

# Each Day a Cup of Life

August 2, 2007

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When I first read the piece by Rachel Remen, “Breathing In, Breathing Out”, it really grabbed me. When that happens, I begin to suspect something is sermon material. It means I need to take a look at something. For you know, we always give the sermon we, ourselves, need to hear! Funny how that works.

So after reading this description of a spiritual practice, I decided to try it. I would fill a bowl of water in the morning, prayerfully, thoughtfully, carry it to a sacred place, in front of my Buddha statue, and then in the evening, take it outside, pouring it reverently into the earth. It would remind me about the sacredness of life, and also the limits of what I can do in one day. Only so much can fit in the cup, after all.

But, it was hard to get into the habit. I kept forgetting. I put the bowl in a sacred place that is so far away from my usual round of activity, I often forgot to empty it, and there it would be, full of water for several days. Then I’d dust in that area or something and see it there, and kick myself for failing to do the thing right. Hmmm, I thought, what is the lesson here?

So I decided to make it easier, because I did not want to give it up. I now put the pot, (it’s really a cream pitcher for easy pouring), right on the window sill in front of the kitchen sink so I can’t miss it. Now,

MOST days, though not every day, I see it in the morning, fill it and put it thoughtfully back on the sill, reminding myself I can only do so much today. Therefore, I must let a few things go and savor the things I can fit into the day. Then I usually forget to pour the water out at night. But I still have the main lesson most mornings. Only so much will fit in this cup. Only so much will fit in this day, so choose consciously. The water is a sacred symbol of life, my life, and choices must be made because of limits. Limits of time, energy, and resources. This is a lesson I need to remind myself of every day. But it isn’t only about limits. It is also about cherishing and savoring the cup of precious water I have today.

My days are filled with the tasks, joys and pains of being the mother of a high energy seven year old boy. Now that he is in aftercare, I have more time for other tasks I love, especially the ministry I am able to take up again, in spiritual direction, at the UUA Washington Office, and with more preaching in my schedule. There are the challenges inherent in marriage, as well as its joys. The to-do list of home maintenance, paperwork, and planning for the future. It is hard not to be busy all the time.

All of this makes me think of a wonderful, funny children’s song from Sandra Boynton’s CD, “Philadelphia Chickens”. Sung by Kevin Klein, the lyrics go like this:

“We’re very very busy and we have a lot to do, and we haven’t got a minute to explain it all to you, for on Sunday, Monday Tuesday, there are people we must see and on Wednesday Thursday Friday we’re as busy as can be with our most important meetings and our most important calls and we have to do so many things and post them on the walls. THEN we hurry to the south and then we hurry north and we’re talking every minute as we hurry back and forth and we have to hurry to east and then we hurry west and we’re talking every minute and we don’t have time to rest and we have to do it faster or it never will be done and we have no time for listening or anything that’s fun.....”

It goes on, but you get the idea. No time for listening or fun. That doesn't sound very fulfilling does it? What is all this busyness about anyway? Thomas Merton has said that busyness is a form of violence. Strong words. Yet some truer life is surely being trampled on with all this hectic activity. If we are so busy that the sacred is lost, something needs to change.

Many people fear silence and solitude and so they keep busy to avoid scary feelings. We keep busy to feel needed and important. We stay booked up to avoid facing loneliness or a sense of meaninglessness. Last Sunday's *Washington Post Magazine* had an article about a professor at American University who gave her students an assignment to go on a media fast for twenty-four hours. No cell phones, no iPods, no radio or TV or CD's or computer. The students were not happy. They were apprehensive. Their social life is so dependent on cell phone calls and text messaging that it was a significant challenge to spend time other ways. One student found she enjoyed spending time with her mother. Others took walks or read. Others barely made it through the twenty four hours.

I am not sure what this means. Technology certainly has changed the way humans live, especially young people with access to these devices. Electronic media are here to stay. Yet, everyone eventually will start to face deeper, more spiritual issues. Later in life, meaning will need to be addressed. The well known psychoanalyst Carl Jung said all problems after the age of forty or so are spiritual problems. We need to stop filling our lives with distractions, and go deeper. What is inside each of us? Who are we really? What do we really want? What are our priorities? What can we let go of? Might some solitude and silence bring us gifts we have been missing?

