

**Don't Just Do Something – March 3, 2019 – The Unitarian Church of
Barnstable, UU**

The Rev. Tracy Johnson

In the spring of the year I begin the recruiting process for WE CAN's PathMakers Mentoring Program; the ten month program that pairs women in places of change or transition with mentoring partners who journey alongside them providing support and affirmation as they work toward goals and dreams. The women who come complete an application that is both informational and aspirational. It asks them to identify three potential goals that they would like to work on and they dutifully fill this out, listing all manner of ideas and hoped for outcomes, stretching their imaginations big and wide. When I interview them I ask them to think about their life a year from now. I want to know what will be different having spent time in the program. The response is usually related to one of the goals, but sometimes it is more about how they believe they will feel; an emotional shift or a deeper self understanding that informs their movement forward.

Not too long into the program year we begin to sense an antsiness about this whole goal setting notion; harder than one may have thought to get a handle on and to dive into. There is a restlessness, a looking back at original plans and a genuine concern over how possible or realistic those dreams might have been. There is a tendency to start grasping at straws; an urgency because, after all, they signed up for this and they need to get going. A goal – any goal – must be better than nothing, right?

And to this I am fond of saying, "Don't just do something. Stand there." It is harder than it sounds, this koan attributed to Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh. It is contrary to the common western philosophy that would have us not just stand there, but instead, DO SOMETHING! ANYTHING! I learned this teaching the hard way, of course, as I spoke with a mentor a year or so ago, listing off my options in a rapid-fire progression of possible personal directions and sacred opportunities that appeared to be presenting themselves on my doorstep. He listened as he does so very well and when I was done, he waited, as he always does. And then he posed this idea to me ever so gently. He said, "I want to share with you this saying that was taught to me by one of my mentors in a time much like your present situation." "Don't just do something," he slowly repeated, "stand there." This flip side of our common phraseology caught me off guard, as if someone had suddenly turned on a light in a darkened room. Silently I mulled it over in my mind; let it pass through my lips, mostly to be sure I had heard him right!

This was an invitation to a practice of noticing that has carried me through the past year. Time and again I have had opportunities, big and small, that sound amazing at the outset and, in a flurry of activity, I might have otherwise jumped on one or more – usually more, over-filling my calendar and then wondering how on earth that had happened! But this thoughtfulness about how I make decisions had been invoked in me; took root as it began to govern my process. Not that choices wouldn't be forthcoming, but a way to approach them that slows one down and gets at the heart of a possibility as it melds with my own heart. "What would that look like?" I began to ask myself as an initial response. "How am I feeling as I ponder the possibility?" Could I let myself feel those sensations beforehand and parse out the sacred from the profane?

Sam Keen's *Hymns to an Unknown God* suggests that great spiritual secrets, at least, are hidden in plain sight, but to see these secrets hidden in plain view we might have to turn ourselves inside-out. Taken literally this means that we need to expose what is usually protected to the elements around us. The challenge of living in a way that peacefully moves us through life and its choices lies in meeting the outer world with the inner world. There is a need for a centered-ness – an attention to what is going on inside – listening to the body – to the soul – that enables us to face what confronts; affronts; sometimes bombards from just beyond our edges. Remaining in touch with that place has the potential to inform our responses. We become actors as opposed to reactors.

I love the image of Michelangelo sculpting in a way that saw the completed image before him; waiting for him; his task to carve away the excess and free the thing of beauty. As we begin the process of noticing we discover parts of ourselves that have been covered up for perhaps a long time – feelings we have avoided feeling, roles that have been assigned to us or that we have taken upon ourselves, emotions and ways of being in the world. However our situation is influencing all of these things; drawing them out into the open, it is important to consider that they need not define us absolutely. Noticing is more than acknowledging that we are sad or confused; angry or ill; excited or flattered. We mustn't stop there, allowing ourselves to be those things only and forever. In sculptor's fashion we can cut away that which doesn't fit the moment, revealing a form that is who we truly are in response to what we are faced with.

