Life is a balancing act. It does feel like walking on high wire from time to time, tentatively moving forward without falling this way or that. “Keeping physically and spiritually balanced, while whirlwinds of anger and oppression rage, requires us to discipline our bodies, minds and spirits,” Stephen Shick!!!!

I discovered when I sat down to write this sermon, that it was harder than I imagined. Practicing a spiritual discipline is one thing, talking about it is an entirely different – far less satisfying – endeavor. We should just keep on singing. But it is my job to reflect on these matters, and you don’t pay me to sing, nor – might I add - should you.

I define a spiritual practice as that discipline, that ritual, that thing we do, over and over again, which helps us keep balanced, be attentive, and alive. Alive in the sense that Henry David Thoreau talked about: “I wish to learn what life has to teach, and not, when I come to die, discover that I have not lived.”

It is all too easy to “practice resignation” as Thoreau describes it – to go through the motions of life without being fully present. The distractions of our day are even more available than during Thoreau’s time, though I suspect the driving force to be quite the same. Thoreau talked about going to the post office to get the news to distract ourselves from our inner lives. Going to the post office, at least to me, seems quaint and constructive these days compared to the hours spent in front of computer or television screens. Mailing a letter seems so much more productive than the sending and receiving of hundreds of email messages which overwhelm an inbox and disturb the conscience. Chat, chat, chattering, but have we anything really to say?

The point of a spiritual practice is to help us prioritize and spend our time on things that really matter. It helps us succeed in that balancing act which is life. Like many good habits, it can be counter-intuitive. We don’t feel that we have time to build into our days a practice that feeds us spiritually, and yet the dedication of that time, can open time itself up – making it feel more abundant and expansive.

One thing I love about our faith, about Unitarian Universalism, is that we can pretty much claim anything as a spiritual practice. I’ve preached on cross-country skiing, reading poetry, walking, waiting in line at the post office. I haven’t preached on napping, but as Bonnie testified this morning, that too can work. I am an expert napper, as my family can testify. One can approach any of these activities as a spiritual practice. Most of us aren’t quite skilled enough to live every breath of our lives as fully as we’d like. The practice part is that most of us need to unlearn some pretty bad habits that most of us have developed over the years in order to be fully present again to ourselves and others. We need to practice being present, because most of us have learned to survive the ugliness and violence of life by tuning it out, and we can forget to tune back in.

So, I’m not sure it’s helpful to most of us to claim everything as a spiritual practice, even though that is my desire... No, the practice part comes because, like anything you get good at, you have to practice. It requires discipline. Sometimes you don’t want to do it, and sometimes it doesn’t feel like you’re making any progress, but by doing it anyway, you get better at it and over time, can benefit from the results.
I like the categories that Andrew Harvey provides for discussing spiritual practices: heating, cooling, physical and shadow work. Heating is represented by the physical posture in yoga – the tree pose, which doesn’t look very heating, unless you stand there for a long time with your hands above your head and your foot on your thigh, I promise you heat in a few minutes. Cooling by the lotus position or sitting meditation posture, physical practice with the weight lifting, and the shadow work by a shadow in the sand.

Shadow work, Harvey believes, is essential for all of us because there are so many ways in which our personal and collective shadow have brought us to the brink of collective suicide. I’ve preached these words before – Harvey’s statement about our shadow bringing us to the brink of collective suicide. However, the last year of weather, natural disasters, school shootings and politics really brings his statement home. Writes Harvey on his website,

“Everyone whose eyes are open knows the world is in a terrifying crisis. As many of us as possible need to undergo a massive transformation of consciousness and to find the sacred passion to act from their consciousness in every arena and on every level of reality.”

He believes that we explore the shadow of the ego, the false self, in order to find the divine self. We do this with deep spiritual practices and the help of others. The reward is a much deeper, heartbroken compassion for all beings, and an ability to help yourself and others.

