

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

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**“Brother Lawrence’s Practice:
Spiritual Gems for Our Time”**

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Brother Lawrence's Practice: Spiritual Gems for Our Time

Several years ago, when I was a new minister, I met monthly with a mentor, a more experienced Unitarian Universalist minister, something that the UUA requires beginning ministers to do for about four years. They don't want us flying solo, and that is a very good idea. My first mentor was Barbara Haugen, a nearby minister, who was a Pagan with a wonderful pastoral presence. I learned much from her, but she left the area before my mentoring time was complete, so for the last several months I met with Carl Scovel, a prominent retired Unitarian Universalist minister, and a Christian, with a beautiful spiritual presence. I was truly blessed by having both of them as mentors.

At the end of our time together, Carl gave me a book, calling it "another friend for the journey". You heard from it today. It's *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. Carl inscribed it this way, "Kathy, I don't think you'll cotton to all of this, but there are some gems – and it's short! Carl." Today I want to share some of these gems with you.

Who was Brother Lawrence? He was a 17th century French Carmelite monk who sought to live simply, to let go of all worries, and to be in unity with God – a tall order, even in a simpler time. Henri Nouwen, a 20th century theologian, wrote that Brother Lawrence reminds us that "prayer is not saying prayers but a way of living in which all we do becomes prayer" and that this does not isolate us, but rather "the closer we come to God, the closer we come to each other".

As a young man, Brother Lawrence was in the military service and saw much that traumatized him. Then he tried being a servant, but he said he was awfully clumsy.

Finally, he decided to enter the religious life – the perfect place for a traumatized klutz, right? At first he tried being a hermit, but that did not work too well for him, so then he entered a monastery. He struggled and despaired in the early years of his vocational life, and then found a spiritual way of pure joy and peace, and was renowned for his holiness. What wisdom he must have had. Wouldn't it be great to be able to learn about his spiritual practice, that so satisfied his soul?

Unfortunately, Brother Lawrence destroyed most of what he wrote because he felt it was unworthy. So this book is actually a collection of what few writings could be found after Brother Lawrence's death, by his Abbot, and they were mostly letters and a few fragments of meditations, augmented by the Abbot's own recollections of conversations with Brother Lawrence. This book was never fully accepted by the Catholic Church, having been controversial when it came out. It seems they felt Brother Lawrence was too independent in his spiritual practice.

What was Brother Lawrence's practice? In a nutshell, he gave his life over to God, completely, letting go, and trusting fully. To this end, he had an ongoing inner dialogue that was his prayer life. The Abbot described it as "a continual conversation with [God], a conversation free of mystery and of the utmost simplicity." His Abbot said that Lawrence was always governed by love, finding that skill and knowledge and thoughts were not needed, nor was penitence, in finding the way to God, only love.

Now some of you believe in God, and some of you do not – we are a free religion – and none of you are monks or nuns, that I know of, so you may be wondering if anything of what Brother Lawrence wrote and taught could be relevant to your lives. I

have found a few aspects that feel universal, and I believe that these gems would speak to anyone who seeks a spiritual life.

First, Brother Lawrence wrote in a letter to a Reverend Mother, “Again I say let us return unto ourselves; time presses down on us and each man [or woman] is responsible for himself [or herself].” We begin with Brother Lawrence noticing that the individual is the only one responsible for his or her life and reminding us that time is of the essence. We will die – he says that too, earlier in the letter – and we need to be with ourselves. Not always distracted with tasks, and the needs of others, and the daily problems, but returning over and over again to the center, to ourselves. We, here, need to remember this as well. Return to ourselves and take responsibility, for we will die, and this time is what we make of it.

Secondly, this inner conversation is a way to live lovingly and I believe it is open to everyone, whether it is believed to be a dialogue or a monologue. Brother Lawrence believed that he was talking to God, but I’ll bet that everyone who has ever tried talking to God has also wondered if they are really just talking to themselves. Well of course they are – we are – talking to ourselves in such a practice, for the mind is the best instrument, the only tool, we have for experiencing the divine, the Holy. Being in conversation with God doesn’t mean being crazy, or that God exists, or that God does not exist because we are also clearly talking to ourselves; it means that the Holy possibility of greater wisdom, of deeper spirituality, of some understanding of the sacred can only come through the mind, and inner conversation is one tool that makes this possible.

