

**IT IS WHAT IT IS**  
**A Sermon offered by Rev. Wayne Arnason**  
**Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**Appleton, Wisconsin**  
**fvuuf.org**

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**READING** from *PARKER PALMER REFLECTS ON DE TOCQUEVILLE*

In Parker Palmer's book *Healing the Heart of Democracy, the Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*, Palmer refers to observations made by Alexis de Tocqueville as he toured America in the 1830's. Tocqueville defined individualism "as a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself."

As individualism spreads (says De Tocqueville) "there are more and more people who, though neither rich nor powerful enough to have much hold over others, have gained or kept enough wealth and enough understanding to look after their own needs. Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine their whole destiny is in their hands."

Parker Palmer talks about there being a constant tug-of-war between our need to be independent and our need to be interdependent... Learning how to hold individualism and communalism in creative tension with each other—allowing each to check the other's darker potentials—is a key democratic habit of the heart.

**SERMON**

It's striking to me that an astute European visitor, the French nobleman Alexis de Tocqueville, identified in the 1830's one of the most important characteristics of the young American culture that remains today one of our most pressing dilemmas – whether it is more important to be independent or interdependent. Our All Ages Focus story today is a great example of the cultural tension around this question. We try to teach our children to express themselves, to be individuals, to be non-conformists, and at the same time we want them to play well with others, not be rude to their teachers, and not play their music so loud that they bother the neighbors.

It's understandable historically why this question of independence versus interdependence became America's signature cultural tension. This country began as a vast and sparsely settled space that European migrants took over, very different from the densely populated and sophisticated countries from which they had come. Many of the earliest settlers were fleeing political and religious oppression, and saw the new world as a land of liberation from tyranny. What rulers the colonies had were far away, and everyone had to be self-reliant. If you could grow your food, and keep a respectable distance from your neighbor, your personal

freedom was limited only by the weather and your luck. De Tocqueville's picture of self-reliant individualism in America is two centuries along from those earliest settlements, but he recognizes what we might call the DNA of that original American experience carrying on from generation to generation.

A lot changes in two centuries, however. Population grows, cities are built, independence is declared, and constitutions, covenants, and laws for how people must live together in closer proximity and closer dependence on one another must be framed. Because the King of England was the head of the Church of England, it's no surprise that at the time of the American revolution, no one questioned that political liberation and spiritual liberation were closely linked, at least if you understand liberation as meaning "the freedom to do and say what you please." To challenge the taxes imposed by the King of England was not much different than challenging the edicts of the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Pope. Freedom was understood by the new kinds of Protestant churches that emerged from the American Revolution more as "freedom from" authority and not "freedom to" articulate any new vision of what spiritual liberation could mean - until the Transcendentalist movement that emerged in the 1830's and 40's, especially in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Less influenced by the struggle for political freedom than the generation of intellectual leaders that had preceded him, Emerson focused on spiritual freedom. In his two 1841 essays on "Self-Reliance" and "Spiritual Laws," he gave seemingly contradictory advice about how to live a religious life that did not rely on traditional Protestant Christian authority, but instead on the authority of the free mind and heart. Here's some words from these two essays. From "Self Reliance" *No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. ..A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition as if everything were titular and ephemeral but he. I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions...I ought to go upright and vital, and speak the rude truth in all ways.*

And from "Spiritual Laws:" *A little consideration of what takes place around us every day would show us, that a higher law than that of our will regulates events; ...There is a soul at the centre of nature, and over the will of every man, so that none of us can wrong the universe. It has so infused its strong enchantment into nature, that we prosper when we accept its advice. The whole course of things goes to teach us faith. We need only obey...Certainly there is a possible right for you that precludes the need of balance and willful election. For you there is a reality, a fit place and congenial duties. Place yourself in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which animates all whom it floats, and you are without effort impelled to truth, to right, and a perfect contentment.*

How can these two statements make sense coming from the same pen: one an expression of confidence in the self-reliant person, and the other an instruction to obedience and surrender to the spiritual laws that are evident in the universe, rather than believe your own will to be supreme? The answer is, that Emerson believed strongly that trusting your own instincts, your own intelligence, your own experience, is critical for living a religious life of integrity, but at the same time, the more that you do this, you realize again and again that your life is not your own. It belongs to others. It belongs to the world, and to the way the world really is, rather than your story of what it should be or might be. Your deepest happiness will come from giving that life

away to those you love and to the ideas, movements, and understandings that will make the world a home where all people can find their fulfillment.

