

## Reading as a Spiritual Practice

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Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley  
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*“...the flesh was made word, and dwelt among us  
full of grace and truth.”*

— Isak Dinesen, *Out of Africa*

### Invitation to Worship

Carla Claycomb

Last week, I watched my daughter proudly read her first words, watched my son tackle pages of a novel by himself, and advocated on behalf of a child who was banned from sharing his favorite book in class—simply because that book, *Harry Potter*, might offend parents. I found these experiences deeply emotional, for both obvious and subtle reasons. What is it that gives me such unique joy at watching my children discover reading and such a deep despair when I think of a child being told his book is too dangerous to be shared?

I think my responses have to do with the power of reading. Reading captivates me—a novel, a poem, a nonfiction text, *The Washington Post*, or a hand-written note I’ve saved in a drawer. Maybe I’m captivated because, as an elementary teacher, I studied the science of reading. Perhaps it is the vast process of assimilation—countless thoughts from other people ready for me to absorb and make my own. Or the lack of limits—being able to move from Ancient Greece to Antarctica to outer space, to be a bird, a mountain, or a drop of water in the span of a few minutes and one short bookshelf. Then again, it could be the intimacy—people reveal themselves to me in print and prompt me to do the same. Maybe it’s the memories associated with reading through the box of old letters I keep in the attic. My guess is that it is all of this and more.

Reading can be quiet, contemplative and intimate, an invitation to internalize someone else’s thoughts and ponder my own. I have always felt most comfortable in living spaces that are full of books—worn, loved books—I think because I love being immersed in a world of passionate

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ideas, mysterious and familiar ideas that people felt compelled to share with me in print.

Many of us probably could list one or more books that changed us. Perhaps we've been humbled by seeing a great idea, one which was lurking formless inside us, come to life in someone else's text. My daughter's recent epiphany, "Once I can read, I can learn anything!" touches on the power of reading to help us all search for meaning both deep within and far outside of ourselves. These places are hard to reach alone. How thankful I am that books can travel with me.

### **First Reading**

"First Reader," Billy Collins

I can see them standing politely on the wide pages  
that I was still learning to turn,  
Jane in a blue jumper, Dick with his crayon-brown hair,  
playing with a ball or exploring the cosmos  
of the backyard, unaware they are the first characters,  
the boy and girl who begin fiction.

Beyond the simple illustration of their neighborhood  
the other protagonists were waiting in a huddle:  
frightening Heathcliff, frightened Pip, Nick Adams  
carrying a fishing rod, Emma Bovary riding into Rouen.

But I would read about the perfect boy and his sister  
even before I would read about Adam and Eve, garden and gate,  
and before I heard the name Gutenberg, the type  
of their simple talk was moving into my focusing eyes.

It was always Saturday and he and she  
were always pointing at something and shouting "Look!"  
pointing at the dog, the bicycle, or at their father  
as he pushed a hand mower over the lawn,  
waving at aproned Mother framed in the kitchen doorway,  
pointing toward the sky, pointing at each other.

They wanted us to look but we had looked already  
and seen the shaded lawn, the wagon, the postman.  
We had seen the dog, walked, watered and fed the animal,  
and now it was time to discover the infinite, clicking  
permutations of the alphabet's small and capital letters.  
Alphabetical ourselves in the rows of classroom desks,  
we were forgetting how to look, learning how to read.

## Second Reading

From *How One Should Read a Book*, Virginia Woolf

Yet who reads to bring about an end, however desirable? Are there not some pursuits that we practice because they are good in themselves, and some pleasures that are final? And is this not among them? I have sometimes dreamt, at least, that when the Day of Judgment dawns and the great conquerors and lawyers and statesmen come to receive their rewards—their crowns, their laurels, their names carved indelibly upon imperishable marble—the Almighty will turn to Peter and will say, not without a certain envy when he sees us coming with our books under our arms, “Look, these need no reward. We have nothing to give them here. They have loved reading.”

## Sermon

Here’s how it begins: a mother hands a cookie to her little girl. The child recognizes that the cookie has a word on it, and proudly spells it out letter by letter: “O-R-E-O — cookie!” Thus a reader’s life begins.

Or maybe it begins even earlier, before the child can talk, when he is snuggled in his father’s lap as he reads to him. The child has only vague associations with what the words mean or how they connect to the pictures on the page, but he knows that he values these intimate moments, the comforting sound of his father’s voice and the warm closeness of their bodies. The fact that his father is holding a book is almost incidental to the child, but because it’s the book that engenders the closeness and comfort, he begins to develop a love for books.

Soon he is looking at books on his own, content to turn the pages one by one, even if the book is upside down. Books are objects of curiosity as well as sources of comfort and self-soothing. Thus a book-lover’s life begins.