New people joining a church community, especially, if they’ve never been a part of one before, will often be surprised when conflict erupts. We idealize the community and assume good intentions, and sometimes church conflict can be particularly volatile – I can’t say I’ve experienced it here yet – but I suspect you know what I’m talking about. Well, conflict in community often provides this opportunity to do shadow work: To face our fears and pettiness with the help of others, and work through our heartbreaks into a new and more mature consciousness. However, one has to be willing to work through the conflict – and people are not always ready for that. Many time conflict in church communities will result in the disappearance of members rather than the maturation of them.

Physical practices are more straight forward – what you might expect: The physical conditioning of the body. Since we are physical beings, physical health can help us achieve spiritual health. Anyone who has experienced chronic pain knows how that can interfere with our concentration and attention, our relationships and good judgment. Things we can do to help keep our bodies healthy will also contribute to our spiritual wellbeing.

For the physical conditioning practices to be helpful to the spirit, however, one needs to approach them with the right attitude. There is an important difference between physical practice in order to become worthy, and physical practice because we value our worth. If you’re always exercising in order to feel better about yourself, at some point you may notice that you’ve not achieved that ever elusive happiness, and give up on exercise and healthy living altogether. If, however, you exercise because you respect your body, enjoy your body, love your body – this exercise can be a gift to your body and enjoyed throughout your lifetime. As I get older, I recognize the significance of balance in our physical life.

The New England Journal of Medicine published a study by research scientist Fuzhong Li, that concluded that Tai Chi may help Parkinson’s patients regain balance. Tai Chi is a Chinese martial art involving slow and rhythmic movement. It is sometimes called meditation in motion, because of its gentle, focused motions connecting mind to body.
Parkinson’s disease is a disorder of the nervous system which affects movement and motor control.

“In the study, Li divided Parkinson’s patients into three groups. One group did resistance training with weights. Another, stretching classes. And the third took up tai chi. Each group participated in a 60-minute class twice a week for six months.

“When they finished, Li found that the tai chi patients were stronger and had much better balance than patients in the other two groups. In fact, Li says their balance was "four times better than those patients assigned to the stretching group and about two times better than those in the resistance-training group." (NPR story 2012)

I share this example because I want to convey the breadth and width of the topic. The spiritual discipline of physical conditioning practice is not limited to weight lifting and jogging or running, though those forms of exercise can benefit the mind-body. Physical conditioning practice can be as gentle as tai chi or yoga – anything, in fact, that helps us stay in tune with the rhythms of our own bodies so that we remain integrated as a whole being, and as flexible as possible.

Cooling practices are perhaps what most of us think of when we imagine Spiritual Practice. You may be familiar with research on the brains of Buddhist practitioners and Catholic nuns in a meditative state. The images of their brains showed increased activity in the frontal lobes – the attention area of the brain, and decreased activity in the parietal lobes – which orients, providing a timeless and spaceless kind of experience. Harvey calls these cooling experiences, because we can use meditation to calm down the nervous system, to slow our breathing and heart rate – basically, to cool off, as a memorable scene from West Side Story depicts. Keep coolly cool boy – easy does it, turn off the juice boy. The Jets – either ready to fight, or just finished fighting – depending upon the film or stage version – are all revved up and hot, and need to cool off a bit in order to think clearly and strategize their next move. When the human body is in alert mode – the fight, flight, or freeze response – what we know is that we don’t think very clearly. The amygdala is in charge – the instinctual reactions – and not the clear thinking parts of our brains. When in that heightened state of alarm, what we need most is to cool off and slow down so the rest of our brain can operate more fully. Meditating, prayer, napping, can all help us think more clearly – you know how after a good night’s sleep you can retrieve a powerful insight that was lost to you during your waking hours?

And then, of course, sometimes, we need just the opposite. “This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism” preached Martin Luther King Jr.

