

Right Foot in Front of the Left
Rev. Mark Stringer
First Unitarian Church of Des Moines
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Sermon

In the midst of this winter blast of cold and snow that has kept so many of us huddling indoors trying our best to stay warm, the house my family and I have the blessing of inhabiting is probably about as dry as it's ever been. A constant stream of forced air heat has transformed our indoor climate into a drafty desert in which my skin constantly prickles, as though I am rolling in the hardened, fallen needles of a January Christmas tree, my daughter's hair transitions in the night into a snarly mess that looks a lot like the hairdo my sister used to spend her mornings creating as a black lipstick-wearing goth girl in the 1980s, and nearly any movement, from opening the refrigerator or reaching for the tea kettle to petting the cats or offering a simple kiss on the cheek, produces crackling shocks of static electricity, predictable, yet surprising every time.

My family and I had been living in this desert state for weeks until, finally, the other night, just as I was retiring to bed, I decided to employ a simple remedy to this dryness, one that doesn't call for more than a few minutes of effort every day: I decided to go in search of our basic 20 dollar-humidifier and put it to use at last.

I was confident we not only had one, but, unlike some other items we haven't used in a while, I even knew where it was. I took the walk to the basement, pulled the humidifier off the shelf, brought it upstairs, filled it with water, and plugged it in. Within moments the air felt different, more welcoming, more livable. A coolness prevailed and I realized how thirsty for moisture I had been; in fact, I found myself wanting our simple machine to pump out the mist even faster. Now that I could feel what I had been missing, I wanted more. Something I had unconsciously avoided was now indispensable. Remarkable considering it had taken me so long to grab it from the basement shelf. What had I been waiting for? The humidifier didn't take away all the discomfort, and it couldn't provide moisture to the whole house, but it was a step towards better living. A solution, or at least a step in the right direction, that had been waiting for me all the time. I just needed to pay enough attention to my circumstances to know that I needed it, and then take the few moments to actually use it. Simple.

This month we have opened our calendars to a new year, and a new decade, complete with all those blank pages waiting to be filled not only with new appointments and commitments, but with expectations of new ways we might be in the world, expectations for the better life we know is mostly up to us to return to, or begin...a better life in which we might strive to eat healthier foods, be more compassionate, lose weight, read more, or complain less. A better life in which might we do more for the causes we most believe in, pursue hobbies and projects that we've always wanted to pursue, or finally organize our closets. A better life in which we might accept that even with all of the circumstances over which we have little or no control, we have within us the capacity to live with courage and forgiveness, choosing at last to pursue what is still possible rather than succumbing to despair over what is not.

Aren't all of our new year's resolutions, whether spoken or silent, really just requests for a life more in keeping with what we imagine for our best selves, a life where our joy might finally overwhelm our heartache, where our disappointment over not being who we thought we were is replaced at last by devotion toward the people who we know in our hearts we still can be, despite everything?

I guess that's why my humidifier episode the other night has stayed with me. The lesson it teaches is a metaphor, I think, of how we can intuitively know what we need to relieve whatever dry spell we may be enduring, of how we can have the tools available to better live with and through our circumstances and, yet, it can take a long time until we figure out that the choice to employ those tools is ours to make, that it is up to us to bring about the only relief on which we can truly rely. It's up to us, we might say, to go get the humidifier already! It's true, isn't it, that what we most need is so often right there in the place where we live? Sometimes we have to dig around a bit to find it, or ask for help, but more often than not, what we desire is there waiting for us, and relief, even if it is just a little relief, is within reach.

This wisdom has also emerged for me as I have facilitated our new Wellspring program here at church. For those of you who don't yet know, Wellspring is a carefully structured 10-month small group experience put together by the ministers and members of a vibrant UU congregation in Rochester, New York. A few years back, they developed this program to provide an opportunity for participants to learn about UU history, to reflect on theological perspectives common in UU congregations, and, perhaps most importantly, to become more intentionally aware of their own unique journeys of the spirit, in

community with eight other people doing the same thing. Our Wellspring group follows the same curriculum they've been using in Rochester. In fact, along with a UU congregation in Dallas, we are actually piloting the Wellpsring program on behalf of the Rochester church before it is rolled out to at least 10 more UU congregations next fall. You'll be hearing more about it in the coming months, because, after our own trial run, at least some of the current participants will facilitate their own groups, so all our members and friends who are interested will have a chance to experience Wellspring. The format is simple. We meet twice a month for two hours of reflection and conversation (similar to Small Group Ministry, with just a bit more thematic structure and more responsibilities outside of our meetings). [The folks in Rochester sometimes refer to it as SGM on steroids...] We have homework assignments (mostly reading), we are encouraged to keep a journal, and we commit to visiting with a spiritual director of our choice once a month, someone who can objectively listen to us and be a sounding board for our emerging questions and answers. Perhaps the most important vehicle of our Wellspring journeys of self-discovery is the expectation that each of us will engage in at least one regular spiritual practice of some kind throughout the 10 months. When we check-in at the beginning of each meeting together, we are asked to reflect on our spiritual practice, and at most meetings, a member shares his or her current practice with the group. So far in our group, we have participated in prayer rituals with rocks and beads, reflected on poetry, and been led in meditation. The sessions to come will offer us even more spiritual practice possibilities because everyone approaches this task differently. There is no right or wrong way. We are all unique, and therefore, so are the ways we understand and approach spiritual practice. Indeed, the richness of our group experience is, in large part, a product of our differences, respectfully shared and received.

