

“Running on Empty”

3/3/19

UUSMV

**A Service by
The Reverend Bill Clark**

Readings:

The readings on a Sunday morning are the framework by which a minister structures his/her sermon. Our readings this morning, which I will do back to back, frame today’s sermon Running on Empty, from two perspectives; the personal and the institutional.

The first is from Thomas Moore’s book Care of the Soul and speaks to the personal.

Care of the soul is a fundamentally different way of regarding daily life and the quest for happiness. The emphasis may not be on problems at all. One person might care for the soul by buying a good piece of land, another by selecting an appropriate school or program of study, another by painting his or house or bedroom. Care of the soul is a continuous process that concerns itself not so much with fixing a central flaw as with attending to the small details of everyday life, as well as to major decisions and changes.

Care of the soul may not focus on the personality or on relationships at all, and therefore it is not psychological in the usual sense. Tending the things around us and becoming sensitive to the importance of home, daily schedule, and maybe even the clothes we wear are ways of caring for the soul.

So the first point to make about care of the soul is that it is not about primarily a method of problem solving. Its goal is not to make life problem-free, but to give ordinary life the depth, and value that come with soulfulness..... it has to do with cultivating a richly expressive and meaningful life at home and in society. (Page 4)

Second Reading: speaks to the institutional and was sent to me by my brother via email. It speaks to the institution of AA, yet one can easily fill in any institutional name. It is titled Rest In Peace.

Alcoholics Anonymous was saddened to learn this week of the death of one of its members, Someone Else. Someone’s passing creates a vacancy that will be difficult to fill. Someone Else had been with us for many years and did far more than one person’s share of the work. Wherever there was a job

to do, an activity to volunteer for, a committee to attend, one name was on everyone's list. "Let Someone Else do it."

It was common knowledge that Someone Else was among the largest contributors to AA. Whenever there was a financial need, everyone just assumed Someone Else would make up the difference. Someone Else sometimes appeared Superhuman, but a person can only do so much. Were the truth be known everyone expected too much from Someone Else.

Now Someone Else is gone. We wonder what we're going to do. We can't depend on Someone Else anymore. Someone Else left a wonderful example to follow...but then who is going to follow it? Who is going to do the things Someone Else did?

Musical Interlude

Running on Empty
A Sermon by
The Reverend Bill Clark

They call it the wall! It is said to be a marathon runner's nightmare. The wall is the term used to describe what happens to a runner when they have crossed the point in the race where they have no more glycogen reserves. Glycogen is the substance stored in the muscles and liver, which is the primary fuel source for the muscles. Glycogen is derived from carbohydrates in our diets. At this point in the race the body has run out of fuel and swaps over to begin using your fat reserves as a fuel source. When you "hit the wall" your body feels suddenly very weak and you are unable to run at your normal pace. Hitting the wall is likened to running on empty.

Now I use this example to begin our sermon today to demonstrate how the body, the body, reacts and rejuvenates itself in times of great stress. Hitting the wall is a challenging time for a marathon runner. Still there are ways around the wall.

The solution is to first, train your body to accept the change from glycogen to fat by running a number of long training runs into that zone. The body gets accustomed to the change. The second is to take carbohydrate gels or drinks during the race to keep your glycogen stores topped off. The solutions again, training and caring for the body while running.

And I begin with this tidbit of knowledge today not to prepare any of us to run a 26-mile marathon. Rather to explain that the body has ways to recharge itself when necessary. We all know that our bodies need certain elements, vitamins, proteins, carbs to give us energy. We all know how to

care for our bodies. Now whether we do that is another sermon all together. Today sermon is not about the body and how to re-energize it. Today sermon is about the spirit, and how to re-charge, and re-vitalize it.

Now I will be examining this from two perspectives. First, I will be looking at the care and revitalization of our personal spirits. How do we recharge or reconnect our spirits when we are personally running on empty. And second examining the care and revitalization of our congregational spirit. How do we care for our congregational spirit in these times of transition, anticipation and grief?

Now first let me define our terms. In using the term spirit, I refer to our desire for connection to our deepest sense of self, our connections to other people and our connections to a higher power however you define that in your life. In using the term soul, I am not referring to any religious quality or dimension. I am using this term as related to Thomas Moore's definition taken from his book Care of the Soul. Moore states, "Soul is not a thing, but a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. Soul has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart and personal substance." (2X) To care for the soul, then, is to give ordinary everyday life the element of soulfulness. To me soulfulness is the fuel for the spirit.

