

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service *The Spiritual Disciplines* January 23, 2011

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**Prelude**

**Chalice Lighting**

We light this candle  
For the light of truth and reason  
For the warmth of love and friendship  
For the flame of strength and action  
And for the vision of tolerance and justice.

**Opening Hymn**

Please join me standing as you are able in our opening hymn No. 389 “Gathered Here”

**Announcements**

**John Pepper**

Visitors, Welcome! We are happy to have you here.

(Pause)

If you would like, please sign our guest book on the table in the entryway and give your address or email if you want to receive our newsletter. If you would like to become a member, please pick up one of our application forms also located on the table and put it in the offering plate or look it over and turn it in when you feel ready.

Next week our guest speaker will be Dr. Matthew Rowe, professor of biology at SHSU. The title of his talk will be: “The Extinction Crisis: Why Should We Care?”

This month we are giving our special collection to the Rita B. Huff Humane Society here in Huntsville.

This is potluck Sunday so please stay if you can.

Are there any other announcements from the floor?

**Opening Words**

**John Pepper**

I declare a Sabbath Day – to walk in the wilderness of enlarged perceptions;

I declare a release from work – to nourish the stamina to pursue ideals;

I declare a special hour – to help cherish life’s joys and combat life’s sorrows;

I declare a reign of holiness – to deepen our grounding in the sustaining mystery.

I declare a time for simply being and letting go, for rediscovering great, forgotten truths,  
for basking in the arts of the ages, and for learning how to live again.

The Rev. David O. Rankin, *UU World*, Winter 2008

**Hymn**

**John Pepper**

Please join me standing as you are able singing hymn No. 360 "Here We Have  
Gathered."

**Joys and Concerns**

**John Pepper**

As an expression of our connectedness and community, you are invited to come forward  
and share a joy, sorrow or concern as you light a candle. Or you may choose to light a  
candle without comment. Visitors, you are also encouraged to participate.

Please form a line to my left.

(Pause)

I will light one final candle for all those joys and concerns left unsaid.

**Offertory Statement**

**Offertory Music**

**Natasha Satterfield**

**New Member Recognition**

**John Pepper/James Moore**

In a world with so much hatred and violence, we need a religion that proclaims the  
inherent worth and dignity of every person.

In a world with so much brutality and fear, we need a religion that seeks justice, equity,  
and compassion in human relations.

In a world with so many persons abused and neglected, we need a religion that calls us to  
accept one another and encourage one another to spiritual growth.

In a world with so much dogmatism and falsehood, we need a religion that challenges us  
to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

In a world with so much tyranny and oppression, we need a religion that affirms the right  
of conscience and the use of the democratic process.

In a world with so much inequality and strife, we need a religion that strives toward the  
goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

In a world with so much environmental degradation, we need a religion that advocates  
respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

In a world with so much uncertainty and despair, we need a religion that teaches our  
hearts to hope and our hands to serve.

This is not our creed. But it is what we believe in and what we are about in this your church home. Welcome!

(Welcome each by name. Give a flower and a certificate.)

We formally welcome into this religious community:

Helen Burrow	Amber Faust
Marcus Gillespie	Annie Glenney
Pat Henry	Matt Jackson
Thomas Jones	Bruce Marx
Sharon Marx	Frances McGregor
Linda Parks	Bob Peake
Karen Peake, and	Denise Tilson

**Resp. Read. No. 442 – “We Bid You Welcome,” James Moore**

We bid you welcome, who come with weary spirit seeking rest.

*Who come with troubles that are too much with you, Who come hurt and afraid.*

We bid you welcome, who come with hope in your heart.

*Who come with anticipation in your step, who come proud and joyous.*

We bid you welcome, who are seekers of a new faith.

*Who come to probe and explore. Who come to learn.*

We bid you welcome, who enter this hall as homecoming.

*Who have found here room for your spirit. Who find in this people a family.*

Whoever you are, whatever you are, Wherever you are on your journey.

*We bid you welcome.*

**Special Recognitions**

**James Moore**

Please be seated.

**Story for All Ages – *Zen Shorts* by Jon Muth**

**Reading – “Disciplines and Spiritual Practices” by Lucinda Vardey**

Largely through the teachings of gurus, swamis, and masters who have moved to North America and Europe and set up ashrams, centers, and schools, the Eastern spiritual

disciplines of meditation and yoga are being incorporated into the everyday lives of many now in the West. We have come to recognize these ancient practices as unsurpassed in bridging the gap between the realities of the higher Self and the soul and the personality of the lower Self.

