

“Life Beyond the Breaking Point”

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Meditation “Fault Line” by Robert Walsh

Did you ever think there might be a fault line
passing underneath your living room:
A place in which your life is lived in meeting
and in separating, wondering
and telling, unaware that just beneath
you is the unseen seam of great plates
that strain through time? And that your life,
already spilling over the brim, could be invaded,
sent off in a new direction, turned
aside by forces you were warned about
but not prepared for? Shelves could be spilled out,
the level floor set at an angle in
some seconds’ shaking. You would have to take
your losses, do whatever must be done next.

When the great plates slip
and the earth shivers and the flaw is seen
to lie in what you trusted most, look not
to more solidity, to weighty slabs
of concrete poured or strength of cantilevered
beam to save the fractured order. Trust
more the tensile strands of love that bend
and stretch to hold you in the web of life
that’s often torn but always healing. There’s
your strength. The shifting plates, the restive earth,
your room, your precious life, they all proceed
from love, the ground on which we walk together.

Robert R. Walsh, “Fault Line,” from *Noisy Stones: A Meditation Manual*, Skinner House Books, 1992.

Reading

excerpt from *Learning to Fall* by Philip Simmons
(formatted for easy reading from the pulpit)

The summer after I finished college
I took a bus to California,
and after various adventures sublime and sordid,
I hitchhiked to a religious commune that I knew of,
in the basin and range country of eastern Nevada,
a land of sagebrush and dust,
jackrabbits and coyotes and rattlesnakes and antelope,
a few cattle and fewer people.

At the base of the Snake Range,
this commune was no hippie hangout,
no faddish Age of Aquarius retreat
but a community founded in the 1930s
by a Methodist minister's son
who had spent years studying yoga with an Indian spiritual master.

I spent a week at the commune, doing farm chores:
I learned to pick apricots,
to make a garden fence that deer couldn't jump over. . . .

But for much of my time there I meditated and studied,
did breath work and kundalini yoga,
seeking the sort of mystical, transforming experience
that to me constituted the one true glamour of the spiritual life.

At the end of the week I went up into the mountains,
for there above the farm
the peaks of the Snake Range rose to 13,000 feet.

Now it so happens that on the shoulder of the highest peak
there lives a grove of bristle-cone pine trees,
some of them over 5,000 years old,
the oldest living things on earth.

Having been a tree-worshiper from a young age,
I saw a journey to these trees as a fitting end to my pilgrimage.

So I got a ride up the narrow road
that takes you to about 9,000 feet
and then hiked in several miles until I came upon them.

Perhaps you have seen them in photographs:
gnarled trees, seeming almost lifeless,
the bark blasted from their gray weathered trunks
except for one thin lifeline that snakes up
to sustain the green bottle-brush needles.

These grotesque forms grow where nothing else survives;
in a high place of wind and snow and stone
they push up through glacial rubble
with their delicate offering of green.

I walked among them, in silence,
while sheer walls of stone
rose above me a thousand feet to jagged peaks,
their crevices veined with ice.

Though this was July, snowfields slumped
at the shadowed base of the cliffs.

Turning my back to the cliffs,
I could look out across thirty miles of sagebrush valley
to where the next range of peaks glittered in sunlight.

If ever there was a place for transcendence,
I told myself, this was it.

On the tortured trunk of a tree several thousand years old,
I found one sticky, golden drop of bristle-cone sap,
which I plucked off and solemnly placed on my tongue,
wishing for long life.

And then I prepared to meditate.
Settling down with my back against the ancient tree's trunk,
my legs crossed, my spine erect, the sun warm on my face,
a gentle breeze lifting the hair on my forearms,
I closed my eyes, ready for my vision.

I waited. I waited some more.
I quieted my thoughts, stilled my breath.

It began as an itch, a small one, low down on my back,
something that with discipline I could ignore.

I bore down, counted my breath, focused on my crown chakra.

The itch had become a tickle,
and moved higher on my back, disturbing my focus.

I held on, projecting a cone of white light
from my crown to the heavens, seeking contact.

The tickle rose between my shoulder blades,
becoming a torment, and I could bear it no longer:
I writhed and scratched, trying to hang on to my perfect moment.

What was this thing?
Was *this* the stirring of the kundalini energy,
rising up through my chakras, heralding my enlightenment?

No. It was an ant.

An ant had crawled up inside my shirt,
on business known only to itself.

It was stubborn and elusive,
and after more violent contortions, my meditation spoiled,
I removed my shirt, shook out the ant,
and spent the rest of the afternoon rambling over the rocks
before hiking down to the road.

I had come for a miracle. What I got was an ant.