So now, in this very busy and hectic race we call our lives, what happens when this quality or dimension of experiencing life's fullness, experiencing the depths, heart, value and substance of life is gone, it's lacking or missing all together? Yes our lives may be full. We have schedules to keep, meetings to attend, health care that needs our attention. We have family to care for and feed. We may have a career, a home, money, security. We have all of this. And yet there is an absence, a void, a numbness perhaps that has sapped our energy till we are simply running on empty. What do we do?

First I think we need to be able to recognize the warning signals that may clue us in to the state of our spirit and soul. We need to observe ourselves and become aware what happens to us, what happens to our spirits and souls when we are running on empty. It's like the blinking red light in our cars when our gas gage is near empty. It's a warning signal. Time to fill up! Or the red light on our battery operated gadgets that begin to blink. Time to recharge. We get the warning signals. So what signals do our spirits give us to let us know it is time to recharge, time to fill up, we are running on empty. For myself one clear signal is that I become easily angered and agitated.

Slow drivers on the Island – getting stuck at the bridge – summer traffic. Now if these simple, silly and uncontrollable events spark agitations, it is a signal to me that I am running on empty. It is time to recharge.

What signals does your spirit give you? Is it a short fuse or quick temper? Headaches? Overeating? Isolation? Unresponsiveness? Do you retreat into couch potato mode and spend your days clicking the remote? To me these may all be signals to observe that our spirits, our souls are running on empty. So once we observe the signal and register it, what do we do know? How do we re-charge and care for our spirits and souls?

Different ways will suit different people. Yet for me our spirits like our bodies need exercise and a workout. Our spirit is like a muscle and it needs to be worked. If we take the time to work out our spirits the natural energy of soulfulness will manifest. I can only relate this to my own meditation practice. When my practice is on track and I am sitting my two hours of meditation daily, my spirit is nourished and the soulfulness to life is strong. Now a spiritual practice can be anything that feeds those connections to self, others and a mystery beyond. For many it becomes walks in nature. Others do poetry.

I did that for a summer – memorizing some of my favorite poems – there was a small group at the congregation in Texas that did colleague, Laurel Hallman’s adult program titled ‘Living By Heart.’ It’s an adult education program. It’s a spiritual practice of and writing and memorizing poetry. As any bodily exercise must fit the needs of the person, so any spiritual practice but suit the spirit of the person as well. A spiritual practice fills us up and adds the energy of soulfulness to our lives.

Life is meant to be lived with the fullness of dimensions. The heights are meant to be experienced as exciting and exhilarating and the lows are meant to be experienced as sorrowful and sad. There is value, substance and connectedness in all of life’s dimensions. By re-charging and rejuvenating our spirits, through a spiritual practice we take the necessary steps to remain engaged in life. In taking our spirits out for a walk in the wilderness, a stroll on the beach, a sit on cushion, a poetry reading, a church service, we are giving the needed food for the spirit that will keep us running, dancing, singing, playing, praying, living! Living a full, multi-dimensional, colorful and soul filled life.

Now let’s turn our attention to the care and revitalization of our congregational spirit. What word comes to your mind when you think of our congregational spirit at this time? (wait for answers)

How can we care for our congregational spirit in these times of anticipation expectation, exhaustion and grief?

I feel, in some ways, we are a congregation in the midst of grief. We are grieving the loss of some of our beloved members as they move away. We are grieving the illness and suffering of some of our members as they face continued struggles with illness and transitions. And we are grieving the loss of our beloved music director, Emily Anderson at the end of the school year. Someone said it feels like slow leak from a helium balloon which is leaking our spirit and soul.

In the past five years we have been on a role with 42 new members joining since 2014. It was wonderful! Currently we have had no new members since October 2018. Is that cause for alarm or simply a symptom of exhaustion? We have also lost some members – a few have joined other churches – two long standing couples are moving or have moved away – some have drifted away. Then, there are our snow birds who head south for the winter but always return.

In the past years we have hired three religious exploration directors. Rick Bausman, our current director has settled into a smooth transition and has renewed the interest of some of our parents, children and youth. Our volunteers for the religious exploration have surpassed all expectations.

