



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Presence of the Heart

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Omid Safi is the director of Duke University's Islamic Studies Center, author of several books about Islam, and a weekly contributor to the online On Being blog. He wrote the following in a piece called "The Prayer of the Heart" on Feb. 20.

"The Prophet Muhammad was once asked what was the one essential quality for prayers to be valid. Many in the community thought they knew the right answer. Some thought the Prophet would say proper recitation of Arabic. Others thought the answer would be lovely memorization of Qur'anic chapters. Yet others expected the answer would be perfect ritual observation of prayer.

Muhammad's answer was: Presence in the heart.

What is this presence?

It is not so much presence of God.

God is always present.

It is we humans who are absent from our own heart.

Presence means to have the fullness of who we are with us.

What does it mean to pray with this Presence?

So much of our lives are spent in a fractured state of heart.

We are, too often, scattered....

To pray with the heart, to have presence in the heart, is a remedy.

It is a healing, an un-scattering.

Presence is simply to have our heart be where our feet are."¹

Omid Safi's words touched home for me, because in the past few months, my heart has neither felt at rest nor at peace. I have been overwhelmed with a wash of feelings—anger, outrage, sorrow, fear, and yes, also joy at small miracles of people coming together—and overwhelmed by the speed and intensity of these feelings arising, from watching the daily news or reading a Facebook feed. And I imagine that many of you, have also felt overwhelmed, from conversations that we have had, or by seeing the proliferation of self-care for the activist articles online. The volume and increase of issues of injustice, violation of civil rights, or violent public discourse and hate crimes have put all of us in, "a fractured state of heart," individually and communally. Living in a continual fractured state of heart is not healthy, nor is it sustainable.

This week I read a prayer for Lent, by West Hollywood UCC pastor Dan Smith which said, "Catch us in our anxious scurrying, God, and hold us in this Lenten season: and make us attentive to those things that keep us from living with you and with our neighbors on this earth." Both Omid Safi and this Lenten prayer remind us that one purpose of spiritual practice is to calm our anxious, scurrying, distracted and scattered selves and to pay attention to where the sacred is in our lives. To practice mindfulness, to be fully present in our hearts, to our bodies, to our souls, and to one another.

Part of my mental "anxious scurrying" has been the persistent question of "what can I do?" or "what should I do?" Should I be calling my representatives, going to a protest or a town hall, writing an op-ed, running for office, and also continuing my work, maintaining close relationships with those I love, and practicing good physical and mental self care? And as a

¹ <https://onbeing.org/blog/the-prayer-of-the-heart/>

person of faith, one whose denomination has its tradition of justice, compassion, and the inherent worth of every person, this question “what should I do?” is also a moral question, a question of deep spiritual commitments.

Our Unitarian Universalist Association and the UU Service Committee released a joint declaration of conscience which firmly states, “we declare our commitment to translate our values into action as we stand on the side of love with the most vulnerable among us.”² What a strong statement about where our religious commitments are calling us! The declaration firmly states, “We will oppose any and all unjust government actions to deport, register, discriminate, or despoil.”

Yet it is precisely the process of translation of values into action, in understanding how to actualize our commitment for justice, that we can also feel scattered— so many possible actions, with such urgency behind them. How are we to remain grounded? How can we engage in the personal transformation that social transformation requires? How are we to most effectively integrate our conscience, our beliefs, into powerful organizing, especially if our hearts feel so broken?

For a long time, part of my individual spiritual practice has been connected to the hymn we sing almost every Sunday, “Spirit of Life.” I have it memorized, as I believe many people do. I sing it to myself sometimes, as a way to calm or center, to be present to myself and to connect to my values as a Unitarian Universalist. Singing this hymn together transforms it into a communal spiritual practice, asking the Spirit to come unto *us* and stir *our* hearts with compassion. It gives voice to a Unitarian Universalist, “love ethic.” For me, “Spirit of Life” provides a declaration of the heart, rather than of the conscience. And in order to do the work that lies ahead of us, we need both our hearts and our minds; we need to connect our deepest spiritual longings with our public actions for peace and justice.

A couple weeks ago, flying back from a trip, after the first executive order banning immigration from 7 Muslim majority countries, the Muslim ban 1.0, I stepped out from my terminal at LAX into the middle of a protest. I had to take a moment to catch my breath, because the sight was truly beautiful. Witnessing hundreds of Los Angelenos marching, shouting, singing their love and welcome for Muslims, immigrants and refugees was nothing short of a vision of beloved community. And joining in the march felt like Omid Safi’s words, “Presence is simply to have our heart be where our feet are.” Or to quote Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel on joining Martin Luther King Jr on the march to Montgomery, “I felt my feet were praying.”