Yale Divinity School professor and author Henri J. M. Nouwen once wrote that “through a spiritual discipline we prevent the world from filling our lives to such an extent that there is no place left to listen.” California psychologist Charles Tart’s *Observations of a Meditation Practice* offers one of the most readable and humorous accounts of a battle with distractions.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen master, poet, and peace advocate who now lives in France, shows us how we can nurture the sacred within amid the stress and pressures from outside influences in his “A Day of Mindfulness.”

Meditation techniques are for opening the heart, stilling the mind, and making them one, for grounding the soul in the body, for uniting the spirit in both. ...

The beauty of the human body and its powers of spiritual and creative expression is not always acknowledged in the Judeo-Christian tradition. But without the body’s inclusion in expressing the spirit, through yoga, tai chi, dance, tantric practices, (and other spiritual disciplines), all willful efforts to achieve wholeness are (made more difficult.)

### **Prayer**

**John Pepper**

Please join me now in a time of quiet meditation. Close your eyes, look out the window, center yourself in whatever way feels right for you. (Pause)

Words tell us of our thoughts, silence helps us hear our deeper feelings.

In silence, we sense the rhythmic measures of all life in the slow repetitive rhythm of our own bodies.

In silence, we feel the ebb and flow of life’s breath as the waves of the larger ocean in which we all live.

In silence, we sense a larger spiritual presence of which we are all a part.

In silence, we sense the coming and going of human pathways, knowing we can ask no more than to have reached out to others in creative and caring ways.

And in this silence, we know it is this human touch that gives the larger journey its meaning.

(Long ...Pause) Amen!

*Rejoice Together*, 54, Edwin Lynn

**Sermon – *The Spiritual Disciplines***

Prejudice is often ugly, but sometimes it is just silly. Last year Albert Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Seminary called on Christians to avoid Yoga because it was not a pathway to God. Specifically Mohler objects to “the idea that the body is a vehicle for reaching consciousness with the divine.”<sup>1</sup>[1]

His statements prompted quite a debate in the Christian community where many agreed with him, but probably just as many totally disagreed.

Just on the surface it seems odd to me that Mohler could so easily dismiss Yoga while not saying a word about prayer, another widely practiced and almost universally accepted spiritual discipline. Here too we use our brains and often our vocal chords to generate a prayer and thus attempt to make contact with the divine. Why isn't prayer also prohibited?

For me this comparison begins to get to the heart of the issue. Which of the spiritual disciplines are acceptable within Christianity and which are not and why?

Quite simply, if Jesus openly practiced them they are okay and if he did not, they are not. In many places within the New Testament Jesus prayed, so it is acceptable. On the other hand, nowhere does it say that Jesus practiced Yoga, so it is not acceptable.

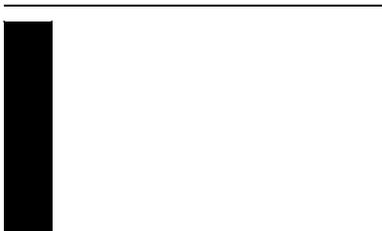
So there you have it. If Jesus didn't do it then it's not worth doing and thus incompatible with Christianity. By the way, for the very same reason one Christian church won't use pianos because they aren't in the Bible.

But I digress. I don't want to talk about silly prejudices. I want to talk about potentially beneficial spiritual disciplines. Ones you might use just like Yoga.

Personally I do believe in the power of prayer and yoga. And I believe there are potential benefits in the other disciplines as well. For many of us, most of the time we are hurrying from one commitment to another, we are bombarded by the TV and the Radio, or we are constantly around other people and their normal distractions.

We seldom take the time to stop and collect our thoughts and feelings by consciously blocking out the noise of the world and all its many distractions.

When we do stop, we often find we can't turn it all off so easily, we can't stop our minds from processing all that needs to get done or that's on our mind, and we find it difficult to listen to that internal guidance, the still small voice, that we so desperately need to hear that helps us make crucial decisions.



That internal guidance could be divine or it could be our own intuition, but regardless of its origin or what you choose to call it, we can't get in touch with it because we can't seem to turn off the incessant voices in our heads in order to hear our guidance.

Down through the centuries this problem has been a recurring theme and techniques have been created to help us get in touch with our own inner most being, that part of us that each of us trusts and that we will listen to and follow.