I come to you this morning an unrepentant book-lover. Although I’m not the mother or the child in the cookie story (that was the daughter of a friend), I am someone who benefited from the every-night bedtime story for much of my childhood. (In my case it was *Winnie the Pooh* and much of the other fiction and poetry of A. A. Milne, a favorite author of my father.) When I could read by myself, I did just that for hours at a time, disappearing behind the pages of a book and becoming totally deaf to anything else (particularly to requests that I hang up my coat or wash my hands for dinner). The Christmas I was nine, I was given twenty-two *Oz* books, and I had read them all by the end of February.

Books have changed my life, gotten me through hard times, opened doorways to new friendships, taught me, amused me, touched me and turned my world around. I am sure that this is the case for many of you as well.

So with the holidays approaching, and gift-giving season at hand, I thought I would sing to you a song of praise for reading, and offer you a few ways of thinking about how the practice of reading can be a spiritual practice as valid and as rewarding as prayer, meditation, or any other of the commonly-understood practices for enhancing our spiritual lives.

Perhaps it would be useful, then, to think first about just what a spiritual practice is. It has been said that the spiritual person is one who “reads the world for meaning.”<sup>2</sup> And as you might expect, I embrace a broad view of spirituality; I encourage anything as a spiritual practice which helps us read the world for meaning, helps us to find the significance of everyday experience. Spirituality is a holy longing for meaning, for finding the connection to something larger than ourselves that will put our lives into perspective in a much broader context. Alan Jones, dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, regards spirituality as “the art of making connections,” and Jewish scholar David Ariel calls it “heart knowledge.”<sup>3</sup>

A favorite description of the spiritual self comes from a woman I attended seminary with. Psychotherapist Molly Young Brown writes: “When we expand our awareness, strengthen our center, clarify our purpose, transform our inner demons, develop our will and make conscious choices, we are moving toward deeper connection with our spiritual self.”<sup>4</sup> I want to read that again and ask you to think specifically about reading as a way to accomplish these ends: expand our awareness, strengthen our center, clarify our purpose, transform our inner demons, develop our will and make conscious choices... Clearly, the regular and intentional practice of reading can help us to move in the direction of a deeper and stronger connection with our spiritual self.

So I want to offer you some ways of thinking about reading this morning that might help you to perceive reading as a spiritual practice, as a way of expanding your heart knowledge and coming to an understanding of your place in relationship to the Great Mystery.

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<sup>2</sup> Brussat, p. 27

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p. 28

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p. 29

I'll start with a kind of reading that actually has been understood as a spiritual practice for centuries, and that is *lectio divina*, literally “divine reading.” This is a practice that is used by the Benedictines to bring them closer to God through the repeated reading of familiar scripture. Rather than reading for information, one reads with an open heart and a kind of curiosity or expectation that God might come closer through the words on the page.

Kathleen Norris describes *lectio* as a type of free-form, serious play in which, for example, one might read a passage aloud trying on different voices: Pontius Pilate’s “What is truth?” as a sarcastic aside not calling for a response, or as a brief moment of wonder inviting a response that does not come — “What is truth?” She describes *lectio divina* as “not so much a technique of reading as a way of life. It is the freedom to ask anything of scripture without requiring an answer or expecting to reach a conclusion... it is asking in a spirit that is opposed to the spirit of inquisition.”<sup>5</sup>

I was struck by Norris’s further description of a conference she attended where the participants, in the spirit of *lectio*, discussed a Psalm with a flurry of unexpected and (apparently to her) unusual questions about the personality of the psalmist, to whom the prayer was addressed, the nature of wickedness, and God’s role as protector of humankind. She reports being struck by the openness and daring nature of the questions, and my reaction was “What’s the big deal? This is exactly what I would expect of a Unitarian Universalist group in its approach to finding meaning in scripture.” So it occurs to me that because we are encouraged to question and re-interpret, we UU’s might frequently be practicing *lectio divina* without even realizing it.

Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, also used *lectio divina* to gain insight and spiritual sustenance, and she didn’t limit herself to the reading of scripture, but used novels and other writings as possible sources of understanding. She wrote “We can browse among the millions of words written and often just what we need can nourish us, enlighten us, strengthen us — in fact, be our food just as Christ, the Word, is also our food.”<sup>6</sup>

This quotation brings to mind another way of describing reading, after “reading as prayer,” and that is “reading as eating.”

