

THE PRACTICE OF FAITH

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
March 13, 2011

On Thursday evening of this past week, my wife Holly Atkinson and I attended a solo recital by the pianist Michael Brown. He performed four etudes by Claude Debussy and Franz Schubert's Piano Sonata in D Major. I found the performance unexpectedly satisfying and delightful, especially given the age of the pianist. My guess is that he's in his early- to mid-twenties.

Most of the time, musicians distinguish themselves at an early age by dazzling with technique and astonishing with mastery of the instrument. Michael Brown passes muster on those counts, but the unexpected aspect of his playing lies in the interpretive subtlety with which he deploys his technical mastery. As a pianist, he has already developed a distinctive musical voice.

The critical response to Michael Brown affirms his talent. He's won numerous competitions both as a pianist and as a composer, played in notable concert halls and music festivals across the country, received coaching from leading international pianists and conductors, and been lauded by the *New York Times* and *Gramophone* magazine. In his copious free time, he's completing a double master's degree at Julliard.

I didn't have the opportunity after the recital to ask Michael Brown the question that was on my mind. How much does he practice, I wondered? As it turns out, I found the answer elsewhere.

In Malcolm Gladwell's book titled *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Gladwell describes the ten-thousand-hour theory, originally proposed by neurologist Daniel Levitan. According to this theory, top musicians, athletes and chess players become masters in their field if they accumulate 10,000 hours of practice by age 20.

The landmark study on this topic examined violinists at the Academy of Music in Berlin. Students in the study were classified into three groups: stars who had the potential to become world-class soloists, students who were merely very good, and a third group identified as proficient. All had started playing violin around age 5, and for the first few years they all practiced two or three hours a week. After age eight, however, substantial differences emerged in the amount of time devoted to practice. By age twenty, the stars had practiced a total of 10,000 hours, the very good violinists 8,000 hours, and the proficient group 4,000 hours. The same researchers studied amateur and professional pianists, with similar results.

Gladwell also cites the Beatles as a case in point. In their early days, especially during their time in Hamburg, Germany, the band played about eight hours a night, seven days a week. By the time they became famous, the Fab Four had already performed about 1,200 live concerts. If each concert represented eight hours of rehearsal and performance, the math works out to 9,600 hours of practice.

Gladwell concludes: "Once a musician has [a certain level of] ability, the thing that distinguishes one performer from another is how hard he or she works. That's it."

On my way to Michael Brown's piano recital on Thursday evening, I dropped by the Mt. Sinai School of Medicine for a lecture by Dr. Patricia Bloom, titled "Meditation

as Medicine: What Neuroscience Has to Teach Us About Health and Happiness.” She spoke about how our modern lifestyle triggers the body’s stress response—the ancient “fight or flight” mechanism designed to help us survive times of physical danger. Today, most of us find ourselves continually under stress, and the mechanism designed to save us is now killing us—literally. One of the best ways to turn off the body’s stress response and turn on the body’s relaxation response is through the practice of meditation.

Over the past decade, researchers have been studying people who practice mindfulness, the deep form of awareness developed through disciplines such as meditation and prayer. The researchers have discovered that mindfulness literally changes the human brain. In particular, mindfulness develops the brain’s capacity for experiencing happiness and fulfillment. In other words, the ancient sages who counseled us to practice the disciplines of attentiveness and gratitude knew what they were talking about after all. Enlightenment isn’t the process of acquiring specialized knowledge; it’s the discipline of following a daily spiritual practice.

The bottom line is this: if you want to excel at playing the piano, you need to practice the piano. If you want to feel happy and fulfilled, you need to practice mindfulness. If you want to experience enlightenment and thereby enjoy a sense of meaning and purpose, you need to practice your faith.

Which means what, exactly? Usually, we talk about the practice of religion. What does it mean to practice your faith? What’s the difference between faith and religion?

In traditional terms, religion has usually been understood as a set of beliefs or a body of doctrine, which believers are called upon to accept as true. These beliefs are typically described in an inspired scripture and compiled into an authoritative creed. The liberal tradition in theology, initiated by Frederick Schleiermacher in the late 18th century and clarified by William James in his lectures on religion at the dawn of the 20th century, insists that religion is not mainly a set of beliefs. Rather, religion is first and foremost a way of life.

In my view, religion is the collection of external forms that constitutes this way of life: sacred spaces where we find refuge, music to gladden our spirits, stories to restore our courage, symbols to remind us of commitments we have made, and daily rituals to renew our resolve. The meaning of the word “religion” traces back to a Latin verb meaning “to bind.” Early monastic Christians were called religious because they had taken sacred vows and were bound by solemn orders. This early form of the word religion confirms that religion is a way of life.

Here’s the key point: if religion is the journey, then faith is the compass. As many of you know, I describe faith as a leap of the moral imagination that connects the world as it is to the world as it might become. Faith looks at what is and imagines what might be. It is a leap of the moral imagination that sets a course for our religious journey.