I happened to pick a book off my shelf recently called *My Ending Is My Beginning* by UU minister David Rankin. It is a book of essays about death and dying. In one chapter he addresses the universal denial of death we all have to work through, not that we all do it unless or until we must. He says that in all our busyness, we are

really avoiding facing the pain of our ending. It is not an easy thing to face. He describes a number of what he calls "immortality formulas." Immortality formulas are ways we divert our attention from our inevitable end. They are such things as accumulating wealth, seeking fame or status, addictions and being very, very busy.

A certain amount of busyness is necessary in our complicated world, but I suggest today that many of us avoid making difficult choices about how we use our time. This is because each choice involves a little death. The thing we don't choose to do is lost. This little death then reminds us of the bigger death we may not want to face.

Here's the deal. We can't do everything we want to do. Basic common sense, right? How busy are you? Are there choices you don't want to make, so you agree to do too much?

Personally I am facing a number of volunteer requests. Sound familiar? Won't I chair a PTA committee? Won't I serve on the neighborhood council? We want to do our part, but given everything, what IS our part? With all the choices, sometimes it is actually easier to say yes to everything than to wade through the guilt feelings and the pro and con analysis of what is the best choice.

Here's a way to decide if we need to make a choice. Look into the clay jug that is you. How are you feeling? What are you longing for? Do you want more time? This is your life and your time. How do you want to use it? I don't mean it's good to be selfish, but to ask what would be most meaningful now, and choose that. Helping does feel good. Contributing does nurture our souls. So does creativity and rest and recreation and spending time with loved ones. I find it interesting that Rachel Remen titled her piece about filling the pot with water "Breathing In and Breathing Out". To me the implication is that we are each a pot. As in the clay jug poem, we must be willing to be empty to be filled with something new. A well known ancient story goes like this: There is a wise monk who is visited by an eager student. The student arrives, seeking wisdom.

The serious student, his head filled with questions, is annoyed and becomes more and more frustrated when his teacher refuses to answer his questions. “Pour me a cup of tea” the monk eventually says, “ and I will tell you when to stop” The dutiful student starts pouring the tea—pouring and pouring the tea. The bowl fills and he is horrified, watching as the tea finally spills out of the cup over everything. Exasperated, the student finds the courage to speak. “Can’t you see the cup is full? It can hold no more!” “And so it is with you,” the wise teacher answers. “Your mind is full of too many things. Only when you are empty will there be room for more knowledge to come in.”

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We breathe in, we breathe out. Eastern spiritual practice focuses on breath as an embodiment of this rhythm of emptying and filling, emptying and filling. There is something important about the receptiveness of silence and solitude, of not being busy. Of breathing out. Of waiting to see what will come to fill us today.

Choices about how we will use this one cup of life are not easy to make. It helps in making those choices, to take time out to reflect. It is the emptying time we each need as part of the rhythm of our days.

I would like to tell you about my work at the Unitarian Universalist Washington Office as an example of keeping this rhythm, this discipline of emptying the cup. Every Wednesday, I go to meet with the interns in the office. These are four young men and women, very talented, very dedicated who work for us, representing the UUA’s General Assembly positions on Capitol Hill. I could not be more impressed with the quality of their work. They are skilled writers, communicators and networkers. We are members of many coalitions of liberal religious groups working for peace, for civil rights, and comprehensive sexuality education.

In our Wednesday theological reflection, we empty the cup. We set aside tasks. We go to a deeper place to reflect, to wonder and to pray. We do this to stay grounded in faith for the work. We do this to avoid burnout. To see the bigger picture. To question our assumptions. And to reinforce our friendship with each other. The break from stress and tasks is crucial. We empty our cups to be filled again with love and energy to continue. Here are a couple of quotes from this past years’ interns about the theological reflection experience:

Meredith Schonfeld Hicks has said:

“These reflections are crucial for the work we do as they provide a time and space for contemplation and reflection about key political issues as well as our own personal spiritual needs and questions”

Adam Gerhardstein has said:

“I feel the clearest avenue for growth I have at this point in my spiritual journey is to address the issues in such a way that engages our souls, minds and hearts....themes and issues that come up in both our personal lives and our professional lives.”