Sermon: “Life Beyond the Breaking Point”

“It’s going to get worse before it gets better.”

We’ve all heard it.

We’ve probably thought it.

We’ve, maybe, even said it out loud at some point in our lives.

“Things are going to get a whole lot worse
before they start to turn around.”

On some level, we know that hard things happen.

We take appropriate precautions.

We gird ourselves against catastrophe, to the degree that we can.

Yet, often, our most effective strategy can be to simply pretend that, if hard things happen, they won’t happen to us.

In our growing quest for immediate gratification,
in our pop-a-pill culture,
we can easily be seduced into believing
this life can be lived without hardship—
that we can guard against vulnerability
by making ourselves somehow invincible
to the sometimes harsh realities of the human condition.

I find this tendency in others—
and I certainly sometimes find it in myself:
a misplaced sense of entitlement,
a charmed but false notion
that life somehow should be free of struggle,
that life somehow could be free of struggle.

And so suffering comes to us so often as a surprise—
when we are startled to learn—to really learn—
the almost unbearable truth
that there isn’t necessarily a cure for everything that ails us.

You could argue that we come by such surprise honestly enough.

We are bombarded with endless offers
of magic potions and potent elixirs—
the promise that there are shortcuts to well-being,
that happiness can be bought,
that more stuff—the right stuff—will set us free or protect us.

It is a powerful mythology—
and it makes for a provocative and popular religion for our times,
a religion now practised far and wide to devastating effect—
to our bodies, our souls, our relationships, and our planet.

A religion that says that we can have, and be, and become,
without ever counting the costs—because there are none.

This is a religion I mindlessly practise more than I care to admit,
and I'm guessing that maybe you do, too.

But, it isn't my true religion—and I suspect it's not yours, either.

If we desire to live a life of integrity, though,
we must summon the courage to look at our lives,
to grapple with the distance—however great or small—
between our true religion and our lived religion,
between our highest ideals
and how we actually spend our days on this earth.

Doing so is some of the most vital work
we undertake in this world.

I believe it is the work that draws us together into community.

And, I believe it is why you've come to this place—
because you long to make the religion that you profess
the religion that you practise.

That is the shortest, simplest definition I know
of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist.

But, too often as Unitarian Universalists,
we settle for an easygoing, low-cost religion,

rather than engage ourselves in a genuine quest
for deeper, richer meaning,
rather than let our religion require something of us—
something real, and something
that may well come at a very precious price.

Unitarian Universalism is frequently misunderstood
as a do-what-you-want, believe-what-you-will religion,
but it's not that simple, and it's not that easy.

Undertaken with intention, I find it to be
one of the most demanding religions of all—
because our faith asks us to put our values into practice,
to be awake to the world and of our place in it.

While this faith offers tremendous latitude
for each of us to work out the core of our own beliefs,
this same freedom can carry with it a great danger.

If we're not careful, in our picking and choosing,
we can skip over the challenges and the harder bits,
and, in the process, assemble for ourselves
a faith that's a little light on nutrients.

It can be like going through the buffet line
and, somehow, ending up with a plate full of desserts.

It may taste great, but it won't sustain you over the long haul.

An enduring faith is forged
in the crucible of struggle with life *as it is*—
with all of its complications and contradictions,
all of its challenges and reversals,
all of its headaches, and all of its heartache.

A faith that endures must come face to face with vulnerability.

This, for me, is the bittersweet lesson
in the reading I shared with you earlier.

Philip Simmons tells us that he hiked to the mountaintop,
sat meditating at the base of an ancient tree,
and just waited for his enlightenment to arrive.

Yet, his glorious entry into nirvana never came.

Instead, what he got was a bug bite
and the insight that maybe the miracle he was seeking
was actually the ant itself.

He writes:

More than in those ancient trees,
more than in the mountains,
more than in the vast space stretching out before me,
the true nature of [the sacred] was revealed to me
in the humble climbing of an ant,
[seeking out] an intriguing smell, perhaps,
or the pleasing salty taste of skin.

It was the ant that returned me to the world,
that called me to another way of worship,
the way of all things ordinary and small,
the way of all that is imperfect,
the way of stubbornness and error,
the way of all that is transitory and comes to grief.

The ant was my messenger,
calling me back to a world that in truth I had never left.

Friends, true religion calls us into the world, not out of it.
It calls us to contend with the hardship
that is at the very heart of our being human.

And, sometimes, it bites.
Sometimes, it stings.

While I'm moved by Simmons' insights about the ant,
what makes his story all the more powerful

is that when it was written,
Simmons was a relatively young man who knew he was dying.

