

The 19th century Anglo-Irish politician M.E. Grant Duffy is attributed as the originator of the famous quote “truer words were never spoken.” I was reminded of these wise words this past Tuesday at our weekly Community Night gathering when, during a particularly heated and contentious game of Mexican Train dominoes, after making a clever and strategic move on my part, the hallowed sage who goes by the name of Fred Dillemoth uttered the pearl of wisdom: “Have you ever noticed that all these kids who go to seminary are always so darn smart?” While I had to bite my tongue and resist the urge to say something snarky along the lines of “a Master of Divinity does not necessarily a smart person make,” it got me thinking and reflecting on my own seminary experience.

My Master of Divinity degree required me to complete 81 academic hours—one of the longer programs among most mainstream theological schools. While I am grateful for the time that I spent in seminary and how transformative both personally and academically that it was, the sad reality is that I spent the majority of the three and a half years that I was there reading about, writing about, talking about, arguing about, preaching about a host of books and topics that I will never reference in my daily life and career as a minister, nor will they ever feature prominently in any of my future sermons. While I am grateful for the discussions that I had in many of my seminary classes and the academic thought experiments that I participated in, many of them are not ones that I have found a way to translate into my context as a UU minister. Indeed, there were many times during my seminary career when I found myself thinking in the back of my mind: “yes, but what am I supposed to DO with all of this? How does this help me when I am actually working as a minister serving a congregation?”

As it turns out, there is an entire branch of theology that seeks to answer those exact questions—practical theology. As defined by Princeton School of Theology professor emeritus Richard Osmer—who quite literally wrote the textbook on the subject—practical theology is constantly asking and seeking to answer four questions:

1. What is going on?
2. Why is this going on?
3. What ought to be going on?
4. How might we respond?

The idea is to move beyond the theoretical aspect of our religious or theological beliefs and to put them into some kind of action in our daily lives and within our community that makes some sort of difference. This is the entire reason that I went into ministry in the first place: I wanted to find some way to use my skills and talents not for my own glory, fame, or celebrity, but to give back and to make a difference to both my community and the people in it. As I would come to discover, we were required in seminary to take a significant number of practical theology courses—which, needless to mention, were some of my favourite seminary classes and favourite seminary professors—and much of the information from those classes does inform much of what I do not just as a minister, but as a UU as well.

In a 2010 editorial published in UU World magazine, Rev. Peter Morales—who would later go on to be President of our Unitarian Universalist Association—spoke of our relationship as UUs to the concept of service as our prayer. He wrote: “Sometimes in our congregations we speak of spirituality and social action as though they are opposites. This is a false dichotomy. Spirituality and service are two sides of the same coin. Deep

spirituality, a loving nature, expresses itself in action. And action that springs from love deepens us and makes us more loving. Love and action cannot be separated.

This is an important point to begin our discussion of the third line of our Affirmation Statement—“and service is its prayer.” I have always loved the fact that, in L. Griswold Williams’ original rendering of the Affirmation Statement, the first three lines are grouped together in their own stanza. I do not know if this was an intentional choice on the part of L. Griswold Williams, but what I like is the fact that each line helps to inform the one that comes after it: love is the foundational principle—love for people, for community, and the greater world that we inhabit—that has brought us here and informs what we do; the quest for truth is the why and what we are looking to achieve; service is the how, the way that we go about realising and expressing that love that we have through our actions. In that sense, service is the active expression of our love; it is what we do to demonstrate our love outside of the walls of the church. This is the first time in our discussions that I would actually advocate changing the words of our Affirmation Statement: service is not simply its prayer, it is our praxis.

This change may seem inconsequential, but it is not without intention. “Prayer”—a much more familiar and accessible word—is defined both as “a solemn request for help or expression of thanks addressed to God or an object of worship” and “an earnest hope or wish.” It comes from the Latin word *precarius*, meaning “obtained by entreaty.” Essentially, prayer is a request of another person to act on one’s behalf in order to bring about something. Peter Morales’s words echo my own early experiences around the subject of prayer: words that expressed gratitude, contrition, and requests for blessing, healing, wisdom, and strength. But, my question is: if we are people that have agency and are able

to do something, why is service something that we are asking of another? Why is service not something that we ourselves are doing? There are other interpretation of this line that speak to prayer being used as a word to help connect us to that which is sacred. But, if service is our way of connecting to that which is sacred, then it seems that we cannot connect to that sacred that is beyond ourselves unless we are actually out working and doing in the service of others.

This is why I prefer the word “praxis” instead of “prayer.” “Praxis” may not be as familiar a word to many people as “prayer” is. But “praxis” is the nominal form of the Greek verb *prattein* which means “to act, achieve, or accomplish.” It is literally a word that means “action.” Service is our action. What this does is force us to not remain in the theoretical headspace, but to take what informs us and put action behind it. It is an intentional reminder to ourselves to live into the words that we say together when we are in sacred space and to act in such a way as to bring those words about in the world. And if service is to be seen as our way of connecting to the sacred, it is important to remember that action does not necessarily always happen in one direction. To quote the Rev. Peter Morales: Service transforms people. No one who commits themselves to service remains unchanged by the experience. When we serve, we become more compassionate, more sensitive, more understanding, and more aware. We are reminded of how precious and fragile life is. We experience our vulnerability and our deep need for one another. When we serve we experience what love can do.

We as Unitarian Universalists have a long history of social justice and social action, informed and guided by the love that we have, that has called us beyond the walls of our churches. It has called us to confront a world that is often deeply divided and broken and

called us to act in such a way as to join hands and take action to affect positive social change in the world. May we ever be known by the love that we have in the world, but may we also be known by the practical actions that we take to demonstrate that love out in the world. To quote American Jesuit educator Rev. Michael J. Graham: Service is what prayer looks like when it gets up off its knees and walks in the world. May we never lose sight of these words, and may we get up off of our knees and walk in the world to both love and serve it. It is our praxis. It is our calling.

May it ever continue to be so. Blessed be. Amen. Shalom. Assalamu Aleikum.
Namaste. Thank you all so much.