

## INSPIRATION

### A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro  
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“There’s a story about a man who wrote to the department of agriculture in his state to find out how to cope with the crabgrass that was spoiling his lawn. The department responded with a number of suggestions. The man tried them all, but he could not completely eliminate the crabgrass. Exasperated, he wrote the department again, noting that every method they had suggested had failed. His yard was still riddled with crabgrass. He got back a short reply: ‘We suggest you learn to love it.’ That is the art of **reframing**, redefining something so that it is no longer as problematic. It isn’t the situation that is changed, of course; it is your **perspective** on the situation.” [Frederic & Mary Ann Brussat, *100 Ways to Keep Your Soul Alive*, p. 84]

I need to reframe my attitude toward January and February. These two months offer a special challenge every year, but perhaps more so this year. The arrival of the New Year has come and gone. Winter weather lingers, even though we may have grown weary of its chilling effect. After all of the enthusiasm of the overlapping celebration of Martin Luther King’s birthday and the inauguration of Barack Obama, all of us (including President Obama) are faced with very real and immediate challenges. Each day brings more bad news about the economy, amplified by the reprehensible behavior of financial executives who have lined their own pockets with taxpayers’ money even while millions of hard-working Americans are losing their jobs. In Illinois the convergence between politics and personal greed has reached a new low point. These violations of public trust have generated a massive public outcry: **Who can we trust?**

In short, we are in the midst of a **spiritual** as well as economic and political crisis. It is times like these that try our souls. Today I would like to share some words of **inspiration** that I hope will help carry us through these difficult times. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “The ultimate measure of a [person] is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” [quoted in John Cook (ed.), *The Book of Positive Quotations*, p. 532]

At times like these, we need to draw inspiration from those who have overcome adversity in their own lives—who have not only survived but thrived in the face of life’s greatest challenges. A few weeks ago I attended what was billed as a summit meeting on the theme of “Excellence in Ministry,” a gathering of about 50 leaders in our denomination, including the president of the UUA, Bill Sinkford, as well as representatives from many different groups that make up our diverse faith movement. (I was invited as the co-chair of CENTER, the continuing education committee of the UU Ministers Association.) There was lots of highfalutin talk about the mission and purpose of Unitarian Universalism. But frankly what stands out most vividly is my private conversation with a man diagnosed as HIV-positive more than twenty years ago who is gradually working his way toward the UU ministry. His dogged perseverance and careful planning for the future in the face of this adversity was truly inspiring. He recounted a recent encounter with a young doctor who had very definite ideas about what his medication regimen

ought to be. Kevin pointed out to her that he was first diagnosed while she was still in grade school, and he had a pretty clear idea of what had worked best for him! So my first words of inspiration are: **persevere in the face of adversity.**

The word *inspire* is derived from Latin words meaning “to breathe into.” One of the sources I consulted for my talk today is Wayne Dyer’s book *Inspiration: Your Ultimate Calling*, and I recommend it as a helpful resource for those who need some “how-to” advice for re-inspiring their lives. Dyer draws an interesting distinction between **motivation** and **inspiration**. Motivation, he says, is directed by our individual ego. “Highly motivated people have a kind of ego determination driving them over obstacles and toward goals—**nothing** gets in their way. Now, most of us have been taught that this is an admirable trait; in fact, when we’re not accomplishing and demonstrating drive and ambition, we’ve been told to ‘get motivated!’ Lectures, books, videos, and audio recordings abound that preach that all we have to do is dedicate ourselves to an idea with actions designed to make it a reality. . . . If motivation is grabbing an idea and carrying it through to an acceptable conclusion, then **inspiration** is the reverse. When we’re in the grip of inspiration, an idea has taken hold of us from the invisible reality of Spirit [with a capital “S”]. Something that seems to come from afar, where we allow ourselves to be moved by a force that is more powerful than our ego and all of its illusions, is inspiration.” [pp. 5-6]

If I have a quarrel with Dyer’s view of inspiration, it is his emphasis on only positive thoughts. He quotes the ancient Hindu sage Patanjali, who wrote more than 2,000 years ago: “When you are inspired by some great purpose, some extraordinary project, all your thoughts break their bonds, your mind transcends limitations, your consciousness expands in every direction, and you find yourself in a new, great, and wonderful world. Dormant forces come alive, and you discover yourself to be a greater person by far than you ever dreamed yourself to be.” [quoted by Dyer, *Inspiration*, p. 40] Sounds pretty wonderful, doesn’t it?