We took a wonderful risk and purchased the land behind us – for me this speaks of our commitment and dedication to the future of UUSMV – and yet we don't talk about land much – mind you we are still paying for it – but have we begun the process of actually visualizing what we want there?

This is the anticipation and expectation I am talking about which can also sap ones energy – soulfulness or spirit.

One other element that can sap energy is exhaustion. And truth be told as I ready myself for a winter vacation I, too, am exhausted. Not having my souful battery recharged over last summer – attending to a dying friend on the Cape – faciliatating her memorial service – working with a family grieving – I returned to all of you in August – already somewhat burnt out and still engulfed in the grieving process.

Then our church year began and we were off and running.

Grief is a funny thing. It can catch us off guard at one moment – then the next moves us forward to a place of resilience. Grief and resilience live together. However, grief is often not something anyone wants to deal with.

You kind of want to run from it. Hide from it. Avoid it. Suppress it. Numb it. Deny it. Anything but feel it. Yet there are some beautiful and telling things I have learned over my many years of working with grief. First, that grief is the honor we have for loving. We feel the pain so much. We feel the sadness, the loss so deeply and completely only because we loved so much. And even though the loss of members is so real and so painful, it is because the love was so real and so powerful. So let's name that love as well as the grief and hold them up and honor them both – be it grief of lost members, dying members or the loss of one's own independence. Love and grief are the opposite sides of the same coin called life.

The second thing I have learned is that one grief touches all grief. As we feel the grief of members and friends dying or moving away it touches the grief of friends and illness, which may touch the grief of other losses in our lives. Our grief then becomes multi-layered and more complex. It may be hard to distinguish exactly what I am feeling and why. It just may manifest as anger or sadness or confusion. This is why I say we are a congregation in grief. It may be hard to actually name which loss because they become all mixed together. It doesn't matter. A loss is a loss is a loss. And we are experiencing many. Awareness of that may help us through the process.

The third important lesson is that grief is a process. A process that involves movement, change and most importantly resilience. The grieving process is just that, a process. It comes and goes, rises and falls and eventually after feeling all the layers of feelings that are there, feeling them, honoring them, holding them....grief changes. Kubler-Ross calls this stage the stage of reorganization or integration. The loss is still there but the changed relationship is now successfully integrated and reorganized into your life. This will happen.

We will find a new music director – they may not have the charm, children and voice of our Emily, but as we waited for her – we will wait for the right person once again. If you would like to be part of this process please see Rita Brown to assist in any way possible.

Improvements to our sanctuary continue on almost a weekly basis. I returned and the library bookshelves are gone and a whole new space opens up. Thanks to Lucianda and the SCP for revitalizing our worship space.

The land behind will be paid for. Excitement and enthusiasm will be resurrected hoping to resurrect Someone Else to help us with its management. We will get through the loss of our dearly beloved friends. We

will. And we will do all of this the exact same way we have always done everything else here at the UU Society of MV. We will do this together. This community is strong, vital and healthy. This community is also grieving. This community is also resilient. So lets keep doing this work together.

I know the Parish Committee has invited the Rev. Amy Freedman to come out to help us with visioning for our future. This will be in June. We will meet together, meet in members homes, meet in small groups, meet together and witness together, one another's sorrow and sadness as well as one another's hopes and dreams for the future.

I invited a NE Regional person to come and work with the Parish Committee and myself to rejuvenate the trust and goodwill between us. This is a loss for me which brings my grief to the surface.

So let's do this important spirit work and grief work together. Let's not run from it or hide from it or deny it...let's just face it and feel it all, with all the variety emotions that accompany it. Let's just feel it remembering grief is an honor, a process and impermanent. This too will pass. It will. It is sad. It is hard. But once through the grieving process a sense of newfound freedom develops and we are always made stronger for it. We have to be, because grief work is a labor of love.

In naming our grief this morning, let us vow to re-energize and re-vitalize our commitment to this congregational community. In this way we not only care for our spirit, but also add the spiritual fuel of soulfulness to the health and well-being of this congregation. May it be forever known that the Unitarian Universalist Society of Martha's Vineyard has soulfulness. We're on our way, my friends. We're on our way!! Blessed Be!!