Practicing one or more of the spiritual disciplines simply helps us better connect at a much more intimate and aware level with our own personal being. I don't know about you, but for me this is a requirement.

From Jesus' time to the Reformation, practitioners of the Christian faith developed quite a few Spiritual Disciplines.

But with the Reformation, the Protestants systematically dismissed most of them as not Biblically based and therefore not worthy of consideration. And both Catholics and Protestants dismissed the Eastern Spiritual Disciplines as heathen practices also not worthy of consideration. And in general, Christianity has dismissed the Spiritual Disciplines of all other religions.

So you see, over the centuries this same silly prejudice has raised its ugly head over and over again. In spite of these prejudices however, spiritual disciplines from around the world continue to be introduced and they are all valuable to some subset of the community, religious or not.

Recently Protestant Christians have begun to reclaim some of the Spiritual Disciplines from the ancient Catholic Church. One author has broken them down into two categories: Disciplines of Abstinence and Disciplines of Engagement.

Disciplines of Abstinence include Solitude, Silence, Fasting, Frugality, Chastity, Secrecy and Sacrifice. Under Engagement he lists Study, Worship, Celebration, Service, Prayer, Fellowship, Confession and Submission. My reading earlier this morning mentioned Yoga, Tai Chi, dance, and Tantric practices.

That totals 19 and represents only a fraction of the Spiritual Disciplines created across the religious landscape.

My children's story this morning came from the practice of one of the Spiritual Disciplines. The author Jon Muth says,

“Zen is a Japanese word that simply means meditation. In Zen, the teachings of the Buddha have always been passed down from teacher to student. The Buddha's method of meditation was to sit very still, yet remain completely alert, allowing first one thought then another to rise and pass away, holding on to none of them.

When you look into a pool of water, if the water is still, you can see the moon reflected. If the water is agitated, the moon is fragmented and scattered. It is harder to see the true

moon. Our minds are like that. When our minds are agitated, we cannot see the true world.

Stillwater's name came from this. His character is based partly on the Zen artist/teacher Sengai Gibbon (1750 – 1838), whose drawings were used as gentle teaching tools.

Uncle Ry is based on Ryokan Taigu (1758 – 1831). He was one of Japan's best-loved poets.

“Zen Shorts” are short meditations – ideas to puzzle over – tools which hone our ability to act with intuition. They have no goal, but they often challenge us to reexamine our habits, desires, concepts, and fears.”<sup>2</sup>[2]

Another author, Anthony de Melo, wrote a wonderful book I am currently using as a part of my daily meditation and it is titled *One Minute Wisdom*. Somewhat ironically, de Melo was a Jesuit priest and his wisdom sources include a Hindu Guru, a Zen Roshi, a Taoist Sage, a Jewish Rabbi, a Christian Monk, and many others.

The following is from his book and it is titled “Religion.”

“The governor on his travels stepped in to pay homage to the Master.

“Affairs of state leave me no time for lengthy dissertations,” he said. “Could you put the essence of religion into a paragraph or two for a busy man like me?”

“I shall put it into a single word for the benefit of your highness.”

“Incredible! What is that unusual word?”

“Silence.”

“And what is the way to Silence?”

“Meditation.”

“And what, may I ask, is meditation?”



“Silence.””3[3]

(Pause)

Meditation and silence do go together and we often resist both. Usually when I lead a corporate prayer in a worship service, after the prayer I remain silent for about 30 seconds. Today I consciously went longer for a reason. Some of you may have felt uncomfortable with the quiet time and its length. Oftentimes we are uncomfortable with silence, we don't know what to do or what to think and we are ready to move on.

But silence is usually necessary if you want to hear what is in your heart. Instead, we are on a schedule and silence is sometimes viewed as a waste of time.

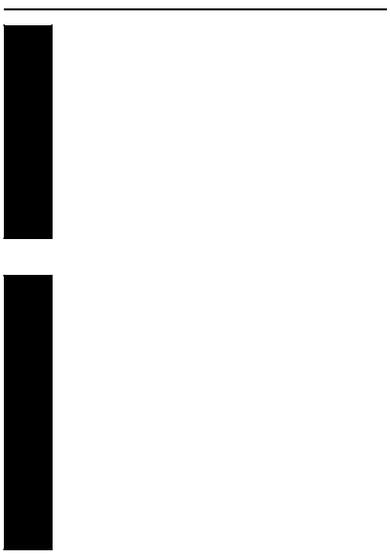
Dallas Willard in his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines* says, “In silence we close off our souls from “sounds,” whether those sounds be noise, music, or words.

