

“Spiritual Tools for Today’s Tough Times”
By Rev. Kim D. Wilson
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos
September 25, 2016

So, what do you all think about our presidential candidates? Is anyone anxious about how the election is going to turn out? And what about everything else that’s happening in the world? Does it seem like things keep getting worse and worse?

I don’t have to tell anyone here that we are living in unprecedented times. So much of what’s happening in the world today is truly awful, and it can lead us to feel burdened and worried. Historically, we humans have always had to deal with fear, but there are two differences today that add to the weight of our concerns.

Not long ago, I was having a conversation with the daughter of a friend of mine, a very bright young woman in her mid-twenties. And she said matter-of-factly, “I think it’s pretty clear that humans as a species will become extinct at some point.” I had never heard anyone state this as a fact. But, she has lived her whole life knowing that we have the capacity to wipe ourselves out. Previous generations haven’t had to carry that weight.

The other thing is that we now have easy and quick access to news around the globe, thanks to the Internet. Gene and I don’t have TV, by choice, so for a long time I checked the news on my computer, usually once a day. When I got my iPhone, I downloaded Yahoo News. There’s a morning and an evening edition. So I was checking the news twice a day.

Then, I added BBC News, which updates all day long, as news stories develop. That means I can now check the news whenever I have a free moment, if I want to. And I want to, often. But do I, really?

Having access to news 24/7 combined with the possibility of annihilating ourselves and the rest of life on the planet, I think creates an existential stress in our society that we’ve never experienced before.

Being caring and compassionate people, the level of concern we feel can be overwhelming at times.

These feelings of anxiety can interfere with our experience of ourselves as spiritual beings. What I mean is, we can begin to feel disconnected from that which is larger than ourselves; our sense of being a part of all that is; our relationship with a higher power, our wisdom, the Spirit of Love and Life, God or Goddess. We use many names to describe the numinous, but we all know it when we experience it.

Because anxiety stems from focusing on imagining what could happen in the future, when we're anxious, we're not really here. It keeps us from experiencing the present moment. Too much anxiety can lead us to lose sight of the essence of life: the beauty and the sheer abundance that are all around us, the love of friends and family. Anxiety can make us forget that we have so much for which to be grateful.

My message for you this morning is this: in today's world, we have to take good care of ourselves. Emotionally and spiritually. In order to walk in the world as the caring and compassionate people we are, we need to be present. So we have to manage our level of anxiety. We can't allow fear to drive us.

Taking good care of ourselves is not a popular message in our society. You will have to go against the undercurrent of fear that the general population swims in. If taking care of yourself sounds selfish, think of it this way: we are the vessels that carry a message of peace and calm to the world. We need to keep our vessel in the best working order possible.

In my own reflections, I've identified three tools that we can use to create a life that helps us balance awareness with equanimity. It IS possible to have an awareness of the world around us, and still have a relatively calm mind. More than ever before, we need to cultivate a life that keeps the bad news in its proper perspective. It doesn't have to dominate our lives or our psyches.

The first spiritual tool I suggest is, Limit exposure to the news. I did an experiment this past summer. As a minister, I feel an obligation to keep up with the news. I had started noticing that as I kept checking the news on my phone

repeatedly throughout the day, it was dragging me down. I was feeling less hopeful and more cynical.

So, it being summer, I decided to take a “news vacation.” For about two weeks, I did not check my Yahoo or BBC news on my phone. It was really hard at first. I think I had withdrawal! But, after a while, taking a break from the news became freeing, and I felt my spirits lift.

Limiting exposure to the news includes the election campaign coverage. It’s easy to become addicted to hearing what outrageous thing happened today. It’s almost like a soap opera! We can’t wait to say, “Oh, my God. Did you hear the latest?” I can engage in that, too. But I also know it’s not helping me find equanimity in my life.

Now, we don’t want to be sticking our heads in the sand like a bunch of ostriches. But we know that the news media doesn’t give us a balanced view of the world. It focuses on violence and other negative news because that’s what “sells.” And too much negativity isn’t good for us. People in urban areas who watch a lot of TV news will consistently overestimate how much crime is in their neighborhoods. The more news they watch, the more fearful they become. They are not so different from us.

As responsible citizens, we want to stay informed; but as spiritual beings, we also have a responsibility to be very careful about what we are putting into our minds. For example, viewing a lot of disturbing images can be hard on our psyches. We might be better off sometimes listening to or reading the news instead. Everyone’s different; you know best what your healthy limits are.

The second tool is, Have a daily spiritual practice. More than ever, we need some time each day when we can quiet our minds. A spiritual practice can be anything that helps calm the inner chatter in our heads so we can experience the present moment. It can include a practice of gratitude, which helps keep before us all the beauty, abundance, privilege and love that we have.

My personal practice includes both some time sitting in silence and a naming of some of the many things for which I’m grateful. And I want to share a little secret here: there are so many people who think they can’t meditate. They give up

because they can't silence the constant stream of thoughts for more than a few seconds. I used to think I couldn't meditate. Guess what? I found out that's normal! It's like that for everyone who meditates!

Two things can help: guidance and time. Guided meditations can be very helpful in keeping our minds from wandering off. Also, during longer silent meditations, many people find that after about 15 minutes, the mind really calms down. For myself, I usually get to a really beautiful spacious, peaceful place, with the occasional thought that seems far away. If you want to practice meditation, there's an active Buddhist meditation group which meets here on Tuesday evenings. There are even some very good meditation apps.

If meditation isn't for you, though, then I suggest spending time each day in some activity that keeps you in the present, like being in nature, playing with young children or pets, or a sport or a hobby. Singing, or playing an instrument. Whatever works for you.

The third spiritual tool is, Do something to help if you can. When we know about so much suffering in the world, it can leave us feeling depressed and paralyzed. Sometimes we call this, "compassion fatigue." There's so much need, we don't know where to start. When it comes to taking care of our spirits, though, **what** we do can matter less than doing **something**, if are able. Some kind of action to promote social or environmental justice that makes us feel we are making a positive contribution. And whatever we do is enough for today. I think it can be easy to fall into feeling guilty because maybe we aren't making huge sacrifices to improve the condition of the world.

As we focus on finding balance between awareness and equanimity, this may not be the time to challenge ourselves. If you're doing something small, that's OK. If you're simply giving money, that's OK. If you can't do anything right now, for now, that's OK, too. We are all part of this Fellowship community, which is making a difference. And this community is part of a larger community of people. Together, we give each other hope, when hope is hard to find.

So there are the spiritual tools we need for life in today's world: less news, more meditation and doing some good. Simple? Yes. Easy? No. We just take each

day on the planet and try to remember to take very good care of the precious vessels we are.

I close with these words by Maureen Killoran:

As we weather winds of change,
May we have the wisdom to cherish
Moments of stillness.

As we [live through] times
Of challenge and pain,
May we remember also
The graceful blessings of our lives.

As we look to future unknowns,
May we have the boldness
To trust that there is unimagined Good
Yet to come.

May it be so.