

“Spiritual Practice in Our Digital World”

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Each week, we begin our services with an invitation to turn our phones to “worship mode”. These words bring a smile to our faces as we reach into our pockets and bags to turn our electronic devices to silent. In doing so, We dedicate ourselves this sacred hour together, minimizing our distractions so that we may learn from our shared experience in song, silence, and community. I do believe that it is healthy and vital that we learn to make space for silence and step away from the constant demands of our lives. And those of our phones. In the quiet, we can connect with the wisdom in our hearts, find rest for our weary spirit, and have the curiosity to truly meet someone new. For others, that gentle invitation may be the start of a digital Sabbath, a time to routinely unplug from the beeps, buzzes and rings that can take over our lives.

Yet, I don’t believe that turning off our devices is the only answer to connect or reconnect with our selves and each other. Spiritual practice is not only done when we meditate, go for a walk in the woods, Visit friends or loved ones or come together in places of worship. The landscape of our lives has changed as we welcomed these devices. And I believe that is has also changed our ability to seek others in common purpose, connect authentically with others and serve the world with all of our hearts.

For a decade, I was self-employed. I worked as a doula, a childbirth attendant Focused on the emotional, physical, and spiritual needs of families of all shapes and sizes. Being self-employed in a small company of one meant there was no one else to do the accounting, the class registrations, and the marketing which were needed to connect and serve this community.

Tweets, Facebook posts, and later images on Instagram were part of building connection with the community I served. Through social media, I met colleagues, clients, community partners, and parents. Each group, teaching me something new – links to research articles, the social and cultural changes touching the lives of new parents and the opportunities to work together and make health care accessible.

Marketing had moved beyond posters in offices or pamphlets in the pharmacy. The people I wanted to connect with were within reach – on the other end of the computer screen. As I learned more about this new way of doing business, it became clear that the one key to success in social media marketing, without sounding like a broken record of offers is to be yourself fully online – to be vulnerable. I can only equate it to being in a room full of strangers and sharing with them some

of your most treasured stories. Slowly, I stumbled through when the moments felt right feeling my way into connection.

Opening yourself in that space certainly comes with risks. For those who have ever found themselves scrolling through the comment section of a blog post or news article, you know that it can be easy to sling insults or hurtful comments just because you cannot see their face. It is also well-known that if you want to see a perfect life, simply look through someone's Facebook profile. There with their latest results of Candy Crush, you will find the carefully curated selection of best looking photos, moments of joy in their relationships, with the unspoken and overlooked understanding. There much more is taking place than what we see on surface.

It took some time and some risk taking but I did develop those digital relationships – even cherished friendships. I was getting the hang of learning when and where a chance to be vulnerable – to be seen. Then, everything changed. I was faced with a monumental decision in the most difficult of circumstances do I share the very recent death of my daughter online? Do I risk, in this most heart-wrenching time, exposing my life in that type of forum?

I thought of the families who opened their homes for me to sit with them as they spoke of their fears of birth or parenting. These were people who let me see them at their most vulnerable and raw moments. naked and in pain and their response was to invite in this stranger. What might it be like if I were to welcome the stranger? What would happen if I simply went quiet? My heart felt like it would be a lie – that I would be participating in the great façade that can be social media.

So there I was, one sleepy morning. I sat at the computer and put together my monthly newsletter where I came out and made the difficult announcement. I told the world of these last precious moments with my daughter, including a photo of us holding hands with IV lines over top of the quilt that was on her bed, which is now in our bedroom. Through this tool, I let others know about my silence in the weeks and months ahead to walk with the grief of our family.

And I waited. I waited for the responses.

Instead of the harsh tones that can sometimes be found I was met with love. Love in various forms – emails, requests for my address, a food schedule – which led us to buying a small chest freezer to hold all the food that was brought to us.

As I tried to ride the waves I was comforted by the very real people on the other side of these keyboards and screens. Other parents of children who left their arms far too soon shared their journeys of learning to live again.

The experience was not the same with people who lived in our building or immediate neighbours whom we saw daily in the halls, people with whom we shared physical space. Most had no idea what happened to us, and those who did avoided making eye contact in the hallway.