Sometimes we know what it is we need to do, but we lack the courage – and at times like this, we need heating practices. We need a way to create energy and increase our heart rate – so that we take action. Heating practices warm us up, get us energized, help us move. More from the Rev. Dr. King:

“We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.”

That is a call to action if I ever heard one. Martin Luther King Jr., in the best Baptist tradition, knew how to heat up his audience. Even so, to get ready for speakers during the mass meetings of the civil rights era, songs would be led. Carlton Reese adapted traditional church hymns into freedom songs for the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights in the 1960’s. His choir would warm up the audience for the preachers –
sometimes they’d be performing at mass meetings 7 nights a week. The songs were sung on marches and in jail to keep hope alive. Heating practices help us gain courage to act, and keep hope alive when despair seems easier.

Heating practices – such as singing - are about channeling our energy – our anger, our pain and frustration, our grief. Heating practices can be used to channel that energy toward constructive action or healing.

In the village of Travesía, Honduras, where I lived for a brief time as a Peace Corps volunteer, I experienced the powerful heating practice of dancing and drumming. Particularly, I remember the wakes – when a villager would die, the body would be laid out in the living room of their house where people could come see the body and cry and wail, and then they’d go outside and there would be drumming and singing and dancing. You’d be outside for a while caught up in the energy of the party and music, and then when you felt like crying again, you’d go inside and wail next to the body. This ritual would go on all night long, until you were exhausted and emotions were depleted, and when the sun came up in the morning, it truly was a new day, the death had been processed a little – the pain hadn’t gone away, but you know how it is after a good cry – things were a little better, and healing had begun.

It reminded me of Irish wakes – my grandfather was Irish Catholic, and after his funeral, it was quite a loud party at my grandparents’ house. There wasn’t any dancing or drumming, but there was singing, storytelling and plenty of laughter.

The heating practices are about turning up the heat – returning emotion, felt love into action. There was a particular strand of Universalism that championed this kind of fervor. Quillen H. Shinn has been called Universalists greatest missionary - he was a leader in the later 19th century. “His roots were southern and his style was that of a country evangelist,” writes David Robinson. Thomas Whittemore, in Plain Guide to Universalism, made a distinction between positive and negative Universalists. The negative Universalists, as he described them, “merely give the idea of universal salvation intellectual assent and are not moved into action by it.” Whittemore wanted converts who embraced the doctrine with a living faith. Such Universalists, as he described them, “not only believe it, but they feel it; they love it; it is the meat and drink of their souls.” and so they preached it and they sang it and they held revival meetings as evangelical as any Christian in the country. Only instead of fire and brimstone, they preached hope and courage and the everlasting love of God.

Love is the spirit of this church which we sang last Sunday was written with that Universalist fervor in mind.

There can be a discomfort among us, I am aware, of getting swept up in the heat. There exists a fear of getting all riled up and emotional and out of control. After all, Hitler inspired. Unfortunately, I don’t even need to go there. I’ve heard good preachers in the Unitarian Universalist tradition misuse their power and while declaring the everlasting love of God, suggest that our God was just a little more loving than their God, which in my opinion fails to acknowledge our relatedness and serves to further divide.

So, yeah, there is power in harnessing our energy and singing together and preaching – but the power can be used for good as well as evil.

When we are dispirited and defeated, worn and weary, we need to come together and sing. We need to move, we need to make noise, we need to shout and scream and wail and heal. We need to encourage one another to act.
Sunday should change us, so that we are not done to on Monday, but present and attentive and able, so that we can find our passion to act, on behalf of our lives and that of the planet.

“Everyone whose eyes are open knows the world is in a terrifying crisis,” writes Andrew Harvey Spiritual practices help us be better, more courageous people... it helps us stay balanced on the high wire of life.

*Benediction*

Whether you need to heat things up this week, or cool down, whether you’re working with your shadow self or physical presence in the world, we need your best self. We need to join our best selves together for that ultimate balancing act which is life.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.*