



RETURN TO THE HOME OF YOUR SOUL SERIES

MAKING PERFECT

SEPTEMBER 14 | REV. T. J. FITZGERALD

I gave you all a practice last week. Who was here? You don't have to raise your hand because I'm about to ask you to raise your hand again. I asked you to meet with someone or a group for at least an hour to devise a way to stop the gears of fascism in our time in some sphere of your life. Now, who did it? Now, raise your hands. Okay, so-so. All right. Nice, nice. I'm going to send out a JotForm this week because I want to actually figure out what you guys are thinking so that we can work together because part of practice is being together. Practicing this powerful skill. One of the ones you were doing in that discernment. Discerning together what we can actually do and not doing it alone. Being together.

Now, there are other practices though that we are going to talk about that we can learn from in times like these. Things I can commend to you that have worked for me over the years. But first, practice, practice, it is one of the ways we make the home for our soul. In her poem *Alone*, Maya Angelou speaks to the home of the soul like this. "Lying, thinking last night, how to find my soul a home where water is not thirsty and bread loaf is not stone. I came up with one thing and I don't believe I'm wrong, that nobody but nobody can make it out here alone. Alone, all alone, nobody but nobody can make it out here alone."

In this instruction about a home for our soul where water is not thirsty, Angelou tells us that we aren't going to make it on our own, that we need to be connected. The most important part of spiritual practices is the way that they connect us to one another's and to ourselves. This is how they serve our needs in these times. If it is not practical, it is not spiritual. Does that make sense? Okay. Well, if it doesn't now, it will by the end, I promise.

Though much is different in our lives today than the lives of our human ancestors, even today we are reminded over and over. Most recently, by the horrific loss of life in Central Texas when the rivers overflowed their banks just a few months ago reminding us we are not so distant, not so distant from the spiritual needs of these ancestors.

What are some of the practices that we can use today? These is not an exhaustive list, just what I am thinking about. First, meditation. Meditation practice. Now, I do not claim to be an expert where meditation is concerned, though it is the cornerstone of many faiths while also being a non-religious practice shown to help with stress and anxiety, even pain management and more. One of the great challenges, one of the great challenges of any human life is sitting alone in silence with our thoughts. I see the land of nod, that's good.

I used to go to a zen center actually during seminary, divinity school. There was one four doors down from my house so I didn't have much of an excuse for skipping my sitting practice. The zen Buddhist tradition is known for its expert meditators. Many other traditions are too, I'm just choosing zen Buddhism. One zen teacher that Steven Levine quotes in his book *A Gradual Awakening* addressed his meditation students thus. I quote. "If you haven't come here to die, you might as well go home, you're not ready for practice." Yeah, okay. That's a serious teacher. Doesn't want a big class clearly.

He meant, I hope, in part the death of the self perhaps. This ego that we all carry around that can defend and that deflects, that can be injured, that is used to injure others and more. But the teacher I think was trying to evoke a recognition in the students of our fragile mortality, too. Practices like these come to us out of life and death questions, life and death errands even, of our ancestors and even those around us. Some say they would sooner go without breathing than go without meditation because life would be too unbearable without it. Serious meditators out there, take note.

Number two, moving our bodies. Movement. Moving our bodies in a way that connects us back to our bodies is essential. Now, go with me on this. Many of us through various practices we have with our phones or with other things have been disconnected between our bodies and our minds. We've introduced these intermediaries. Others of us have suffered trauma to our bodies and part of our survival was to disconnect sometimes our minds and our bodies from one another. Some of this deep work of getting conscious again, returning into our body can be done with moving practices like yoga or Tai-chi or, even running, a practice that connects our body and our mind can be powerful and healing.

I'm personally right now training for a marathon. A friend of my reminded me that the first marathon ever run ended when the guy running had died. Yeah. He was leaving marathon to celebrate the victory. I know I should get new friends, that's another spiritual practice I'm working on. But movement or exercise like meditation is something more than fun or luxury. Our bodies move in ways that protect our life, preserve our life and our quality of it, and also to help us live in this world. When we move in these ways, we call forth generations that depended on their movements to live, to protect their loved ones, to find foods, do all of these things. We are calling this back into our bodies.

Next, third, worship. Congratulations, you've done it. Moving on. No. Worship is an important spiritual practice. In Bell Hook's reading, she is pretty clear about the history of fundamentalist religions and the rituals that espouse in those faiths. She talks about how fundamentalist religion has placed worship and some of the things that happen in it in a place of privilege and of gate-keeping that she challenges as not being good for us. Here, we often get the question at this church, "Why do we call this worship?" Or, "What are we worshipping?" Let me just make it crystal clear and answer both of those questions. Yes. Moving on.

Our faith though is about practice more than it is about perfection. That is true in many forms of worship. We also talk about God here, something we do in worship that not all of our Unitarian Universalist sibling congregations do. We talk about God as a totality of all being and matter, time and space, and then some in a complexity we will never fully know and wrapped in mystery surpassing knowledge. And definitely bigger than a set of books written by a discreet set of people at a particular time in history in one small corner of the world. Our God has got to be bigger than that. Right.

One of the primary reasons our faith is called the living tradition is that it is not marred by rituals that can seek to control or subvert the best of human nature, the beauty of human nature. This tradition seeks to bring us together in authentic and deeply human ways without a special set of rituals mediated by somebody else. This practice is the lifeblood, the growth, the beauty of this faith.

