, time alone in quiet, gives the present moment back to us.

Yet we are not always alone in our spiritual kayak. As in my night on the bay, we are connected to other people and other boats. In small groups we practice a compassionate regard of other people. Connection to others on a human level is another component of the spiritual life.

In our world today, human community is suffering. Researchers at Harvard University have studied the “loneliness epidemic” we’ve heard so much about. More

than 20% of Americans surveyed said they were “seriously lonely,” and the numbers were highest among adults ages 18-40. It’s not a male loneliness epidemic: both men and women experienced similar rates of loneliness. And a low income makes loneliness worse. The researchers wrote, “Of those who were lonely...57% said they were unable to share their true selves with others (Ross).” Sharing our true selves with others is one of the fruits of the spiritual life, and small groups are one way the church helps to make this happen.

By small groups in the church context, I mean intentional community with people you don’t entirely choose. The researchers found that Americans identify technology, overwork, and individualism as leading causes of loneliness. This makes sense to me. In American life today, we are splintered ever more into identity groups. Our online feeds are custom-tailored to us. Our politics are fractured. Class differences grow. When I scroll videos on social media, I feel connected to a nationwide conversation. But my feed is mine alone—there’s no guarantee that my community experiences the internet the way I do. The only way to build community is to connect to actual other human beings, and to get to know them as fully-formed people. Online tools help with this; video calls make shared experiences possible over great distances. In small groups we move beyond acquaintance to true human recognition of our fellow spiritual navigators.

Of course I believe that the church has gifts to help us do this. If you join a Soul Group, or attend a potluck with the UU Sisterhood, or come to a meeting of the book group, or volunteer with a church program, you’ll meet people there you don’t yet know. And if you come back regularly, if you listen to what people share, if there is space in the conversation for true sharing without judgment, human mutuality and community will

grow. You will be like a group of kayakers holding onto one another's boats so that you can all take in the majesty of the cosmos together. You will come to see the face of God in the faces of your fellow humans.

We honor each other's humanity through compassionate regard in our small groups. And we look out for one another in life, working to make the crooked paths straight and to cure injustice. Service to all is part of the covenant of this church and the third component of the spiritual life.

Because I was kayaking this summer with my 17 year old, we were in a group made up of families: about half the people in our kayaking flotilla were children and teens. Once on the water, with teenagers in boats separate from their parents, we all worked together to make sure every boat made it across the bay and every boat came back. The leader would take the rear, making sure everyone came along, while stronger paddlers led the group toward our target—but not so fast the slower folks couldn't keep up. We were all each other's responsibility in the darkness, on the water.

There is a concept in Judaism called *tikkun olam*, or repair of the world, or what one rabbi calls "braiding the world together." The word *tikkun* does not only mean "repair." It means "straightening a crooked rod, maintaining a roadway, cutting fingernails, setting a table, composing a parable to explain a difficult idea (Freeman)." It is beautifying, setting right, making clear. Religion acknowledges that we recognize the world's problems even when they don't apply to us personally, and that we have a responsibility to work on them. This commandment to walk alongside those who face injustice in this world is echoed in every major world religion. I believe it comes from the experience of the holy which we find in solitude, in deep relationship, and in worship. If

our spiritual life moves us to realize that all people are worthy and all people are connected, then the next logical step is to show kindness and mercy to all. Many religions ask, “What will happen when we die?” And some offer a list of rules to follow or rituals to perform to make sure you get your ticket into heaven. In Unitarian Universalism, we have no teachings about the afterlife. We bring our focus to the present moment. It is on this earth that we can create a heaven of kindness and compassion for one another.

We experience the holy. We build connection to others. We serve the greater good. We find the heaven of kindness and compassion in these ways. And it is in our worship together that we share as one body in the awe and depth of our universe. We hold on to one another and gaze at the stars. Worship is the final component of the spiritual life.

I could have started this sermon with worship; like me, when you think of “going to church,” perhaps worship in this sanctuary is the first thing that comes to mind. It may be the most obvious aspect of the spiritual life. Last week when I preached about our inheritance—and our departure—from our Puritan ancestors, one of you said to me, “The Unitarians don’t leave much room for magic, do they?” But I believe it is in our worship together that we experience the charm and power of the Spirit moving among us.

Of the elements of our covenant—the energy of truth, the spirit of goodness, the inner love of right—Unitarian worship theorist Von Ogden Vogt wrote this:

None of these energies can stand alone. Each requires the others. What organizes them and binds them together is a pattern of related actions which are the activities of worship. By the praise of all that is glorious and good, by clear humility and quiet waiting, by all-embracing remembrances and concerns, by eager efforts for larger understanding and faith, by pure dedications of heart and hand, by fellowships that are open and unlimited, which are all the religious actions of worship, these energies are mingled and fashioned into that supreme experience of communion with the Most High that is at once our noblest task and most sublime joy (114).

In other words, we can't do the religious life alone. We can't do it only through meetings and conversations, as much as we Unitarian Universalists love to know and to understand. Truth, goodness and beauty make themselves fully known in us when we come together as one body to sing, to pray, to sit in silence, to affirm, and to know one another heart to heart, even those whose names we do not yet know. When a choir sings together, their shared breath and shared music aligns their brain waves. When we sing together, and speak together, and listen to the promptings of the Spirit together, we become one body. Here is the inspiration for everything else we do together as a church. Here is how we pastor to one another. Here is how we, together, see the door opened to the Eternal. If in our silent solitude we feel our connection to God, and in our small groups and acts of service we walk alongside one another on our human journeys, it is in worship that we know in our hearts, in a place beyond rationality, that we are not separate, but all are one in the loving embrace of the divine.

We worship together. We braid the fraying strands of the world together. We connect to one another. In the sheer silence we listen for the still, small voice. These are the components of the spiritual life. We may each be in our own boat, sailing from birth to death across the dark waters of the ocean. Yet we are not alone, not separate from each other or the water or the stars themselves. It is in our connectedness to all that is that we find the meaning and purpose of our human lives. I love you all. Amen.

Sources

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