Great Spirit come and rest in me. (the choir just sang)

I learned to pray while interning with the Countryside Church in Palatine, IL – when the choir sang, I would often ask for God to be present in my words so that the spirit could move through me or at the very least I didn’t block its expression. *Great Spirit come and rest in me.*

We are making the shift from the theme last month of spiritual practices to the theme this month of letting go. So, I thought we’d rather start with the spiritual practice of letting go of judgment. I know that much of my own spiritual practice has been to learn to suspend or let go of judgment.

I preached last July a sermon called *No Judgment Zone* and was surprised by the positive response. It seemed to have hit a nerve within the congregation.

I have long learned to not judge my own sermons – well, ok, I try not to judge my own sermons. After years of preaching, I have learned that the sermon I think is my worst ever will be said by someone else as my very best. And vice versa. If I go into a Sunday morning feeling like I’ve got a pretty good message, that I’ve really mastered this preaching gig, inevitably that’s when there is a decided lack of response by all who hear me. In my early years, if someone would walk out during a Sunday service, I might worry all week long what I could have possibly said! Now, I’m pretty sure if you leave, you probably have to go to the bathroom or attend to something equally personal, having nothing to do with me at all.

So, while I have become better at letting go of judgment, it does always hover in the back of my mind. I’ve just gotten better at not letting it take over. So it was that I preached this sermon called *No Judgment Zone* last summer and thought it was your every day Sunday kind of sermon, and was surprised instead how many people said it resonated.

My husband, Stuart, last week, in his sermon on the spirituality of songwriting, talked about how passing judgment too early in the process can stymie creativity, and I think that’s true with all kinds of creative forms. He spoke of the muse and that sense of something coming through you, rather than having complete control over what comes out. *Great Spirit come and rest in me.* This creative process is always mysterious – there are tricks of the trade to be sure, but there is always an element of mystery. And in religion, that mystery is our stock and trade.

It was in yoga classes over the years, that I think I heard the language of non-judgment first or fullest. When you do a standing tree pose, for example, balancing on one leg with your other leg up and your hands above your head or next to your heart, thinking too hard about it can get in the way. Judging oneself to be off balance can in fact make one off balance. And so I’ve heard yoga instructors remind us to not judge ourselves while in a pose, to let go of judgment and observe what is.

“Judgment clouds our sight; it’s like looking at a view through a dirty window. This technique gets us comfortable with just looking at things without judgment, allowing us to be present with what is.” Says
Pragito Dove, as she explained the first spiritual practice in our readings. “Try just looking at a flower or some other small thing for a few minutes. Don’t say ‘beautiful’ or ‘ugly.’ Don’t say anything. Don’t bring in words. Simply look. The mind will feel uncomfortable; it would like you to say something. Try to just ride through this feeling. Try to just look.”

In that sermon last summer, I quoted the Tao Te Ching, “the Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal Name. The unnamable is the eternally real. Naming is the origin of all particular things.” I’m using the Stephen Mitchell translation this morning. “Free from desire, you realize the mystery. Caught in desire, you see only the manifestation.”

Free from desire – free from judgment, the desire to be taller or shorter, or better or worse, hot or cold, free from that desire, you realize the mystery. The unnamable is the eternally real. Naming is the origin of all particular things. Ie – you take the mystery out of it when you categorize it and name it and put it in a box.

And so the spiritual practice of letting go of judgment, helps us notice things that we missed while we were naming them and categorizing them and desiring them.

For example, the word judgment can be spelled with two e’s or just one. You can spell judge – and add a ‘ment’ on the end of it, or spell it without that ‘e’ j-u-d-g-m-e-n-t. I never really noticed that until I saw that I had spelled it both ways in the written description of this service. It was in last week’s order of service, it is on our website. And my first instinct, when I noticed that, was to go correct it everywhere. Only, I didn’t know which spelling to correct it to – I figured it didn’t matter, but it should be consistent. Then, I asked myself, why? I stopped and just sat with my discomfort a bit longer. So, in order to practice what I preach, I left it – hanging out there, with two different spellings, inconsistent and unprofessional – hear the judgment in there? I left is as an example of my own letting go of judgment.

It’s human nature to judge – to make distinctions, to delineate, to draw boundaries between this and that, good and bad, yin and yang, cat people and dog people. Our brains are hard-wired to conceptualize in that manner. And the categories we create are not the things themselves. Sometimes, in the day to day motion of our lives, we forget that. We confuse the word for the thing the word is pointing to, hence my bringing in the Tao Te Ching, the Chinese classic text.

I was intrigued by the concept of a “no judgement zone” when we first moved here and moved in with cousins in Portland while finding a place to live in Vancouver. My cousin said we could live with her and her family as long as we left behind all judgments about how they live and raise their children, that there home was a No Judgment Zone. I really took to the concept – ‘you’re welcome here as long as you know that I don’t need your judgment.’ Hence, the topic of my sermon last summer and my continued fascination with the concept. I guess it resonated with you as well, or at least it did at the time.

I like pairing this concept with the spiritual theme of ‘letting go.’ Because it is about control. When we pass judgment, we control our experience of it, define it, and shape it. If we let go of that control, we can actually have a different experience.