Total silence is rare, and what we today call “quiet” usually only amounts to a little less noise. Many people have never experienced silence and do not even know that they do not know what it is. Our households and offices are filled with the whirring, buzzing, murmuring, chattering, and whining of the multiple contraptions that are supposed to make life easier. Their noise comforts us in some curious way. In fact, we find complete silence shocking because it leaves the impression that nothing is happening. In a go-go world such as ours, what could be worse than that!”4[4]

Silence in a church is expected and if you can't practice silence in a church, where can you?

In reality, our church isn't magical. It doesn't miraculously shield us from the rest of our lives. If we want to benefit from a Spiritual Discipline, we must practice that Spiritual Discipline, even in Church. To benefit from silence we must practice silence.

Martha Graham, the world renowned dancer and choreographer said,



“I am a dancer. I believe that we learn by practice. Whether it means to learn to dance by practicing dancing or to learn to live by practicing living, the principles are the same.

In each it is the performance of a dedicated precise set of acts, physical or intellectual, from which come shape of achievement, a sense of one’s being, a satisfaction of spirit.  
One becomes in some area an athlete of God.”5[5]

Yes we must practice silence. Unless you are a savant, you must practice anything and everything you hope to master, whether that is golf or cooking. The Spiritual Disciplines are no exception.

Once again I look to de Melo for another bit of wisdom he titled “Beatitude.”

“The disconsolate stockbroker lost a fortune and came to the monastery in search of inner peace. But he was too distraught to meditate.

After he had gone, the Master had a single sentence by way of wry comment: “Those who sleep on the floor never fall from their beds.”6[6]



I wonder how many of us are just like the stockbroker. I know when I am truly stressed out, frustrated over work or politics, that's the time when clearing my mind would probably be the most beneficial and yet I often can't because I haven't practiced enough. The Spiritual Disciplines can be of assistance in our times of need, but not if we aren't practiced at them.

But don't give up hope. There are other Spiritual Disciplines and one of them might be right for you.

de Melo shares this piece of wisdom titled "Universality."

"The Master ordinarily dissuaded people from living in a monastery.

"To profit from books you don't have to live in a library," he would say.

Or, even more forcefully, "You can read books without ever stepping into a library; and practice spirituality without ever going to a temple.""<sup>7</sup>[7]

Here he could be talking about another Spiritual Discipline such as Solitude. Yes you can retreat to a monastery to meditate and obtain solitude but there are other ways as well.

Today monasteries offer spiritual retreats without the requirement to join the monastery. There are even spiritual retreat centers. I personally spent a wonderful enlightening week at one on the Frio River just outside of Kerrville called Laity Lodge. It was built by one of the HEB grocery store owners and is available to all religious organizations.

But seeking solitude doesn't always require so much effort. You can also achieve solitude in your own home in a back bedroom or spare room before anyone gets up or after all have gone to bed. Whatever works best for you.

I personally get up almost every week day morning at 4:00 and for the next hour and a half, I have my alone and quiet time. This is my time to think and pray and write.



I like what Dallas Willard says on solitude but where he says “God” I simply substitute “The Interdependent Web of which we are a part”. He says, “Solitude is choosing to be alone and to dwell on our experience of isolation from other human beings. Solitude frees us actually. This above all explains its primacy and priority among the disciplines.

The normal course of day-to-day human interactions locks us into patterns of feeling, thought, and action that are geared to the world set against God, the interdependent web.

Nothing but solitude can allow the development of a freedom from the ingrained behaviors that hinder our integration into god’s order, the interdependent web of which we are a part. ... In solitude we find the psychic distance, the perspective from which we can see, in the light of eternity, the created things that trap, worry, and oppress us.”8[8]

But to acquire solitude, and the benefits you will gain from its practice, you will have to consciously create a space and a time for it. And in our busy world, it probably won’t happen on its own.

If solitude isn’t for you, maybe some form of action is. The Spiritual Discipline of Service, service to others, is something many UUs are good at and they perform service to others on a regular basis. Willard says, “But I may also serve another to train myself away from arrogance, possessiveness, envy, resentment, or covetousness. In that case, my service is undertaken as a discipline for the spiritual life.”9[9]

Last year after the earthquake in Haiti, my sister Ann travelled to Haiti and helped in the relief efforts for a week. I must admit I tried to dissuade her from going and I’m glad she didn’t listen. She says the experience changed her life and I believe her. Here are her own words.