It takes time, which in our culture we often say we have far too little of, and quiet, which we tend to eschew in equal measure. Time and quiet are a recipe for solitude. Hermann Hesse¹ wrote that “we must unlearn the habit of being someone else or nothing at all, of imitating the voices of others and mistaking the faces of others for your own;” that, “When destiny comes to [one] from outside it lays [them] low, just as an arrow lays a deer low. When destiny comes to [one] from within, from [their] innermost being, it makes [them] strong, it makes them into a god . . .” He argues that it is solitude that leads us to ourselves and that once our destiny has been recognized we try never to change it. So many times a choice comes to me – to each of us – that is based in another’s expectations; their assumptions about who we are – who we could be – what they’d like to be, even. We are mistaken if we simply put on that face without first seeking the solitude necessary to discern if it really fits. Is it a mask that covers our true expression or is it of a form and substance that is one with our own identity? To figure that out takes a stepping back and really looking at it alongside of our deepest selves. What it opens up for us can sometimes be painful realizations and it is no wonder we shy away from this process, instead quickly adapting to proposals that lessen who we really are. Reaction is easier than action.

Mary Oliver, in our reading this morning, talks about paying attention; about noticing, as a good first step, but says that real attention takes the next step also, going on from just making a report to exploring the feeling beneath. It’s like receiving an invitation to do something, noticing that it doesn’t particularly appeal to us or maybe even offends our sensibilities somehow and then accepting it anyway. We make a report to ourselves, but then ignore it. We get stuck on the “heavenly visibles,” as she puts it, and don’t make time to dig into the “heavenly invisibles;” the layers beneath the surface that may require us to see things about ourselves and then have to expose those thoughts and attributes in order to decline what isn’t true to our being; our beauty; to our destiny; our humanity.

Our world is fraught with events and revelations; sound bites and snippets; the lives of people known and unknown reflected back to us through lenses not our own. Daily the little hairs on the back of my neck rise up; my heart breaks in the wake of injustices near and far; I am angered to the brink of lashing out. There is no shortage of material to react to and our bodies respond viscerally whether we take a sudden tangible step or not. I believe my body is trying to tell me something beyond the initial fight or flight triggering of my reptilian brain! I have come to believe that it is inviting me to slow down and to ask the questions I began with today. What is the piece of this news that speaks most strongly to me? What is that understanding grounded in – what prior experience or learning? What growing edge is this asking me to stretch? And

ultimately, what is the meaning in this for the Tracy I have come to know most intimately? With the answers to these questions in hand my response can reflect my clearest self-expression and will likely carry the greatest impact because of its authenticity.

It is no different when new opportunities arise. We are called upon to take on a task which may have been on the periphery of our field of vision; perhaps we see or hear about a possibility that could be for us – a direction for our work we hadn't yet considered – a chance to travel somewhere distant and intriguing – these things come to us more often than we might think. They are exciting or flattering or simply pique our curiosity. Our pattern in this culture is to jump on these and it may be that no harm would come if we did – they are opportunities after all! But even things that sound good can have consequences or may not be representations of our most beautiful selves. The idea is to ask the questions again in order to be sure – to get in touch with that still, small voice at center that speaks from our truest being.

After a while this practice begins to come naturally, but it won't be the case without a little intentionality at the outset. Every morning I sit, light my chalice, consider my gratitudes, select a reading and meditate on it's meaning, journaling a bit. What I notice is that it often is speaking precisely to me – to some decision I am grappling with or some deeper truth I need to explore. But what it really does is set me up for a more intentional way of journeying through my days; for noticing and pondering the questions; for making choices informed by my most beautifully sculpted inner self; the ones that answer the call of destiny and bring joy in my living.

This is the self we were made for. Getting back to it is hard and frequently painful work because it asks us to turn from the conventions of the world around us and travel inward, spiraling toward our core. But the result is this being that would otherwise remain hidden from the world has a chance to flourish. Hesse says we are made to be ourselves; to enrich the world. "In each of you" he writes, "there is a hidden being, still in the deep sleep of childhood. Bring it to life! In each of you there is a call, a will, an impulse of nature, and impulse toward the future, the new, the higher. Let it mature, let it resound, nurture it!"

This week the Christian season of Lent begins; a "time to practice who we want to becomeⁱ," as one woman religious puts it, a time to reflect on our spiritual journeys, make course corrections, and pay attention to our attitudes and actions. It is a time

that invites the introspection necessary to build a practice of solitude into our living. May we, in these reactive times, journey toward the beauty within in order to face our world; the big questions that have global impact and the smaller, more personal questions that guide our days. May we take the time; find the solitude that unlocks destiny; and let our lives shine forth as the beacons they were intended to be. Don't just do something! Stand there. Blessed be and Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.brainpickings.org/2019/01/15/hermann-hesse-solitude-suffering-destiny>

ⁱⁱ From *A Year of Spiritual Companionship* by Anne Kertz Kernion, 2016.