One of the first books we read as we began our adventure together in September was a series of essays by UU ministers about the spiritual practices in which they regularly engage. Described by the clergy of a religion that doesn't prescribe or expect particular ways of being religious, the spiritual practices in this book were as varied as you might expect. Essays focused on praying, meditating, gardening, keeping silent, cooking, quilting, facing adversity, working for social justice, parenting, even being married. It didn't take long in our reading for the primary message to be clear: spiritual practice is not necessarily an abstraction that removes us from our lives; rather it is, or can be, an activity that emerges from the fully lived experience of our lives. It is anything we do with intention and attention that helps

us remember with gratitude and awe that we are alive. Therefore, spiritual practice occurs whenever we choose to create space for reflection, for presence, for mindfulness within the activities and circumstances of our lives, whenever we intentionally shift our lives off automatic and into manual, whenever we pay attention to what we need, and take the steps, simple and timid though they may be, to move toward where we must go. As our first reading reminded us, spiritual practice “does not create the sacred, it only describes what is there and had always been there, deeply hidden in the obvious.”

Lest you think that merely being asked to engage in spiritual practice brings peace and joy, let me assure you that many of us in Wellspring have had to grapple with the ways we continually come up short in our expectations: We’ve had to come to terms with how, even with the support and interest of our peers, we still find ways to avoid, if not skip, our chosen practice. When I began Wellspring, for example, I had the intention of beginning a regular meditation practice that has been very difficult for me to maintain. I’ve had to be gentle with myself in my failure, which is not always easy to do. Life is complicated. We all know it. We often have very good reasons to put off that which could improve the quality of our life, and sometimes we have to trade one life-giving activity (like exercise, or meditation, or a beloved hobby) so that we can participate in another (like raising our children, or doing chores, or caring for a loved one). And, yet, sometimes, we just need to go get the humidifier already!

So even if I’m not doing the practice I thought I would, my Wellspring experience, and has put me in community with others who are also seeking richness in life, kind of like a Weight Watchers meeting for our spirits, has reminded me that I can still start with what I am doing. I can start with where I am. For example, I have to drive most days. So when I am in my car, behind the wheel, I have chosen to create a mini retreat for myself. I am very particular about the music I play, or, even better, I drive in silence, living with and through my always-present urge to tick off of my ever-growing mental to-do list or be frustrated by my trip taking 12 minutes instead of 8. Am I always able to drive mindfully, with compassion for myself and all those I encounter? Of course not. But consciously setting aside my everyday 10-minute drives in the car for a mini-meditative retreat has been a step definitely worth taking, because doing so invites me to wake up and not ignore the remarkable reality that I am not only alive but also moving in a metal box powered by fossil fuel at many miles per hour. Like the moisture I wasn’t fully aware I had been lacking until I finally turned the humidifier on, my simple mini-retreats have become

indispensable, and have led me to seek more opportunities to be mindful, more opportunities to remember that I am not just a human do-ing, but also a human be-ing.

So often we judge ourselves against a picture of perfection that we will likely never match, no matter how hard we try. We set impossible, unfriendly, if not inhuman goals and then become angry at ourselves when we come up short. Then we may give up even attempting the small steps, or embracing what we are already doing, saying to ourselves, "Oh, what's the use." And yet, and yet, we know, don't we, that ultimately every meaningful and lasting change anyone has ever made began with a simple step, a step often taken not when the conditions were perfect or most likely to succeed, but when that initial step probably seemed most futile. And after each step, another is taken, and another, and another.

Of course, there are set backs and disappointments. But I believe in these moments perspective is everything. For example, let's say you want to begin to exercise. Your doctor tells you that you should walk for an hour every day, but you can only find the time, at first, to get out for 30 minutes twice a week. Over the course of a year that's more than 50 hours of walking that you wouldn't have done otherwise. And chances are good that those 50 hours will inspire you to do more. Each step we take matters. In our journeys toward improving our health, in our journeys toward nurturing our spirits, in our journeys toward living the lives we really want, each step we take matters.

There is more to life than feeling bad about not meeting our own expectations. My Wellspring journey has reminded me that most of us come up short in our strivings for more embodied, fulfilling lives, and yet, the times when we miss the mark are the moments when we could be most open to return from our disregard for who we know in our hearts we want to be, and thoughtfully, respectfully, reengage with our lives on our own terms as we really are, people who will often come up short, but who keep trying anyway.

And by so doing, by trying anyway, by choosing to take that next step, no matter how difficult it may be, we welcome once again the new year's day that happens any time we fall down, get back up again. and take another step forward. The new year's day that begins every time we take that next step. And what a gloriously promising new year it can be.