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<sup>5</sup> Norris, pp. 278-9

<sup>6</sup> Brussat, p. 242-3

Eating is probably the most basic act of animal nature, far more common than mating. For some of us passionate readers, the act of reading is like the act of eating — devouring the words, always hungry for more. And we are nourished by what we read, make no mistake about that. We fulfill some elemental need — like the need for food — by reading the fruits of others’ imaginations and ideas. Everything alive is continuously eating something in order to stay alive, and we read to stay alive as well, to be as fully alive as possible. This deep commitment to be fully alive is part of what drives us spiritually: the hunger to know, to understand, to be affirmed for the complicated, flawed, striving beings that we are.

And where better to find that affirmation than in the pages of fiction, well-written stories that teach us about ourselves and the very stuff of our own lives. “Facts are a very inferior form of fiction,” wrote Virginia Woolf, and so we turn to fiction to discover the facts about human life in all its passions, its messiness, its courage and poignancy and pain.

I have had the experience, as I imagine you have too, of feeling that I have become a better person after reading a good piece of fiction. The novels of Barbara Kingsolver have done that for me, and *The Ciderhouse Rules*, Olivia Butler’s *The Parable of the Sower*, and Ann Patchett’s *Bel Canto*. Certainly you could make your own list.

Several years ago I stumbled on a fascinating book written by Gestalt psychologist Erving Polster, called *Every Person’s Life is Worth a Novel* (a quotation attributed to the French novelist Gustave Flaubert). Polster has found in his psychology practice that if he can get people to view their own lives as though they were the stuff of novels, he can help them discover how unique and interesting they are, and assist them along the way to better mental health. He writes, “Whether realizing it or not, each person is recurrently party to mystery, violence, suspense, sex, ambition, and the uncertainty of personal resolutions. And eventually, there is death for all!”<sup>7</sup>

While Polster’s book itself is non-fiction, written for people interested in Gestalt therapy, it makes a case for the likelihood that people who read novels could — if they were alert to the possibility — be reminded that they are as fascinating, principled, ingenious, or courageous as any character in their favorite books. In his psychotherapy work, he calls his clients to be more alert to their everyday experiences and per-

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<sup>7</sup> Pollster, p. 3

ceive them as the background and context of their unique gifts and qualities.

Through the reading of fiction, then, we can feed ourselves health, self-esteem, and personal empowerment. But we need to be careful in choosing what will nourish us. We need to be intelligent, discerning, thoughtful readers. There is so much junk out there — junk food and junk fiction. Life is too short to waste on reading junk. If it's true that you are what you eat, then perhaps it's equally true that you are what you read. So read well.

In the chapter on “Reading” in *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau takes the citizens of Concord to task for their poor choices in reading matter, complaining that they prefer to read the nineteenth century equivalent of romance novels and adventure stories to the ancient classics and philosophy. Who is more illiterate, he asks, the one who can read but “only reads what is for children and feeble intellects,” or the one who cannot read at all? At least the illiterate's mind is unprofaned.<sup>8</sup>

You might recall that at the Last Supper, Jesus broke a loaf of bread and said to his disciples, “Take, eat; this is my body.” (Matt. 26:26). But fewer of you are probably familiar with the story of the conversion of Augustine, a loose-living young man who turned his life around and became one of the most influential of the early Church Fathers in the early third century. As he wrote in his *Confessions*, Augustine was in a garden one day, caught in the snare of indecision between the pleasures of the flesh and the call of chastity, when he heard a child's voice chanting a phrase reminiscent of the words of Jesus: “Take and read, take and read...”

He snatched up the Bible he had put down, and read the first verses his eye fell upon, which were Romans 13: 13-14: “Let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”<sup>9</sup> And Augustine was immediately overcome with an awareness of being reborn into a life of devotion and discipline.

From my point of view, this was not necessarily one of the great moments in Christian history, since we have Augustine to thank for the doctrine of original sin, and for his teachings on the separation of body

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<sup>8</sup> Thoreau, p. 77

<sup>9</sup> Malone, p.37

from spirit, on women as impure beings who tempt men into sin, and on the necessity to renounce the pleasures of the flesh for the greater glory of God. Hardly the most exemplary teachings of Christianity, when compared to the lessons that Jesus taught.

Nevertheless, this story reminds us of how life-changing the experience of reading can be. Call it “book providence” if you will — the experience of just the right book falling into your hands at just the right time, the time when you needed to read its wisdom in order to turn your own life around.

If you went to Hollywood on High last week, you saw the film made from the novel *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, in which two middle-class young Chinese men are sent into the country to be “re-educated” during the Maoist Revolution. They both fall in love with a pretty, intelligent but illiterate young woman, and they embark on their own project. On their time off from a re-education in how to carry leaky baskets of human sewage up rocky mountain paths and how to mine copper ore on their bare hands and knees, the boys are educating the little seamstress by inviting her into the worlds of Balzac, Dostoevsky and Stendhal. Unwittingly, they transform her into a feminist who is aware of her own power and potential, and she leaves them both to seek a new life in the city.