I think that this is what Unitarian Universalism, as a uniquely American faith tradition influenced by Transcendentalism, has come to embody. It is both our path between the extremes of independence and interdependence, and our commitment to unite these two spiritual tasks in a life of integrity. Today, in the spirit of that path and that commitment, I am not sure whether what I am offering you today is a sermon about growing in spirit or a sermon about leading in social justice. In some of the feedback about the State of the Fellowship these two parts of the mission and goals of Fellowship were sometimes contrasted, with people sounding as if they somehow represented different political parties sitting on opposite sides of the aisle during services. But as Parker Palmer has told us in the reading we heard, our challenge is not to see these as opposites, but see them in creative tension with each other—“allowing each to check the other’s darker potentials.” He says that this is a key democratic habit of the heart. In the same way, in this congregation, we seek to hold our respect for the sacred conscience of each individual’s mind and heart in creative tension with our desire to lead in social justice, to use our collective power within this community to be a unique voice for compassion, tolerance and equality. That is our key spiritual habit of the heart.

In this strange season of political campaigning that we are now enduring, we find ourselves struggling to make sense of whether and how the American political parties are still representative of this tension between individualism and communalism. When I am generous and humble, I believe that people who are passionate about politics ultimately want to the same things for this country and for the world – they want prosperity and peace for as many people as possible. I grew up thinking that conservatives, allegedly represented in this country by the Republican Party, were more likely to vote for candidates and policies who expressed a belief in personal responsibility, limited government, free markets, individual freedoms, traditional American values and a strong national defense. Conservatives were supposed to believe that the role of government should be to provide people the freedom necessary to pursue their own goals, and be empowered to solve their own problems. What we see instead in this election is people campaigning under that label who will support all kinds of government intervention to make laws that restrict or eliminate individual liberty if it involves having choices about reproductive health care, end-of -life decisions, getting married or joining the military, or who will condemn free market trade internationally. I grew up thinking that a liberal was on the other side of these tensions, and would vote for candidates and policies that wanted to use government to alleviate social ills at home rather than engage in militarism abroad, to protect workers’ rights and defend civil liberties. What we have seen in this election is people campaigning under that label whose records include voting against new gun control and safety laws, support military intervention abroad, defend new trade pacts that threaten American workers, and support government surveillance of electronic data. My point here is not to offer opinions about any of these hot button issues or point a finger at any candidate, but to observe that in these strange times, the old corrals that conservatives and liberals were supposed to gather in have fallen down, and the elephants and the donkeys seem to be wandering and grazing wherever they will. Surprising coalitions are being formed defined by a single or a small number of positions, rather than by a candidates’ comprehensive platform, record or character. If you are mind-boggled by hearing radio interviews with voters who say that they are torn between Trump and Sanders, you are not

alone. So what's a religious liberal to do in this strange new political world? Does the eternal noise of the 24 hour news cycle, the barrage of ads, and the constant adversarial conflict that seems to be part of both political campaigns and the various forms of justice work that you are routinely invited to engage with here at the Fellowship make you feel like you want to close the door, light a candle, and just meditate? Can we do both? Should we do both?

In Connie's reflection this morning, she shared not only her own passion for social justice, but her own doubts about where she finds balance between always doing doing doing, and just being in her life. This is a challenging problem that Buddhist teacher and social activist Donald Rothberg writes about in a book called *The Engaged Spiritual Life*, published by our own Beacon Press. He says: "I believe that many of us genuinely feel called to a vision of our lives in which inner and outer transformation are connected. Knowing that we don't have to do everything, that there are many aspects to transformation, frees us further to listen for a calling, a vocation, for the very specific ways in which we might live this vision.

The title that I put on today's sermon: "It is What It Is" is a line that I got from the Mayor of Cleveland, who uses it a lot at press conferences as a way of saying "no comment" about all manner of situations that he can't control but where the reporters want him to give them a sound-bite opinion. Sometimes I really like it when he uses that line. It feels like it's a liberating recognition for a politician, but sometimes it bothers me. On the one hand, it's looking at things as they are with an honest and dispassionate eye. "The state legislature is controlled by Republicans and they have cut payments to local governments. It's done, and it's not going to change, and as a result we have a big hole in the local government budget that threatens essential services. It is what it is! So today I'm asking you to support a local tax increase." I get that.

