

**Everyday Spiritual Practice**  
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*Everyday Spiritual Practice* is an anthology of essays by 40 Unitarian Universalist ministers and lay people. They share their spiritual practices in five areas: contemplation, activity and nourishment, relationship, right action, and creativity. Those five areas pertain to engaging the mind, engaging the body, engaging the heart, engaging the will, and engaging the soul. In answer to the question, “What are spiritual practices, the anthology editor, Rev. Scott Alexander, responds “They are any activity or attitude in which you can regularly and intentionally engage, and which significantly deepens the quality of your relationship with the miracle of life both within and beyond you.”<sup>1</sup>

He continues, “Paradoxically, by choosing to embrace discipline and structure, which on the surface seems to restrict freedom and limit choice, you gain the freedom to become more fully and joyfully yourself.”<sup>2</sup> Spiritual discipline supports personal development. Discipline supports development.

If I were awarding prizes for various categories of spiritual practices mentioned in the book, these would be the winners. Most counter-intuitive spiritual practice? The martial arts practice of Sarah Lammert. “Some people enjoy prayer, meditation, yoga, tai chi – the quiet and calming ways to get centered and touch the holy within and without. While I do enjoy a small dose of such practices, what I have discovered about myself is that I much prefer kicking, screaming, and punching as a spiritual path!”

She continues, “To practice the martial arts you must use your mind to memorize and to plot strategic movements. You must engage your body, which you come to rely on to be both quick and slow, balanced and strong. And you must touch a place beyond mind and body, what in Chinese is called chi and in Japanese is called ki – the center of your energy, the soul.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life*, edited by Scott W. Alexander, Skinner House Books, Boston, 1999, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Page 6.

<sup>3</sup> Page 120.

If Sarah Lammert gets the prize for most counter-intuitive spiritual practice, who gets the MPP (Most Prevalent Prize)? The practice most often recommended (recommended by a couple of contributors) was keeping a Sabbath – making a commitment to reserving one day a week when we do nothing which we are obligated to do, Use the time instead for being with friends and family and for rest and reflection.

The prize for Most Intriguing Spiritual Practice belongs to Barbara Merritt, who nominates adversity as a spiritual practice. She says, “When searching for a spiritual practice, most of us seek a discipline that will soothe, comfort, relax, and nourish us . . . [yet] there may be no practice as transformative, as effective, and as ultimately beneficial as adversity.”<sup>4</sup> Adversity is anything that comes into our life which we would not choose.

“The important question is, What relationship will we have to that adversity? Will we hate it? Will we attempt to escape it, perhaps through destructive addictions to alcohol or drugs? . . . Will we withdraw into self-pity, depression, or whining complaint? . . . Will we become angry and project our unhappiness onto society, or other external targets? Will we blame our suffering on poor parenting, cultural oppression, historical injustice, or bad genes? . . . There is an alternative. The great schools of meditation and prayers and spiritual discipline agree that it is possible not only to accept adversity with forbearance and equanimity, but to use it to more deeply understand what is essential and what is peripheral in life. Adversity can be one of the great teachers of the soul.”<sup>5</sup>

I wonder, what are Unitarian Universalist perspectives on adversity? The Unitarian Universalist prime directive of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning leads to diverse perspectives on adversity. To bring some order into the diversity, I turn to the six Sources of the living tradition of Unitarian Universalism. The Sources are listed on the back cover of the Order of Service. What does each Source tell us about responding to adversity?

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<sup>4</sup> Page 53.

<sup>5</sup> Page 54.

Direct experience of mystery and wonder tells us, in the words of Julian of Norwich: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” In more contemporary language . . . there is good news and bad news. The good news is that this, too, shall pass. The bad news is that this, too, shall pass. ;)

Words and deeds of prophetic women and men (that means words and deeds of social justice activists) tell us that we can be agents of change. Regarding systemic oppression, if and only if we work together for social, cultural, and political change, we can improve conditions for ourselves and others.

Wisdom from the world’s religions generally advocate some measure (whether teaspoon, tablespoon, or 20-lb. sack) of acceptance of adversity. “The Buddha said, ‘To my best disciples I give disease, poverty, and dishonor.’ Apparently the Buddha understood that these hardships are some of the most auspicious circumstances in which to move forward on the path of enlightenment.”<sup>6</sup>

Jewish and Christian teachings tell us that in life there are times for lamentation and also times for praise. The story of Job, icon of adversity, says to me simply that we do not know why bad things happen to good people (or to bad people), but they do. Remember Sarah Lammert, the person who uses martial arts as a spiritual practice? She has this to say to people who say that martial arts are aggressive. “When Jesus said to ‘love your enemies,’ I do not believe he meant to teach that love means allowing one person to destroy, dehumanize, or hurt another. Perhaps what he was really saying is that the enemy is ourselves, and that we need to embrace and love the wholeness of who we are, both good and bad, in order to be fully human.”<sup>7</sup>

Humanist teachings . . . ah, my favorite. From the ancient Greeks onward, humanism tells us that integrity matters more than success. I find great consolation in that counsel in times of adversity: Integrity matters more than success.

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<sup>6</sup> Page 56.

<sup>7</sup> Page 122.

Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions tell us that there are destructive forces at play in life, as well as constructive forces. However, with intention, training, and the support of allies, we can tap into powers larger than ourselves.

Note that Unitarian Universalist responses to adversity do not include “grin and bear it” or “what does not kill you makes you stronger” or “there but for some kind of grace or for some kind of chance go I” or “life is short and then you die.” In my experience, adversity is like a guest knocking at the door, wanting to crash my party. As the party host, I could slam the door in the face of adversity, but adversity would probably find an open window or a back door and find a way inside anyway. I might as well invite adversity in, keep an eye on adversity, reframe adversity’s presence, and see if adversity adds anything to the party. We could check in with each other. Hey, adversity, what’s new since we last met?

I conclude with the outline of my personal relationship with adversity. Adversity exposes my shadow and my growing edges. Adversity reveals which coping mechanisms are no longer adequate. Adversity is a tool for self-knowledge. Adversity is like Miracle-Gro plant food for empathy! Adversity helps increase my pain tolerance so that the distinction is clear between minor annoyance and major challenge.

Adversity reminds me not to add to my suffering by resisting pain. Resistance may not be futile, but it is counterproductive. Better to feel the pain because resisting pain makes pain worse. Adversity spurs me to collaborate with others to change oppressive social and cultural conditions. If adversity is in the foreground of my experience, I do well to focus on the many things in the background for which I am grateful. They only seem to disappear when my focus is on the foreground.

A is for Ann. A is for adversity. A is for an attitude of gratitude. For those of you whose first name does not begin with “A,” best wishes as you put together a similar pithy statement about your relationship to adversity. Each day, may we deepen the quality of our relationship with the

miracle of life within us and beyond us. May we work together to improve conditions for ourselves and others. May it be so!