Azar Nafisi is an Iranian woman who came to the United States at age 13, then later married an Iranian man and went back to Iran to teach in the University at Tehran just as the Ayatollah Khomeini took over in 1979 and established an Islamic theocracy. In her book *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, she describes a clandestine reading class for selected women students, which she held in her home under considerable threat of danger. With this daring and revolutionary act, Nafisi invited her students to rise beyond all that was holding them down, holding them back in the grim society of the Islamic Revolution. She wrote,

For nearly two years, almost every Thursday morning, rain or shine, they came to my house, and almost every time, I could not get over the shock of seeing them shed their mandatory veils and robes and burst into color. When my students came into that room, they took off more than their scarves and robes. Gradually, each one gained an outline and a shape, becoming her own inimitable self.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Nafisi, pp. 5-6

Here again, we see how the act of reading (and in this case, animatedly discussing the reading assignments) opens the reader to new worlds and allows her to become more authentically herself, “her own inimitable self.”

And so we come to my last suggestion of ways to think about reading, and that is reading as the work of justice. Certainly this was what motivated Azar Nafisi in her determination to open her students’ eyes to the worlds of Henry James, Jane Austen, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Lolita*. Despite the best efforts of the Iranian revolutionaries to revitalize Islamic traditions by insisting that women return to the veil and attempting to shield the country from all Western influences, at least one small group of bright young women were encouraged to keep their minds and their eyes open and their sights raised beyond their immediate circumstances.

I don’t believe that learning how to read suggests that we will forget how to look, as Billy Collins suggests in his poem “First Reader.” Indeed, it may be that through reading, our eyes are opened to look even harder, and we become motivated to take action because of what we both see and understand.

And speaking of seeing... an acute but often invisible disability in modern American culture is the inability to read. I have a friend whose 20-something son is so severely dyslexic that he is functionally illiterate. This bright and funny young man is severely hampered in terms of the possibilities life holds out to him — he lives at home, struggles to learn what he must learn to get even a half-decent job, and wrestles with constant feelings of worthlessness. Until I heard his story, I had assumed that reading is something we could all take for granted. Now I know better.

Here are some scary data, according to a 2003 national survey on illiteracy<sup>11</sup>:

- 50 million Americans cannot read or comprehend above the 8th grade level.
- Illiteracy costs business in the U.S. \$225 billion a year.
- 60% of prison inmates are illiterate.
- Almost 50% of adults who receive welfare are illiterate.
- Almost 75% of those who are unemployed are illiterate.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.comminit.com/baseline/baseline2003/baseline-110.html>

I have a college friend who is the Executive Director of a small non-profit in New York called Literacy, Inc. The work of her agency clearly falls within the definition of reading as the work of justice. LINC, as it is known, works in neighborhood groups not only to teach reading and literacy skills, but to build neighborhood identity and pride. LINC trains neighborhood citizens to teach reading and create reading partnerships with children wherever people can be found who need to learn: laundromats, homeless shelters, and the like. Local community networks encourage families and other community members to be reading partners to young children, working to ensure a literacy-rich community that will contribute to the success of all of its children by ensuring that they are ready to learn and read on time.

Our sister congregation in State College has a huge social action project each year to acquire and distribute books to children who live without books around them, children who frequent the local food banks and shelters, children whose parents would probably never pick up a book, and perhaps don't know how to read at all.

When I fantasize about where I would put my volunteer energies if I weren't working, I always come back to the idea of working for literacy. As an unrepentant lover of books and reading, and as a person committed to enhancing and encouraging the spiritual growth of those around me, I believe that helping people learn to love books and reading is the greatest service I could provide.

There's a wonderful old hymn that says it all for me in this regard:

Open my eyes, that I may see  
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;  
Place in my hands the wonderful key  
That shall unclasp and set me free.  
Open my ears, that I may hear  
Voices of truth Thou sendest clear;  
And while the wave notes fall on my ear,  
Everything false will disappear.  
Silently now I wait for Thee,  
Ready my God, Thy will to see,  
Open my eyes, illumine me,  
Spirit divine!

In my vision, it all falls neatly together: reading as prayer, as nourishment, as providence, as justice. The written word as the wonderful

key that will unclasp and set us free; and when the wave notes of truth  
fall on our ears, everything false will disappear.

May it be so. Amen.

from "Reading" in *Walden*  
Henry David Thoreau

To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble  
exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which  
the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes  
underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object.  
Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written.

**Sources**

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