In addition to these weekly reflection times, the office itself, directed by Rob Keithan, with additional leadership from the UUA in Boston, has developed a philosophy in choosing which issues to focus our resources and energy on. This is an example of making hard choices. Because we cannot possibly do everything well, we must choose the three or four issues that have grounding in UU statements of conscience, fit with our goals as an office and the opportunity to focus on bills before Congress. These are the criteria for making choices on where to invest time and resources: grounding, fit and opportunity. So many are suffering. We must believe that many people of good will are working on the issues we cannot address now. In doing social justice work, we must be willing to work together to decide which issues we will address so we can have more of an impact on the ones we choose. It is for this reason that the General Assembly now only picks one main issue for a two year period. In the past, there were three statements of conscience every year.

I was particularly impressed with this realistic approach when I learned that some other groups who do the same work on Capitol Hill do NOT have such clear criteria for choosing which issue to work on. Nor do their staffs take time for theological reflection. I have heard that other agency staffs long for time to reflect, for limits on what issues they must take on.

These are spiritual practices: making hard choices about time and energy; emptying the cup that is our daily life so we can be filled with new fresh energy.

Yes, we can learn to live with limits, especially if we are nurturing our deeper wisdom by taking time out. I have taken this lesson to heart on my visits to St. Paul Minnesota where I still have many beloved friends and relatives. Every year as we are planning our summer visit I start to get anxious about scheduling time with as many of these loved ones as possible. Perry also has relatives in Minnesota and of course we are trying to weave in those with children approximately Louis's age. This has been a great source of anxiety for me in the past. This year I seem to have given that anxiety up. In the same spirit as recognizing that the cup can only hold so much, the trip, also can also only hold so much. This year I was much more relaxed and we arranged things one day at a time, many get-togethers not arranged until we arrived, and letting go of some visits until next time. What a relief! I am sure I was easier to live with and the vacation was much more relaxing.

I am sympathetic with the author Sarah Susanka, an architect who first wrote *The Not So Big House*, critiquing the McMansion trend. Now she has followed that book with a more general one: *The Not So Big Life*. Skimming the contents recently in Garrison Keillor's new book store in St. Paul, I saw that Ms Susanka and I are promoting the same idea. Only so much can fit in a day or a life. Let's examine what we want those things to be. What do we find to be most nourishing and worthwhile? Let us intend to focus our lives on what we value most. Let us choose wisely and live consciously, one day at a time. As I

looked up from reading the book in Garrison's bookstore, I saw this line painted above me on the wall: "Make haste slowly: There is luck in leisure". So may it be. Amen.

**Reading:** *Breathing In, Breathing Out...* by Rachel Naomi Remen

I begin and end every day with a very old ritual that was taught to me by a gentle elderly woman who is a Tibetan nun. Each morning, the first thing after awakening, you take a small empty bowl that you keep for this purpose and fill it slowly to the brim from a source of running water. Doubtless, the originators of this ritual had in mind some high mountain stream. I use my kitchen faucet, turning it on and letting it run for a while before passing my little bowl through the water to fill it completely. As the bowl fills, you reflect on the particulars of your life, whatever they are. The people with whom you share your time, your state of health, whatever problems you face, what skills and strengths you have...your personal limitations, your losses, your history. As the bowl fills, you receive your life open heartedly and unconditionally as your portion. Walking very slowly so as not to spill a drop out of the brimming bowl, you take it to a private place, dedicating all it contains to the service of life. Leaving the full bowl in this place, you begin your day....

Each evening, the last thing before going to sleep, you take the bowl outside and empty the water out onto the earth. Then you place the empty bowl upside down in its special place in your home, turn out your light and rest...