Last, but not least, let's talk about prayer. We do it here in worship, we do it in our lives in different ways. So many ways to think about prayer, just a few of them. One of the best things I ever hear about prayer is to remember that the prayer itself is only a doorway, a doorway between what we are living and what we are looking for. One of the things we say here in service is our prayer and our affirmation, which is a version of pray with all your heart and soul, and when necessary use words. My personal favorite is that what is prayer except being one's self in the presence of the divine.

Now, I've heard some people say, if you're just getting used to prayer or just starting, one way to practice is when you wake up in the morning, you just say, "Please." When you go to bed at night, you just say, "Enough already, Jesus Christ!" Because we're all on a journey, friends. We're all on a journey to learn to say thank you at the end of the day. I will let you know when I get there. Because I know well and I know some of you do too, prayers of desperation and hopelessness and hard times. Not just times like these, but private times that other people don't even know about. Times where it'll take you down, and where loved ones are hurting, or we praying for the world, or where we see people or even children under fire and starving in this world.

For world out there and the world in here, prayer sometimes seems like the only answer we have. I can only speak for myself, but prayer is a matter involved intimately for me with life and death. I've sat with people as they're dying or their families are watching them die and that is part of how we do something when words fail us, another piece that prayer is. It's a matter of life and death.

But what is underlying all of these really? There's a lot of answers to that, too. Practices, or how we're coping with this world. But why do they all work? Underlying them all is really a life unto itself, a birth,

a life, and a death. A full time, timeline of our lives. In his poem Unliving, the great Turkish poet Nâzım Hikmet says this. "The Earth will grow old, a star among stars, and one of the smallest, a gilded moat on blue velvet. I mean this. Our great Earth, this Earth will grow cold one day, not like a block of ice or a dead cloud even, but like an empty walnut, it will roll along in pitch black space. You must grieve for this right now. You have to feel the sorrow now, for the world must be loved this much if you're going to say I lived."

It is this marriage of Earth that we are. And stars that we are also. Each finite in us, friends. In our bones lies this deep knowledge of our lives, of duration, of unending in our lives. Like the poets urge us seemingly ever, we know we have but the short time and no one does it out here on their own. As a faith whose ancestor placed in this nation's mind the idea that practice makes perfect, it is our work perhaps even more than others to wrestle with what perfection really means and what it does not.

Bell Hooks talks about her students, the despondent ones sitting across from her, and deciding at last to speak to them about what works for her. She said she had to be willing to talk about her spiritual life. That was part of her practice. "My belief that God is love," she says, "that love is everything, our true destiny sustains me. I affirm these beliefs through daily meditation and prayer, enough contemplation and service through worship and loving kindness. Everyone needs to be in touch with the needs of their spirit. This connectedness calls us to spiritual awakening, to love. All awakening to love is spiritual awakening."

This gift that she gives is one of many of us struggle with us here, one that many of us struggle with. We have our faith, but how do we share it? How do we tell others about it? Because I want to tell you a faith that believes in the freedom of conscience and used to being the odd faith out in some rooms, trust me, has a lot, a lot to offer a world and maybe still much to learn in a world where speaking your mind can be a death sentence.

A few friends asked me this week what I thought, what I was thinking of the killing of Charlie Kirk this week. The first thought that came to me is that any killing in cold blood is a horror. It is. For those mostly impacted, but also for our society. A second thought I didn't share as much is some fear I have about what a backlash could mean. I don't have a lot of time to talk about that now, we will only see what comes. But a second thought I shared with my friend was that at the end, at the end of that gun barrel also lies the end of reason. This ability for us to reason with others, and when that failure of reason is starting to be more and more answered with violence as it has in many ways. But now, more starkly, more painfully around political division is something we all must be concerned about, we all must pray for an answer to and soon.

Because when public speech, even if it takes the form of caustic rhetoric that counters decency and base civility spells death for the speaker, the home of every one of our souls is less safe. I dare say at this juncture in this nation, how we grow and hold our spiritual lives and how we share that life with other who need this faith in small measure or in great is a matter no less of life and death. Together, we face the sorrow laid in our veins, yes, from birth, to make it out here where nobody, but nobody will make it out here alone. Sometimes I think, sometimes I think before I was ever born, some part of me

was calling out into the universe, "Take me to the river, I want to go. I want to get out of here and live a life." Then we spring into this world. Then for all of our lives, our daily reminders are there of the journey we are on and the call comes to return again, back into whatever was before, whatever awaits us. "Take me back to the river, I want to go."

Whether we are humans having a spiritual experience or spiritual beings having a human one, the journey of the twin rivers in each of us is the same, is uniting, and is universal. Not just with us here, but with all the humans and all of life we share. Practice makes this a home for the soul now. If it is real, this practice, it tends to each of our lives' work, reminding us how we are both human and spirit at once in a constant flow.

May we all, may we each, may this world that asks so much be made better by the practices we can find, we can use and make real in this world. May the life that we balance amid the chaos, amid the strife be made wholly by the practice we make of it, by the lovingness that is an answer to the lovelessness we see. By the realness and the fullness we see as a response to the nihilism we see in the world. May all of these rivers collide so that we may at long last know that perfect blessing of a shared destiny, returning to the river that springs us each, sprung us all into this life and will welcome us home someday. Until then, take us to the river, we want to go. May it ever be so, blessed be, and amen.