The moment when you feel your heart being pulled together, healed from its scurrying, may not be at a protest. Maybe it’s when you say no to going to a protest and instead sit down for dinner with a friend you haven’t seen in a long time. When you picked up the phone and called a congressional representative for the first time. Maybe it’s when you decide to take a break from the news and go on a hike in the mountains. When you went to a teach-in and had your mind opened and expanded by learning. Or it’s a moment of being held in loving community right here in this congregation. We seek these experiences of heart-unity because they are transformative, because they allow us to see more clearly, connect more deeply, and to grow as spiritual beings and communities.

² <http://www.uua.org/action/show-love/declaration-conscience>

So Neighborhood I ask you, when was a time when you felt transformed? What did it feel like? And knowing that transformation is sometimes risky and challenging and requires discernment and discipline, let us also ask ourselves, are we willing to be transformed? Turn to your neighbor and ask them, “Are you willing to be transformed in this work? Neighborhood, in the service of beloved community, in the service of justice and equality, in the service of right relationship and solidarity with our neighbors, are we willing to be transformed?”

Our UUA justice campaign, Standing on the Side of Love’s director, Caitlin Breedlove wrote on Jan. 17, that her courage for organizing for social transformation came from being in deep relationship, and, “seeing my political fate as tied to people other than myself.” These words have been inspiring me to see that one place I can focus my energies towards transformation lies in my relationships. Reaching out to old friends, checking in with people, deepening relationships through heart-felt conversations—this listening to one another is vital.

Before “building bridges not walls” was a protest sign, Neighborhood Church’s Building Bridges Task Force was reaching out to our Muslim neighbors, and listening, supporting and engaging in transformative relationships. Beginning in 2010, Building Bridges has hosted numerous educational meetings and speakers, classes about Islam, breakfasts with interfaith neighbors, and initiated our church’s successful sponsorship of a Syrian refugee family. Last fall the Building Bridges supper had 100 guests, and this month Esma Ali is teaching her second “Introduction to Islam” class, with so many people interested that we will likely offer another class this year. Currently our congregation is working with Pasadena and larger regional partners on ways to be effective allies and safe places for immigrants, refugees, and other vulnerable people. What an example of the power of transformative relationships, of being willing to learn more, listen more, and do more in community!

Nationally, we witness other examples of transformative relationships for social change. Muslim communities raising money to repair damaged Jewish graves at a cemetery or calling for investigations in anti-Semitic threats. Communities repairing mosques damaged by arson or other hate crimes. Japanese American communities remembering the internment camps and opposing attempts to ban/register other groups based on racial fear. More and more we act out of our understanding of interdependence, of knowing that our fates are tied to others. We are living in a time when the concept of sanctuary is being expanded to be more flexible, powerful, and include protection for many different vulnerable and “othered” communities.

Again from UU activist, Caitlin Breedlove: she writes, “Sanctuary means we sanctify ourselves for the struggle ahead, finding (despite all odds) an inner place of hope, action and humility: drawing on inner strength to connect and build with the people around us to defy not only the evil of the policies upon us, but the culture of bleakness, cruelty and cynicism that they impart.”³ Inner sanctuary, a place of hope, action and humility within us that will give us strength to connect, to take courageous risks, to transform and be transformed. Sanctuary requires nothing less than the presence of our whole hearts, our whole selves, which means we must resist all that would scatter, divide, or distract us from being wholly present.

I’d like to close with reading another part of Omid Safi’s essay on “The Prayer of the Heart:

³ <http://auburnseminary.org/sanctuary-strategies-now/>

*“Our inner division, being disconnected from our own bodies, our own breath, our own heart is only one part of our lack of unity.
That inner division is reflected in how we as a human community are divided. When we are not one with our own heart, we cannot see the full humanity of others.*

*The inner and the outer are reflected in each other.
When we are internally divided, we will be externally divided.
If we wish to be united as a human community, we have to strive for unity and healing at the heart level.*

*We need the prayer of the heart.
By whatever form we pray, we need to become whole.
May it begin one breath at a time.
May it begin with me.”⁴*

My spiritual companions, as we leave this sanctuary, this community, may our hearts be united, un-scattered, transformed. Let’s heal our hearts one breath at a time.

Amen and blessed be.

⁴ <https://onbeing.org/blog/the-prayer-of-the-heart/>