

**Essay Title:** The Value of Personal Spiritual Practice

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I WAS RAISED IN A CONSERVATIVE JEWISH HOME by parents who were the children of immigrants from Eastern Europe. My parents were well-educated and assimilated and successful. They were living the great dream of America. Mom and Dad offered my brother and me advantages and middle class privilege. They offered us freedom to think and dream, but the offer did not cover religious training. They could not imagine a child of theirs who would question Hebrew scripture. They could not imagine, much less sanction, a child of theirs leaving the tent.

But in my college years at Vassar, I began to do just that. Twenty years before the emergence of a vocabulary of feminist religious thought, I cringed from the patriarchy, resisted the chains of orthodoxy, peeked tentatively outside the walls that felt so stultifying. What was out there?

Well, you know what was out there, awaiting my discovery at age 28, now forty-five years ago. Unitarianism, just one year away from becoming Unitarian Universalism. That's what was out there!

It is my practice to take time to consciously acknowledge the gift of life most every day. I look at the world about me and acknowledge awe before the miracles of nature.

I acknowledge the joy of family, the blessings of health and the comfort of substantial material possessions. It took me a while to realize that this practice is actually meditation, perhaps it is prayer. It is a personal religious ritual, simple and at the same time complex and, I believe, very Unitarian Universalist.

Given the freedom to figure out how to be conscious of the grace in my life, disobliged to repeat a litany not of my choosing, encouraged to be awake to wonder, I can see that I am growing into the life of a serious religionist. I love this facet of Unitarian Universalism more than any other. The imperative to learn, to discover, to not necessarily finish up where one starts. How lucky can we get to have this opportunity for spiritual sustenance and deep worship experience! The challenge is to get more of us to understand and value the gift.

I tell you these intimate details about my spiritual life because it is important for you to understand that if I am effective as a UUA leader, it is because I engage in individual spiritual practice. This relationship between the private person of liberal faith and the liberal faith public figure, this necessary source of centeredness and energy is the single most valuable lesson I have learned in the course of serving the Association in a variety of roles. The lesson is profound and ample payment for going to all those endless meetings!

Stephen Covey, author of the book *First Things First*, writes: "We settle for the illusion society sells us that meaning is in self-focus, self-esteem, self-development, self improvement. It's what I want. Let me do my own thing.

I did it my way. But the wisdom literature of thousands of years of history repeatedly validates the reality that the greatest fulfillment comes in our willingness to more effectively reach out and help others and to live for something higher than ourselves. I think that's why we gather in congregations. I think that's the essence of our common call as Unitarian Universalists.

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