But where does faith come from? What is its source? Like music or mindfulness, faith comes from practice—a daily spiritual discipline that sparks our moral imagination and sets our moral compass. The irony is that the liberal tradition in religion, which rightly frees religion from dogmatic bondage and insists that religion is a way of life, has often been lax when it comes to spiritual practice. It is my deep conviction, however, that if we intend to be people of faith, we must practice our faith.

Many of you share this view. During our recent strategic planning process, you expressed a hunger for a deeper spiritual experience. Many newcomers and new members express a similar desire. We instinctively know that faith needs practice. So does religion,

of course, which is the sum total of everything we do on the journey: come to church, take a class, feed the homeless, advocate for nuclear disarmament, and so on. The practice of faith is a specialized experience during which we imagine a better world and set our moral compass to reach it.

Some of you are already beginning to squirm. You've done the math: 10,000 hours of spiritual practice over 15 years is fine if your goal is to become, say, Pema Chödrön or the Dalai Lama. Truth be told, the Dalai Lama practices four hours each day, and some of the monks studied by neuroscientists have accumulated more than 30,000 hours of meditation practice. Brain studies show that intensive practice of this kind causes significant changes in the brain, such as increased gamma wave activity, especially in the left prefrontal cortex, the region of the brain associated with happiness and positive thoughts and emotions. Studies also suggest that some of these changes to the brain are permanent.

The good news is that these positive benefits begin to accrue after meditating for short periods of time over as little as eight weeks. My goal, at least for now, is to suggest a modest approach: a daily spiritual practice that will serve to spark our moral imaginations and set our moral compasses, but without forcing us to turn into monks or nuns.

Fortunately, we have a model to guide us: a practice of focused meditation known in Latin as *lectio divina*, or divine reading. Originally developed by third-century Christians as a way to read scripture, it was adopted by many of our nineteenth-century Unitarian predecessors as a means of spiritual formation. Some termed the practice “devotional reading,” which Henry Ware, Jr. described as reading not for knowledge but for your life. Ralph Waldo Emerson called it “provocative reading”—an approach to reading spiritual texts designed to provoke us into new ways of thinking and living.

Taking the practice of devotional or provocative reading as a template, I have further adapted the practice for our use. The practice is quite straightforward: take a short text, read it over several times, then meditate upon its meaning for your life. Remember that your purpose is to provoke: you should come away thinking about your life in a slightly different way. You can do this practice anywhere you happen to be, at any time of day, for however long you choose.

The practice itself, which I'm calling a Common Meditation for All Souls, has four elements: reading, reflection, intention, and contemplation. By the way, you don't need to keep notes about this practice. As you leave the Sanctuary today, ushers will hand you a sheet that summarizes the process and offers short readings for each day this week. Beginning next Sunday, you'll be able to receive the readings by email, if you wish.

As you begin the practice each day, sit comfortably and take a few deep breaths to remind your body that it's time to focus. The first step is reading: read the text carefully several times, preferably aloud. For example, take these few lines from W.H. Auden's poem titled “Leap Before You Look.”

The sense of danger must not disappear:
The way is certainly both short and steep,
However gradual it looks from here;
Look if you like, but you will have to leap.

The second step is reflection: ask yourself which word or phrase provokes your attention. Perhaps the word “gradual,” or the phrase “sense of danger,” or the declaration

“you will have to leap.” Why that word or that phrase? You may wish to jot the word or phrase in a journal. Reflect for a short time on the word or phrase and ponder what it evokes in you. Maybe everything about your life seems gradual right now, or perhaps you’re feeling at risk in some way. Make a note or two.

The third step is intention: ask yourself what purpose your reading and reflection suggests for this day. Set a specific intention that you can reasonably fulfill. Maybe you identify one small leap that you can make today. Perhaps jot it down.

The final step is contemplation, in which you expand your awareness from intention to gratitude. Remind yourself that the world is full of untapped wisdom and your life is full of unrealized potential. Note a couple of things for which you’re especially grateful. If you wish, end your practice with the final two lines of the All Souls benediction: “This is the day we are given; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

If we practice provocative reading faithfully, this personal spiritual practice will help spark our moral imagination and set our moral compass as individuals. But the practice also has a larger purpose. Since—ideally at least—we will all be reading the same short text on the same day, this practice will help unite us as a community of faith. Over time, my hope is that the themes of these daily texts can become interwoven throughout the life of our congregation. They will form part of the common conversation we share as fellow travelers on our religious journey.

Reading, reflection, intention, contemplation. I hope you give this Common Meditation for All Souls a try. The purpose of this practice is provocative: to spark your moral imagination and set your moral compass. Even from the outset, you’ll find yourself on the path to being morally happier and spiritually more fulfilled. As the Dalai Lama himself says, “The most important thing is practice in daily life; then you can know gradually the true value of religion.”

Look if you like, but you will have to leap.

Credit: My thinking on devotional reading was provoked and guided by a presentation Rev. Rob Hardies of All Souls Church, Unitarian in Washington, DC gave at a ministers’ conference I attended earlier this month in California. Thanks, Rob!