“Before I went to Haiti, it was suggested that the money I would spend traveling to Haiti might be better spent in contributions to the cause. Either way, my impact was a drop in an ocean of need. I went out of curiosity. I have been interested in Haiti since I read the book *Mountains Beyond Mountains* about Dr. Paul Farmer who, almost single-handedly,



has made a dramatic impact in eradicating and treating HIV and tuberculosis in the region.

Traveling with a Baptist church and a couple of dozen people, we had safe, clean accommodations at the home of a Haitian minister. Our mission was to help in rebuilding one church and give our testimonies at evening revivals in several churches. I had never been on a mission trip before and had not shared my beliefs ever in a public setting.

The people were gracious and loving towards us. Education seems to be a priority but it is not ever free.

We witnessed schools that were thrown together with only chalkboards yet high level Algebra problems were being discussed. A couple of days we witnessed the parade of children traveling to and from school while we worked reconstructing a church.

With no running water, they had colorful, starched and ironed school uniforms and matching hair bows. The children melted our hearts. They played around us as we worked on the church. Many were not in school because they could no longer afford it. They seemed basically healthy -- no runny noses or coughs. (I was there in May -- long before the cholera outbreak.) I believe they seemed healthy because the sick just don't make it.

The air quality was atrocious. They burned plastic continuously. Garbage was just piled everywhere. They simply don't have anywhere to put it. The houses that we visited were always immaculate but there were no services for garbage removal so they resorted to burning it.

My experience made me so thankful of the services that are provided to me -- garbage services, sewer services, clean water, safe roads, reliable electricity, and health services. I can't even begin to list those things in the order of importance.

While visiting a school, I commented to a teacher that she would probably be happy when we left and quit distracting her students. She replied that they were happy for us (missionaries) to be there because the ministers preach a different sermon.

Apparently, they preach that your happiness is in direct proportion to the amount you give when missionaries are not around.

At some point, a young girl had convulsions and was removed to a room so that the demons could be exorcised. The Haitians are subject to superstitions but my companions joined in on the exorcism.

Both of these events made me sad. It seems that the people are being manipulated.

One of my fellow travelers was a veteran mission trip traveler and has been predominantly to South America. During a conversation of despair, she voiced this opinion. The need is so overwhelming; there is nothing that we can really do to make a difference. Our focus should just be on winning them to Christ and saving their souls.

I don't want to support only that mentality.

What ways did it change me? I would like to think that I am striving for a simpler existence. A manicure and a pedicure seem ridiculous now! I sponsor a Haitian child through World Vision for \$35 a month. I enjoy regular correspondence from them and the organization seems legitimate. I have a deeper sense of gratitude for all my advantages and blessings. I don't deserve anything.”

Spiritual Disciplines are practiced for our own benefit and for the benefit of others. They are practiced to reawaken ourselves to our inner most beings and to the Interdependent Web of which we are all a part.

The Spiritual Disciplines are just tools for our use and with practice they become more useful.

The Spiritual Disciplines are not magical or miraculous, but what they open us up to and allow us to see or remember may at times seem divine.

As always, the choice to practice them is up to you. And quite frankly, many people practice Spiritual Disciplines and they may not realize that is what they are doing. You can create your own!

The Spiritual Disciplines are there for our benefit in this life, the only one we have.

I'd like to close with one final piece of wisdom from de Melo titled, “Involvement.”

“The Master, while being gracious to all his disciples, could not conceal his preference for those who lived in the “world” – the married, the merchants, the farmers – over those who lived in the monastery.

When he was confronted about this, he said, “Spirituality practiced in the state of activity is incomparably superior to that practiced in the state of withdrawal.” Namaste!

### **Sermon Response**

#### **Closing Hymn**

Please join me standing as you are able singing our final Hymn, No. 352 “Find a Stillness” and remain standing for our Benediction.

#### **Benediction**

**John Pepper**

“Is there anything I can do to make myself Enlightened?”

The Master replied, “As little as you can do to make the sun rise in the morning.”

“Then of what use are the spiritual exercises you prescribe?”

“To make sure you are not asleep when the sun begins to rise.”

*One Minute Wisdom, 11*

Amen, Namaste, and Go in Peace!

**Extinguish the Chalice**

**Postlude**

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