Diagnosed with ALS,
the degenerative and fatal condition
that would eventually take his life
by slowly paralyzing his body,
he was coming to terms, both literally and figuratively,
with “learning to fall”—what he describes as
our “work of learning to live richly in the face of loss.”¹

He goes on to say that he found strength
in embracing the paradox that “we deal most fruitfully with loss
by accepting the fact that we will one day lose everything.”

“When we learn to fall,” he says,
“we learn that only by letting go [of] our grip
on all that we ordinarily find most precious—
our achievements, our plans, our loved ones, our very selves—
[only then] can we find, ultimately, the most profound freedom.

In the act of letting go of our lives, we return more fully to them.”

As profound an insight as this is, it isn’t entirely new.

It was central to the teachings of the Buddha.

It was key to the message of Jesus,
who taught that we find our lives in losing them.

It is a lesson that any of us can learn
when we are awake to our lives.

It may not sound, at first, to be especially Unitarian Universalist.

Proudly independent and self-reliant,
we don’t often talk of giving up our grip on life,
of letting go of our control—or at least our illusions of it—
yet we are, of course,

¹ Philip Simmons, *Learning to Fall: Blessings of an Imperfect Life*, xi.

made of the very same stuff as everyone else.

Our bodies give out.
Sadness can fall across our lives at any moment.
Tragedy can strike us like anyone else—and most certainly does.

When the fault lines
running just beneath the surface of our lives shift,
and all we thought we knew of ourselves
and our place in the world is suddenly upended,
we are left with that most primal human question:
what on earth do I do now?

Simmons, who was for many years
the editor of the *UU World Magazine*,
says that we simply have to *learn to fall*.

He says that, “When we learn to fall we learn to accept
the vulnerability that is our human endowment,
the cost of walking upright on the earth.”²

Shortly before he died at the age of 45,
having beaten the odds and lived for a decade with ALS,
Simmons’ alma mater, Amherst College
awarded him an honorary doctorate,
commending him for:
“confronting the very palpable evidence of his own mortality.”

Would that it were so—that we all might earn such a degree.

My colleague Victoria Safford points out that:
“[Simmons] did all that writing, and all that listening,
watching, noticing, loving the world, while he was wasting away.”

“Which,” she so astutely adds,
“is what all of us are doing, at various velocities.”³

And, so we are.

² Simmons, p. 11.

³ Victoria Safford, “Practising Imperfection.”

“Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.”

But the trick in learning to fall—
is to fall *with* grace and to fall *to* grace—
to fall into life, even as we fall towards our death.

For in doing so, we may well find our way to freedom
and to the fullness of life itself.

To be sure, on the way down, there will always be ants—
those tiny messengers of the divine,
calling us through pain and distraction,
to notice and to cherish what it means to be fully alive.

Now, this isn't in any way a call to glorify suffering,
but, instead, an invitation to use it—
after all, it's so abundantly available in this world of ours—
to use it as a tool that unlocks our soul
and opens us up to the fullness of our own lives.

In the meditation words earlier,
Robert Walsh says that when
“the great plates slip and the earth shivers
and the flaw is seen to lie in what you trusted most,
look not to more solidity, to weighty slabs of concrete poured
or strength of cantilevered beam to save the fractured order.”

“Trust more,” he says,
“trust more the tensile strands of love that bend and stretch
to hold you in the web of life
that's often torn but always healing.”⁴

Such trust can be so hard to come by.
And our resistance to the fundamental fact of our vulnerability so great.

It can be difficult to trust that if we fall—when we inevitably fall—
that we will be caught and held,
cradled in the arms of something bigger and beyond us.

⁴ Robert Walsh, “Fault Lines” from *Noisy Stones*, Skinner House, 1992.

But, may that fear—that fear of falling—be to us a teacher.

May our fear of falling point us directly to our vulnerability,
that we might see it for what it is—
our most common bond with every other person on this planet.

For when we are truly mindful of the vulnerability
that binds us to one another,
we can't help but reach out our own arms
to form those “tensile strands of love.”

To form the great web of life that can hold each of us,
in our time of need, amid life's struggles and set-backs.

May building that web, of life and of love, be our work in this world.

May that be the religion we practise.

May that be the labour of our hands and our hearts,
this day, and every day
that we are given upon this good green earth.

Amen.

Closing Words from Philip Simmons

“We are all—all of us—falling. We are all, now, this moment, in the midst of that descent, fallen from heights that may now seem only a dimly remembered dream, falling toward a depth we can only imagine. . .

And, so let us pray that if we are falling from grace, . . . , let us also fall *with* grace, *to* grace. If we are falling toward pain and weakness, let us also fall toward sweetness and strength. [And,] if we are falling toward death, let us also fall toward life.”