



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

We Are Built For We

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We each come here – to this church and this community – for all kinds of reasons. Personally, I treasure the opportunity to be able to grow spiritually here through personal reflection, and by being touched by your presence, words, and deeds.

Each one of us also brings a unique perspective on what it means to be human, in our approach to spirituality, and our life experience. I find that diversity intriguing, rich, and beautiful.

My own spirituality includes a deep respect for the validity of each person's experience – of life, of grace, of those connections to the universe and the unexplainable. What you experience is what you experience. Period. Would you believe and accept that I have felt the presence of god in the rustling of the tops of palm trees? That I've glimpsed the soul of my husband by seeing deeply into his eyes? That, in the midst of depression, I've had an ecstatic euphoric experience that gave me the sensation of oneness with the expansiveness of the universe being able to see it in its entirety? I have experienced this. My evolving spirituality now allows me to experience these with amazement and wonder, AND without judgment or interpretation. They just ARE.

Being able to live and to describe – not prescribe – these experiences is a facet of mindfulness. Mindfulness is another way of knowing and experiencing, beyond our abilities to think and feel. Mindfulness. Paying attention in the present moment, with purpose and intention, and without judgment.

Dr. Dan Siegel, who I admire very much, is a co-founding director of Mindful Awareness Research Center in the UCLA School of Medicine. He says: "People who come to develop the capacity to pay attention in the present moment without grasping on to their natural judgment also develop a deeper sense of well-being." Mindfulness allows us an accepting and compassionate distance from our thoughts and feelings, as if they were clouds passing in an open, expansive sky. This "discernment" allows you to feel a feeling or remember a memory, and be aware this it is just an activity of the mind, not the totality of who you are.

I love science because of its disciplined and unbiased quest (at least as much as it can be, given it is being done by us humans) to discover, observe, and explain the world around us. For me, this grounds its conclusions in more certainty and validity. So science is showing that, as humans, we can change our own brain, because of its "neuroplasticity". Imagine being at the top of a mountain, and seeing one well-worn trail down. Your experiences in life build neural trails in your brain, and the trail gets more embedded as it is used. The practice of mindfulness allows other paths down the mountain, other neural trails, to be seen, explored, and developed.

As you listen to these words, take a deep breath – and exhale slowly. Bring mindfulness to your body, and notice how it feels right now, – and how even a moment of kind attention to your body can bring a more spacious ease. After only six or eight weeks of mindfulness

training, there can be visible changes in our brain structure as well as in the formation of more robust neural connections. I find this fact so empowering! We don't have to be stuck in our thought patterns!

Jack Kornfield, Buddhist monk and clinical psychologist, says: "When mindfulness is joined with compassion, it gives the heart a new set of choices."

I've been practicing mindfulness through guided meditation for many months now, and finding that my thoughts ARE changing. Both are present, old path and new path; old feelings, new perspective. But now, I have a choice. I get in a stressful or uncomfortable situation, and old thought patterns come up. The difference is now, when they visit, I recognize what is happening, acknowledge them, and even honor them for their service of serving a need in my past. Then, I turn to the new path and go down it instead.

Sometimes, for example, I find myself wishing I had qualities that someone else has, wishing I was more talented – like so many of you – or more outgoing with an easier time connecting. These kinds of thoughts drive down my opinion of myself, and it's not a pleasant thought path to be on. But I've witnessed a dear friend of mine regularly express his gratitude to others for their presence in his life. I've become more mindful of the space he creates, so in modeling him, I've come to develop a more pleasurable path. I can now choose to connect to others by offering, without expectation, the sincere gift of speaking to them of their qualities I admire. Mindfulness offers me the ability to both see and grow that new path.

Dr. Seuss' Lorax asks "Which way does a tree fall?" The Once-ler replies "Uh, down?" and the Lorax replies "A tree falls the way it leans. Be careful which way you lean."

Some mental grooves are so well-worn that they are hard to get out of once something has started you down them. It can feel like you're on the path of sheer survival – that you must hold on to a belief, that way of thinking. That makes it even harder to see other paths.

Neuropsychologist Rick Hanson explains it this way. "To survive and pass on their genes, our reptilian, mammalian, primate, and human ancestors had to get pleasurable things – 'carrots' – like shelter, food, and sex. Meanwhile, they had to stay away from 'sticks' – things that were painful such as predators, starvation, and aggression from others. From a survival standpoint, sticks have more urgency and impact than carrots. Over hundreds of millions of years, it was a matter of life and death to be extra-sensitive to sticks and remember them well. Consequently, the brain evolved a built-in 'negativity bias.' The results live on between our ears today, continuing to shape our experiences and guide our actions."