But sometimes the line bothers me. I can hear this expression in a whole different way that gets under my skin. It can sound like resignation and complacency. I've heard UU's say this about problems that don't seem to get better, no matter how hard you work on them, such as persistent poverty and income inequality at home, racism, or the Israeli-Palestinian controversy. The way I hear that phrase then is: "This is an intractable problem, and it has nothing to do with me, so why should I get involved?" When "what is" about our world seems too complicated or depressing to think about is exactly when the spiritual life of practice and reflection that you have built into the routines of your day becomes most important -- because it creates a foundation for everything else, particularly for your justice and service work.

Let's imagine the life you are living as if it was a home that you are always building and improving. You want it to have rooms for all the parts of your life that invite your attention each week. You want rooms where you take care of yourself and your body. You want rooms that are private space you share with those family and friends closest to you, and you want rooms that are devoted to your public life: a room where you can work, a room where you can hold and give away goods or time, a room for people to meet you, to talk about the world in which we live. But it would be a terrible mistake to build all those rooms on the bare ground. The rooms would be hard to keep at a stable temperature and every time the seasons changed you would have to change the way you used those rooms. Some might be unusable. Being grounded in practices of study, contemplation, and generosity that draw on the best wisdom you can find about the way the world is will be absolutely essential to you as the foundation of your life's house. There are

lots of possibilities for the materials you can use in your foundation. Mine is built on a Unitarian Universalist upbringing, values and community life, and on a Buddhist spiritual practice. Yours may be different. But you should know what it is, what the foundation of your life rests on. With such a foundation, the commitment to include in your house room for activism, for being a volunteer, to being a person who is connected to the interdependent life we share together becomes easier, because it is not a duty. It's just one more aspect of who you are. This is the key teaching in Donald Rothberg's book: "We don't all have to be on the frontlines," he says "in every demonstration, or attending directly to those in great need, in order to be of great help. We can follow a vocation that might not be seen as that of an activist – say, teaching children or gardening – yet that vocation can represent a deep response to the suffering of our society... I may not be on the frontlines, but I can know that I am part of the same basic work – that all of our contributions are necessary, and that all are connected."

There is no right way for you to give your life to the world and make it a better place. You have a vocation that is calling you, not a duty to perform. The spiritual foundation that I have laid through Unitarian Universalism and Buddhism has called me into public life and activism, but that form of involvement doesn't have to be for everyone, or forever. It's work that often challenges me, and exhausts me, and even depresses me, at times, but I've figured out that this just goes with the work, and that these are difficult but not unworthy emotions when you are dealing with intractable problems. You develop an ability to acknowledge those feelings and let them go, because you also find there is also so much joy in working with others to change just a piece of the world.

In my Buddhist practice, I've learned that we only know two things for sure: that we were born and that we will die. Everything else is the words that we weave into stories and statements that try to describe what we can expect and hope for on this journey between birth and death, to try to describe what may be indescribable. Some of those stories and statements sound pretty convincing about what it all means and what lies beyond this journey, but for me, there's only one thing I'm sure of, and that is that everything changes and is impermanent. Impermanence Is What It Is! Some people find that depressing, or dismiss that view as nothing more than resignation or complacency. Others will find this understanding liberating, and even exhilarating.

It's liberating because it challenges you to be suspicious and humble about all the stories you tell yourself about the way things are, and about all the many ways that people have organized human structures of truth and power that we take for granted because those who built them have the authority of time behind them. Understanding impermanence is liberating because it challenges you not to have to have the happiness you draw from all your labor depend on outcomes. The outcomes will always change, and our imaginations around these structures of truth and power that we build are so limited, that we can't possibly foresee what will happen in the future to a career, a family, a cause, that we may have given our life to. You do the best you can but you don't do it because the outcomes are what prove that you did your best. The satisfaction of doing your best is profoundly meaningful in and of itself. That's actually true of every activity of every day.

I worry that in our American society too many people grow up with the idea that what it means to be happy is to be emotionally or financially independent of the obligations and demands of others. This is such a limited picture of what freedom is all about. Freedom in the spiritual sense, freedom as the liberation that is described in many religious traditions is having the ability to make choices about how to live your life that reflect your best insight into the spiritual laws that Emerson wrote about, the deep rhythms of human existence that are beyond words to capture. A friend once described this kind of freedom as seeing that you are in the Left Turn Only Lane, and appreciating that you have a clear and joyful desire to turn left, and knowing that this is exactly where you should be. It is what it is.

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