Singing, as those who sing with the choir know, is a spiritual practice. In part, because you have to pay attention to your breath when you sing. It takes attention to sing. You have to practice. I define a spiritual practice as that discipline, that ritual, that thing we do, over and over again, which helps us stay grounded, 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, television, or phone 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. Like many good habits, it can be counter-intuitive. We don’t feel like 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. Karl spoke to that this morning. I myself have preached on cross-country skiing, reading poetry, walking, waiting in line at the post office. 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 we’ve 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 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. This may be where I differ a little from our worship associate this morning, Karl. But then again, he and I had distinctly different upbringings. He was raised Mormon for which there were a limited list of activities that were considered spiritual practices
and he was *compelled* to practice them. I was raised UU, for which, as I’ve just explained, there is an *endless* list of potential spiritual practices and they are all *voluntary*. So, of course Karl would grow to reject the necessity of building the practices into his daily schedule and putting them on his “have to do” list, whereas I embrace the discipline of meditating each day, whether I feel like it or not...

Sometimes I don’t want to do it, and sometimes it doesn’t feel like I’m making any progress, but by doing it anyway, I get better at it and over time, I benefit from the results.

I like the way religious scholar, Andrew Harvey, categorizes Spiritual Practices. He talks about Heating Practices, Cooling Practices, Physical Practices, and Shadow Work. This morning I’m addressing the first two categories, and I’ll touch on the other two in subsequent sermons in February.

I generally think of singing as a heating practice. *Great Day, the righteous marchin.* Gathering up energy to act. *(the song the choir just sange)*

The heating practices are about turning up the heat – returning emotion, felt love into action. Heating practices 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.

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.

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...

Singing can also be a cooling practice. – the kind that help us calm down and cool off when we’re overheated, angry, upset, panicked, or worried.

“The human brain is a complex, self-regulating system, able to integrate experiences of amazing complexity. In response to changes in the environment, our brains construct new pathways and reconstruct old ones.” Bill Harris said in the reading this morning.

Most of us are familiar with the research in neuroscience into meditation and its effect on the brain to cool off, or regulate the limbic system, reduce anxiety and the stress response of hypervigilance and worry.

The Prelude sung by the choir was more in that vein, of cooling. Calming the anxious mind, O Lord, please, hear my prayer. A soothing song, like *Meditation on Breathing*, designed to calm and center us, and remind us to pay attention to our breath. Prayer and Meditation are both considered cooling practices.

I think it helps to separate the experience of prayer and meditation from the belief systems which surround different spiritual practices. What we have in common are experiences, but what meaning we make of them can vary greatly. You know how the joke goes, that Unitarian Universalists begin prayer with “to whom it may concern.”

As a movement we are ambivalent about God. Some strongly believe in a God, some strongly disbelieve in God, and many are somewhere in between, depending on your definition of God. We don’t as a liberal religious community, hold a single view of God. But, we do as a people, share certain experiences of life.

Or like the Jets in *West Side Story* (or the Montagues in *Romeo and Juliet*), we know what it’s like to get caught up in a feud and to over-react and misbehave and hurt one another. When our emotions run high, sometimes what we need most is to cool down before we hurt ourselves or each other. Just because sword fights or knife fights are, fortunately, not a regular occurrence for most in this church, doesn’t mean our anger doesn’t get out of control, and we don’t do or say things we later regret.

*Just Play it cool, boy, real cool.*
You may be familiar with the brain imaging research with 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 the scene from *West Side Story* depicts. 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 or flight 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.

And meditation and prayer doesn’t just help when we’re emotionally overheated. Overstimulation is rampant. They’ve added televisions to the muzac playing in grocery stores. It used be that sports bars were unique in having television sets to watch games, now it’s hard to find a restaurant without a TV. And cell phones – how many times have you thought a stranger was speaking to you only to discover they were talking to an ear bud? The noises of life have changed and turned up. Quiet is a rarity we have to seek to create, rather than simply experience.

We have different temperaments, too, which adds to the confusion. What is noise for one person can be music to another. Some are good at tuning out sounds, while others of us have a hard time thinking when there are competing sound vibrations stimulating our ears.

Have you ever noticed how a sound you can’t identify can actually make your heart race and create feelings of panic, until you discover its source and you can calm down – that is, if the source is benign. We’re hardwired that way, and it’s a good thing. It’s saved us many times. But overstimulation can make us hyper vigilant and wear us down. We have machines these days to create so called “white noise” to block out all the disturbing sound stimuli of our lives.

I’m focusing on sound, but the same can be true for visual stimuli. I’m aware that not everyone can hear, and for the hearing impaired, sound may not be the source of overstimulation, but rather all the visual “noise” in view.

Yes, we need places of quiet and rest, where our heart rate can slow, and we can experience calm and safety. We need to reclaim ourselves and listen to the beat of our own drummer, as Thoreau might suggest. To be referring always to outside stimuli, we can lose our own sense of self and sanity and wholeness. We need moments to look inward and listen to God, if you like, or listen to our true self, if you prefer.

We need to create a safe place, a sanctuary, in which to calm down, cool off, and listen deeply. I think of meditation as primarily listening and prayer as talking. One is receptive, the other is expressive. Sometimes we need to listen, and other times we need to share.
Religious scholar, Karen Armstrong, calls prayer the “verbal attempt to bridge the yawning gulf that separates us from the sacred.” We speak our longings and yearnings as a way to unite feelings and thought, or intentions with actions, ourselves with Godself, or our purpose with a greater purpose.

In the introduction to a collection of prayers called *Every Eye Beholds You*, Armstrong claims that in some profound sense, when we pray, we are talking to ourselves. This does not mean that we don’t also address the ultimate, since all the world’s faiths (according to Armstrong) “do not see the sacred as simply Something ‘out there’ but as a Reality that is also encountered in the depths of our own beings.” But she also acknowledges that people who pray are addressing deep personal needs and fears.

“We live in a frightening world and are the prey of mortality, injustice, cruelty, disaster, darkness, and an evil that can seem palpable and overwhelming. Unlike other animals, we humans fall very easily into despair.”

Prayer is the act of saying words to cultivate the conviction that, despite all the tragic and dispiriting evidence to the contrary, our lives do have some ultimate meaning and value. Prayer, according to Karen Armstrong, is not born of belief and intellectual conviction; it is a practice that creates faith. Prayer, like meditation, can help us cool down.

But sometimes, 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.
In the village of Travesía, Honduras, where I lived for a brief time as a Peace Corps volunteer, I experienced the powerful healing 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 awhile 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, story-telling and plenty of laughter.

We humans are complex.

**COMPLEX SYSTEM** A system that constantly exchanges energy and matter with the outside environment and which can constantly adjust to environmental conditions.

We are resilient.

**RESILIENCY** The ability of a complex system to handle and process increasing amounts of input from the environment without becoming internally chaotic or overwhelmed: a plasticity in the ability to respond to varied and changing conditions, showing a wide ability to adapt to changes in the environment.

We are aware.

**EXPANDED AWARENESS** A state of being aware, in each moment, of everything that is happening to create the circumstances of the present moment, in all its relationships and connections; the quality of being conscious.

We are curious.