Practicing mindfulness helps the brain shift in the direction of approaching, rather than withdrawing from, something that is frightening or uncomfortable (but isn't dangerous). The meditation practice we did earlier not only helps us enjoy life more fully, but at its core, helps bring a needed balance in our brains towards taking in the good.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, former director of the stress reduction clinic at U Mass Medical School, explains that in Asian languages, the word for 'mind' and the word for 'heart' are the same. He says, "So if you're not hearing mindfulness in some deep way as heartfulness, you're not really understanding it. Compassion and kindness towards oneself are intrinsically woven into it. You could think of mindfulness as wise and affectionate attention."

Eventually, I grew tired of those sticks – the perceived dangers of failing to excel, not doing enough, struggling to fit in. I felt there must be something more fulfilling than the world of logic and achievement that I grew up with. I wanted to live more fully, and have deeper, more meaningful connections. I think having a child and wanting to be present for her - and for me, and wanting to have time and energy to participate in and relish the experience of her young years, really motivated me to explore other ways of being. Also, raising a child can evoke old pains that I thought I'd moved on from, but hadn't really been healed at their deepest level.

Mindfulness is also an effective practice for approaching physical pain. I figured out a while back that I could mentally go inside to the site of my moderate pain, offer it compassion, stroke it mentally, and tell it I was sorry it was hurting. Relaxation would ensue, and the pain would subside almost immediately.

Particularly with chronically painful conditions, Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction program helps us turn toward the experience of pain, get curious about it, and identify the differences between thoughts and pain sensations and between coping strategies that contribute to suffering and those that can alleviate it. It is not trying to force anything to be other than the way it is, only hold it in awareness. Out of that, the pain, and our relationship to it, can change profoundly.

Studies on cancer survivors show this program reduced their stress and lowered their mood disturbances. They also developed qualities of positive health beyond the reduction of symptoms, and on to finding meaning and purpose in their life, and feeling increasingly interconnected and "spiritual". Over time, they were able to see cancer as only one part of their life story, and no longer the predominant story-line.

Jungian analyst and feminine psychology author Marion Woodman speaks of her journey through uterine cancer in her book *Bone: Dying into Life*. "Simplifying becomes my total focus. I believe that failure to simplify could lead me back to cancer because I would lose touch with my life vibration – my tone that sustains my life force. The more I listen to my soul, the more clearly I hear the truth of other people, of animals, birds, the universe. One clear melody – like the song of a cardinal – sings out, and everything else fades away."

I think it's really beautiful when science helps us understand how an aspect of our own experience actually works. You probably know intuitively already what science is now concluding – that having close, supportive relationships are, in fact, critical to your health. According to Dr. Seigel, the more we study the human nervous system, we know that we are

hard-wired from the very beginning of life to connect in ways that are perceptive and responsive.

So, a little brain science now, with apologies to the professionals in our midst for any over simplifications I make!

What is called our “resonance circuitry” is the core of our very social human brain. When you watch someone else lift a glass of water to drink it, your mind’s “mirror neuron system” drives the experience of thirst you feel, and your “motor system” gets activated to carry out the same act. Studies have shown that the mirror neuron system is not only involved in imitation of action, but that emotional states are also picked up by the mirror neurons. And this engages your brain to generate an actual physical “simulation” of the other person’s mood, feeling, or intention, which then changes your internal bodily state. If you have the experience and wisdom, through mindfulness you can then ask of your body what it is feeling, and turn that internal perception into insight.

As we are imagining the mind of another, we are literally, physically being changed ourselves. “We” ARE built for “we.”

Carl Jung himself said, “The unrelated human being lacks wholeness, for he can achieve wholeness only through the soul, and the soul cannot exist without its other side – which is always found in “you.”

When we go deeply into the nature of our internal world, not only is empathy enhanced (which science has shown it is), we also dissolve the delusion of our separateness. I invite you to watch for moments when separateness disappears. I’ve felt it happen as I sing and somehow intuitively know what the composer is going to do next, when I share cherished stories across the table with a dear friend, when I held my mother’s hand as she lay dying peacefully, and now, as I share these experiences with you.

A wonderful poet and Irish Catholic priest John O’Donohue expressed this beautifully: “To be human is to belong. Belonging is a circle that embraces everything; if we reject it, we damage our nature. The word ‘belonging’ holds together the two fundamental aspects of life: Being and Longing, the longing of our Being and the being of our Longing.”

Science now extends what contemplative traditions have practiced for centuries. According to the Sufi mystic Rumi, “there is a way between voice and presence, where information flows. In disciplined silence it opens, with wondering talk it closes.”

Developing the ability to use our minds and harness the circuitry of our brains allows our relationships to be more empathetic. We can have a world more full of compassion.

And, we’ll need to keep compassion in our hearts as we move forward together into our next phase of ministry here at the church, and our next dimension of spiritual practice. Knowing

ourselves well and being fully present for each other are gifts we can offer in service of our own well-being and for the health of our community.

We each have the physical hard-wiring in our brains – and the power to alter it – for the development of a better world. We can dedicate ourselves to further growing our skills of connecting and compassion. I offer the path of mindfulness as one key way of knowing, of joining, of being more fully “we.”