In fact, a lot of our judging of other people, as one of the readings suggests, is about defining ourselves as “not that.” If we judge someone as racist, for example, then surely that means I am not. Thus the practice, to add “just like me.”
He is so lazy, just like me.
She is arrogant, just like me.
They are incompetent,
She is unreliable,
He is angry,
Just like me.

It interrupts that habit and makes one consider the implication of the judgment on another.

I have learned over the years, that those who judge others harshly, are often hardest on themselves... thus, Arjuna Ardagh has us practice the very hard statement of “the Dalai Lama is so very wise, just like me.” You might take a moment to consider which statement is harder for you?

They are incompetent just like me, or she is so beautiful just like me.

What if I am neither incompetent nor beautiful, but just am what I am. **I am what I am, I don’t need praise, I don’t need pity.** You know that song, from La Cage Aux Folles, made famous by Gloria Gaynor? The show’s Act One finale, has become known as a “gay anthem” for the celebration of one of the first Broadway musicals centered on a gay relationship. Or you may know the movie, the *Birdcage*. La cage aux folles means “the cage of mad women” but of course, folles is a slang term also for queens. And the cage – well, the cage is those ways in which we box ourselves in by terms such as incompetent or beautiful, straight or gay, liberal or conservative, male or female, republican or democratic socialist.... We can fail to see what is really there if we’ve already categorized it a priori.

And so letting go of that judgment, setting it aside, and learning to see a thing for what it really is, not what we’ve judged it to be, is a serious spiritual practice, with dramatic rewards. We notice things we’d never seen before and learn things we didn’t know we didn’t know. And, as I said last July, and still believe:

I am convinced that the only way out of our present human predicament – the climate crisis, the political crisis, the human rights crisis at the border and elsewhere – I am convinced that all these intense difficulties and dangers – can only be solved by our own evolution. Our own improved functioning as human beings, our ability to not react instinctively, but to make conscious choices, to make hard choices, to focus on the things we have power to change and not let that which we cannot control overwhelm us.

This is basically why I am a minister. It forces me to grow spiritually as I ask others to do the same. It’s not because I have the answers, I’m sorry to say, for I guess it would be nice to have the answers... Only I’m not sure there are answers. There is only growth and evolution and improvement, and that’s what we seek – just a little better every day.

In his book, *Atomic Habits*, James Clear claims that we need only get 1% better every day. He writes, “It is so easy to overestimate the importance of one defining moment and underestimate the value of making small improvements on a daily basis. Too often, we convince ourselves that massive success requires massive action. Whether it is losing weight, building a business, writing a book, winning a championship, or achieving any other goal, we put pressure on ourselves to make some earth-shattering improvement that everyone will talk about. Meanwhile, improving by 1 percent isn’t particularly
notable – sometimes it isn’t even noticeable – but it can be far more meaningful, especially in the long run.” “Habits are the compound interest of improvement,” he writes.

This reminds me of spiritual experiences – we’re always seeking those big, peak, gigantic spiritual moments when God speaks to us, or the Universe opens up, or a major awareness is thrust in our way – but the truth is, many small moments are available to us each and every day, with each and every breath. And learning how to let go of judgment is a one way to make that 1% improvement each day – focusing on what is, rather than what we think is.

Letting go of judgment, letting go of control, letting go.

It’s not easy for us. This seems to be one of the characteristics of white supremacy culture in which the U.S. and our UU churches are saturated. Culture being powerful as it is all around us and hard to identify. But if you have a hard time letting go, it is not just you. We celebrate clinging and hanging on and perseverance. And there is some benefit to perseverance, but not when it is hanging on to control and power. By sharing our power, we always accomplish more. “Free from desire, you realize the mystery. Caught in desire, you see only the manifestation.”

One thing I learned in the Peace Corps, which I thought at the time was about Peace Corps culture, but now I think is about life in the developing world…. Is that we are dependent upon one another, and our job is to work ourselves out of a job – that is, to make sure others can do what it is we’ve learned to do and that we learn from others their important contribution so we can carry it on after they have gone. We are not individuals which begin and end with our lives, but organic, living, breathing communities, connected in ways we both recognize and miss.

It is particular to the Peace Corps that we must work ourselves out of a job, as we go into countries on short term assignments – being there 2 or 3 years at most. And we are there explicitly to share skills and teach others to carry on our projects after we leave.

But isn’t it also true that our lives are all short-term assignments? For this world existed before your birth and it is our greatest hope that it will continue after our deaths. We had no control of our birth and have little control of our death, so why would we all of a sudden expect to control our lives to the extent many of us have been taught? Loosen, loosen, baby, you don’t have to carry the weight of the world in your muscles and bones. Let go, let go, let go.

Letting go of judgment is just one way we can learn to let go of control. And it is a deep spiritual practice that reaps its rewards. We can see things we didn’t know were there, we learn things we didn’t know we didn’t know, and we evolve.

Great Spirit come and rest in me. Because there is a mystery that I cannot name, cannot judge, cannot explain, but it is there just the same: A river flowin in my soul, a sense of life pulsing in my veins; a life I did not create and a life that will end, despite all efforts to thwart that ending.

When we let go of those big things we cannot control, we are left with the little ones we can. Those habits the size of atoms. The awareness of my breath, the lovingkindness with which I approach myself and others, the decision to let go of judgment for a time, and engage in the spiritual discipline of attention and awareness and awakeness. There’s a river flowin’ in my soul and it’s tellin’ me that I’m somebody and you are somebody too.