A divine inner conversation is an ongoing, minute by minute reflection, at least some minutes. And not the kind that we usually have: ‘Why did I do something so

stupid? She is driving me nuts. I wish he wasn't so much better at everything than me. How will I ever finish this?' You know the kind of inner conversation with which we often barrage ourselves. Instead, there is another way, a gentle inner check-in, a loving and seeking heart that reminds oneself of the good, the true, the real; and that tries to bring one's best to the world.

This divine inner conversation can sound like it is happening between myself and God, myself and the universe (– that interdependent web of all existence of which I am a part –), myself and my wise teachers, myself and my conscience or my own best self. When I was in the hospital recently I was grateful to have had a previous prayer life, which included memorized prayer, which came to me as a comfort when I could not read or talk or even think straight. My inner conversation was often just, “Gracious God, in whom I live and breathe and have my being, thank you” and I could rarely get much further, but it was meaningful because I felt sustained at a time when I could not breathe on my own, nor did I have a super good chance of continued being. Later in my illness, I was grateful to have the sayings of Jesus to converse with in my mind, helping me make sense of the struggle I was enduring. And although I am a Christian, my inner conversations have sometimes been with other traditions – I've had wonderful dynamic dialogues inside my mind with 20th century Jewish theologian Martin Buber, for example, and with the witty figure of Mulla Nasruddin, a Sufi mystic of long ago Islam – you heard one of my favorite Nasruddin stories earlier. What are your sources of inner conversation? Do you talk to God, to the universe, to beloved teachers, to your beloved self?

I came across an interesting example of sacred inner conversation from a public figure, one who was partly raised by Universalist grandparents. I read an interview with Barack Obama about his spiritual life, from several years ago, when he was a candidate for the U.S. Senate. Reporter Cathleen Falsani asked Obama if he prayed and he answered, “Uh, yeah, I guess I do. It’s not formal, me getting on my knees. I have an ongoing conversation with God. Throughout the day I’m constantly asking myself questions about what I’m doing, why am I doing it.” He goes on a little later to say, “The biggest challenge, I think, is always maintaining your moral compass. Those are the conversations I’m having internally. I’m measuring my actions against that inner voice that for me is audible, is active. It tells me where I think I’m on track and where I’m off track.”

The inner conversation, whether with your moral compass, with God, with wise teachers, or with your own best self; this is the kind of reflection that both settles us down, and sets us free to be who we are meant to be. This inner conversation helps us to be open to love, instead of closed to life.

Third, from Brother Lawrence’s practice, we need to figure out a way to “let go”, to not hold so tightly to the stuff of the world that we end up trying to control what we did not create, and feel anxious about what we cannot change. Brother Lawrence felt that he was unworthy, wretched, and had done plenty wrong, which made him unhappy for the first many years of his monastic life. He didn’t quit believing this understanding of his wretched self, even when he attained peace, since he knew it to be true – but he did let go of it by abandoning himself fully to God. And he found that God lovingly embraced him, anyway. We can abandon ourselves, our egos, our controlling natures; we can live

with abandon, letting go into the fullness of life. It takes a lot of practice, but letting go is a wonderful possibility for us. Whether we let go to God or to the universe, or into each breath; in letting go, we open ourselves to peace.

Fourth, love is the center. It occurs to me that Brother Lawrence could not easily love himself – he knew what was wrong with him. Many folks have trouble loving themselves, for we all have such a front row seat, an insider’s view, on our fallible natures. But in Brother Lawrence’s practice, his love of God, who he believed to be in his heart, meant a de-facto love of himself. By loving the divine within, he loved himself; by loving the sacred in the world, he loved completely. I do believe that love is the center, and that love of self is necessary in order to love others. Practice love, practice it over and over again, for that is the only way we can ever get it right. That is what Brother Lawrence continued to do in his practice – practiced loving, naming it the love of God, but loving all around him as a holy consequence.

Finally, be joyful. Brother Lawrence is often wry, a bit funny, and I could just imagine him beaming with joy, for that is how he said he felt. Practice joy – it’s not too hard to do, really, and you deserve it.

Do not be discouraged, as Brother Lawrence taught, by the spiritual journey. He wrote this about a Sister, “She appears to me to be full of good will but she wants to go faster than grace. One does not become holy all at once.” Do you sometimes find that you want to “go faster than grace”, figure out your life already, find peace after trying meditation for the first time, live fully loving and joy-filled because you made it here, to UUFR one more Sunday? Slow down, enjoy the journey. It takes a whole lifetime, after all. Blessed Be. Amen.