To me, inspiration arises not by denying negative life experiences, but by reframing them as part of a much larger picture. Rachel Naomi Remen is a physician whose book *Kitchen Table Wisdom* was a *New York Times* bestseller for many months. When she was about three or four years old, her father set up a table for jigsaw puzzles in their living room. She describes her earliest experience with what would become an ongoing family ritual. “Alone in the living room early one morning, I climbed on a chair and spread out the hundreds of loose pieces lying on the table. The pieces were fairly small; some were brightly colored and some dark and shadowy. The dark ones seemed like spiders or bugs, ugly and a little frightening. They made me feel uncomfortable. Gathering up a few of these, I climbed down and hid them under one of the sofa cushions. For several weeks, whenever I was alone in the living room, I would climb up on the chair, take a few more dark pieces, and add them to the cache under the cushion.”

After her mother expressed frustration at not being able to complete the puzzle, little Rachel confessed what she had done with the dark pieces. She concludes the story: “As piece after dark piece was put in place and the picture emerged, I was astounded. I had not known there would be a picture. It was quite beautiful, a peaceful scene of a deserted beach. . . . We are always putting the pieces together without knowing the picture ahead of time. I have been with many people in times of profound loss and grief when an unsuspected meaning begins to emerge

from the fragments of their lives. Over time, this meaning has proven itself to be durable and trustworthy, even transformative. It is a kind of strength that never comes to those who deny their pain. . . . When people begin to take such an attitude they seem to become more intensely alive, intensely present. Their losses and suffering have not caused them to reject life, have not cast them into a place of resentment, victimization, or bitterness.” As one of Dr. Remen’s patients put it so succinctly, **“When you are walking on thin ice, you might as well dance.”**

“From such people,” she says, “I have learned a new definition of the word ‘joy.’ I had thought joy to be rather synonymous with happiness, but it seems far less vulnerable than happiness. . . . Joy seems to be a function of the willingness to accept the whole, and to show up to meet with whatever is there. . . . Joy seems more closely related to aliveness than to happiness. . . . There is a fundamental paradox here. The less we are attached to life, the more alive we become. The less we have preferences about life, the more deeply we can experience and participate in life.” [Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, pp. 169-73] Such an outlook can be a source of inspiration, not only to ourselves but to those we encounter along the way. Marianne Williamson writes, “We’re all assigned a piece of garden, a corner of the universe that is ours to transform. Our corner of the universe is our own life—our relationships, our homes, our work, our current circumstances—**exactly as they are**. Every situation we find ourselves in is an opportunity, perfectly planned by the . . . Spirit, to teach love instead of fear.” [quoted in Brussats, *100 Ways*, p. 62]

We need never feel that we are alone in our yearning for such a life. Rev. Gordon McKeeman has served as a mentor to me for several years. One of the pieces in his recent collection of daily meditations is titled “A Drop in the Bucket”—which is an **anti-inspirational** image. Let me share a portion of its wisdom with you:

“You feel like a drop in the bucket? Who asked you to **fill** the bucket—especially all alone? Remember how many there are who share your concern. We may feel daunted, but we are **not** one drop. A sense of isolation is the parent of the drop-in-the-bucket feeling. Sometimes one can decide the **size** of the bucket. Don’t think you can do a large bucket? Try a smaller size. Even imparting a bit of hope—a pat on the back, a financial contribution, a few hours of volunteer service—every drop helps!

”It might even be wise to remember: Why you need to help fill **this** bucket, possibly to quench the thirst of someone hard at work on a larger one. That buckets of whatever size are filled a drop at a time. If you don’t help, it will take even longer. That your drop may be one of the last ones needed. (Why is it that our image is of the **first** drop in the bucket?) Where we’d be if everybody gave up putting drops in the bucket—probably much worse off. Persistence depends on patience, keeping at it when there is little to reassure us. It would be too bad to give up, to sit back, bemoan the sorry state of the world and wonder why somebody, anybody, everybody (but not me, thank you) doesn’t do something about ‘it.’ After all, the Grand Canyon was fashioned by drops of water, ordinary as they seem.” [pp. 20-21]

The Spirit that infuses the universe and inspires us to move forward is known by many different names, but is ultimately beyond words. As Scott Russell Sanders says, “The sun shines

without vocabulary. The salmon has no name for the urge that drives it upstream. The newborn groping for the nipple knows hunger long before it knows a single word. Even with an entire dictionary in one's head, one eventually comes to the end of words. Then what? Then drink deep like the baby, swim like the salmon, burn like any brief star." [*Staying Put*, quoted in Brussats, *100 Ways*, p.100]