Communities hold us during challenging times. For some of us, it may be how we have found this place a community of love and justice in this world. For my family, it was the digital village that held us together and provided for some of our most basic needs in those early weeks. I don't know what might have happened if I had decided not to write that newsletter – to be vulnerable.

Near the end of that first year without Siobhan, making space for quiet, walks, and frequent naps, I heard my inner voice of wisdom say that in order to walk with this grief, I would need to learn radical self-love. My first thought was “what is radical self-love” and with no immediate definition coming to mind, as a millennial, my first stop, was Google. To my amazement, this was a concept that was already being lived out by other people and none of it looked the same. Radical self-love was being expressed differently from one person to the next and I would need to make my own definition.

I shared with the online world my hardest moments so I thought that I would also share with them moments of grace. Every day, I would take pictures of what I considered to be radical self-love. They weren't glamorous by any standard. If you search the project I called 365 days of radical self love; you will find pictures of glasses of water I finally remembered to drink naps and extra time spent in pajamas on particularly rough days; purple play dough stuck to my fingers after art therapy sessions; and my feet in the grass as I ventured outside on a sunny day. This became a personal journey of growth and courage as I dared to put my whole and messy self out into the world. What came back to me, was not what I had anticipated. I received messages of thanks from others who felt they better understood how to support someone who is grieving and others who saw the importance of self-care in a world where it can feel like you must give until you are completely empty and are told, even then, to give some more.

I did not realize it at the time, but this became for me, daily spiritual practice. I used these online tools to speak the truth of what it is to be human, I connected with my own deep wisdom, and recognized my need for support and community

I have come back to this spiritual practice a few times since sharing my yoga practice and my reflections. It helps me collect and curate my own thoughts. I didn't consider the impact it would have on others but if I miss a few days, I would get little notes in my email or phone calls from colleagues at work to tell me that they have not seen any yoga in a while and that they made it part of their day to read my posts at the start of the day to set the tone for what lies ahead.

I am not the first person to take such personal risks online to make it a habit or spiritual practice. In a book by Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church, I read the story he shared about the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Second Life. Imagine for a moment that you enter through the doors of a Unitarian Universalist Congregation like you did this morning. You take your seat and on your left is a dragon and on your right is an alien-like creature. It is unlikely what you expected joining us this morning. But in Second Life, it isn't a big shock.

Second Life, is an online role-playing game in which you create your persona both on the outside and on the inside with which to interact with the world and others around you as you go about your day – be it the grocery store, the night club or perhaps a something a little more imaginative. The spaces are created by those who participate in the game. It wasn't long before places of worship joined the digital landscape of Second Life.

For the creator of the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Second Life, who goes by Bizzare Berry, wanted his real-life Unitarian Universalist values to be part of his online life. Although the project was mostly for fun, he spent his free time designing and creating the building for this UU congregation. A screen capture of the congregation is on the front of your order of service. Congregants sit on cushions around a pond and surrounded by trees. When it is time to light the chalice, the flame erupts from the centre of the pond for everyone to see.

As people do, they explored their virtual environment and It wasn't long before others noticed the congregation and would visit to take a few quiet moments to reflect. Knowing that people were drawn to this place, Bizzare Berry took a risk and began to offer services. To his surprise and delight, people attended!

The congregation now serves this our faith in this online community. With two services a week, they also have by-laws, congregational meetings, a library and for some, most importantly: coffee hour. In this online space, people the world over are offered the ability to step away from their day to day, in the comfort of their home, to deeply examine their lives and their values.

Here are First, we too share our services with others online, so distance or illness need not be a barrier to this beloved community. In this way, we have opened our doors in the spirit of love and in the knowledge that technology and this digital world of ours will not simply go away.

Can we move technology as a distraction, sometimes from those sitting in the same room, or possibly to our truth? And have we the courage to be seen for who we truly are part of this faith which calls us to love and justice?

If and when we do, when we take our truth and combine it with the our current technology and that which will come tomorrow, I believe that we may find like-minded people, those who want a faith tradition that is ready and willing to meet the challenges of our times.

May we learn to interact with our digital world to deepen our spiritual practices and to learn more about one another.

May we take our mission to seek, connect and serve not only beyond the physical walls of our congregation but the digital walls of our devices when we turn them back on.

May we have the courage to take risks and use these tools to better live out our faith in this interdependent web of life.

May it be so.

Blessed be and Amen.