

Stretching Our Selves
Reverend Cyndi Simpson

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Our monthly theme is *INTENTION*. A rich word for the start of the year.

The word comes from the Latin *intentionem*, literally meaning a stretching out, a stretching out of mind, of heart, of body, of spirit. When we set an intention, we are turning our attention toward something, or someone, or some idea, and stretching to meet it.

However, our intention is not our action. That would be a resolution or goal. It is a paying attention to something in ourselves, a stretching towards something within. A stretching toward ourselves.

Colleague Katie Covey, in doing her brainstorming for this month's theme, said this:

Here's what I discovered. Intention is different from setting goals or resolutions in that it "pulls us into" who we truly are. Goals and resolutions "push us out" into future possibilities and actions. To set intentions, we listen to our inner voice which tells us who we truly are.

This understanding of intention is echoed in Buddhist teachings on right intention. Here is a story on intention from Phillip Moffitt, a Buddhist teacher:

Once a month, an hour before the Sunday-evening meditation class I teach, I offer a group interview for students who attend regularly. These interviews give them the opportunity to ask questions about their meditation practice or about applying the dharma to daily life. In a recent session, a yogi who dutifully meditates every morning admitted, "I must be confused about the Buddha's teaching on right intention. I'm very good about setting intentions and then reminding myself of them. But things don't ever seem to turn out according to those intentions, and I fall into disappointment."

*At first, I could only smile in response. What a good question! When I asked her to explain these intentions, she proceeded to describe a number of goals for her future - to become less tense at work, to spend more time with her family, to stabilize her finances, and more. She was suffering from a kind of confusion that seems to afflict many bright, hardworking people: mixing up two different life functions that are easily mistaken for each other. All of her goals were laudable, but none would fit within the Buddha's teachings on right **intention**.*

Goal making is a valuable skill; it involves envisioning a future outcome in the world or in your behavior, then planning, applying discipline, and working hard to achieve it. You organize your time and energy based on your goals; they help provide direction for your life. But none of these activities is what I call setting intention. Rather, they involve living in an imagined future and are not concerned with what is happening to you in the present moment. With goals, the future is always the focus: Are you going to reach the goal? Will you be happy when you do? What's next?

Setting intention, at least according to Buddhist teachings, is quite different than goal making. It is not oriented toward a future outcome. Instead, it is a path or practice that is focused on how you are "being" in the present moment. Your attention is on the everpresent "now" in the constantly changing flow of life. You set

your intentions based on understanding what matters most to you and make a commitment to align your worldly actions with these inner values.

As you gain insight through meditation, wise reflection, and moral living, your ability to act from your intentions blossoms. It is called a practice because it is an ever-renewing process. You don't just set your intentions and then forget about them; you live them every day.

So, your intentions are truly about what is going on inside of you. They are the values that reflect your most real sense of who you are. And you live your intentions not through the achievement of goals, but through being mindful in each present moment of your deepest values, your intentions.

This doesn't mean you don't set goals, but the goals are grounded in your intentions. The intentions – the stretching towards your deepest values – is your foundation.

Moffitt's student found that when she focused on her goals only, when she did not achieve them or got off course, she became absorbed in judging herself harshly for her perceived failures. When she worked on being present to her best intentions, and with being compassionate for herself, she became less reactive around her goals and found that she was able to move more easily towards their achievement.

She was not so caught up in emotional storms around what she experienced as her mistakes, faults and lacks. Or the mistakes, faults and lacks of others that affected her.

As Moffitt says:

In choosing to live with right intention, you are not giving up your desire for achievement or a better life, or binding yourself to being morally perfect. But you are committing to living each moment with the intention of not causing harm with your actions and words, and not violating others through your livelihood or sexuality. You are connecting to your own sense of kindness and innate dignity. Standing on this ground of intention, you are then able to participate as you choose in life's contests, until you outgrow them.

Naturally, sometimes things go well for you and other times not, but you do not live and die by these endless fluctuations. Your happiness comes from the strength of your internal experience of intention. You become one of those fortunate human beings who know who they are and are independent of our culture's obsession with winning. You still feel sadness, loss, lust, and fear, but you have a means for directly relating to all of these difficult emotions. Therefore, you are not a victim, nor are your happiness and peace of mind dependent on how things are right now.

There are only two things you are responsible for in this practice: Throughout each day, ask yourself if you are being true to your deepest intentions. If you're not, start doing so immediately, as best as you're able. The outcome of your inquiry and effort may seem modest at first. But be assured, each time you start over by reconnecting to your intention, you are taking one more step toward finding your own authenticity and freedom. In that moment, you are remembering yourself and grounding your life in your heart's intention.

That is what we heard in Mark Vogt's story as read by Mark Tipton. He said:

I do not have to be perfect, beautiful or smart. I only have to be myself. I do not have to be wealthy or popular to make a difference in the world. I only need to give what I can and to love my neighbor as I wish to be loved.

He states his intention so clearly: *to give what I can and to love my neighbor as I wish to be loved.*

If that's all he ever does and he does it as much as he can, however imperfectly, is that not enough? Can living your deepest values, your heart's intentions, be enough for you and for the world?

So, Intention is about connecting with who you are, the values you hold most dear, about *only being yourself*. Your intention therefore is about your **identity**, who you **are** when you are being the most and the best you that you can be.

And it is also possible to think of these intentions, and these identities, when we are speaking of our whole religious community, not just ourselves individually.

[IDENTITY SLIDE]

One of the Developmental goals is around our Identity. The Identity we share as Unitarian Universalists. Here is the goal statement:

Second Unitarian has a clear and shared idea of our identity as Unitarian Universalists in this time and place.

Just as with the individual Buddhist, our shared identity is the set of shared values and intentions that make us uniquely Unitarian Universalists in Omaha in 2018.

Just as with an individual, our shared intentions are the **ground** of our shared lives together. Our shared identity as a religious community is **who we are** when we are being the best UU humans we can be.

This idea of a shared identity can be a real challenge for Unitarian Universalists. The Board of Trustees and I really struggled with IDENTITY when we were writing our key Outcomes last year. We're not done with that struggle.

Because our shared Identity is the basis, the foundation of all that we might do – as it reflects our highest shared values and intentions – it is primary. So that is why next month we begin with the Theme of Identity.

In the meantime, you can, if you choose, explore your own intentions. I offer you some fill-in-the-blank questions, and some questions to reflect on your answers. I will put these in the weekly newsletter.

1. My most important promise to myself is _____.
2. Because of me, my children will understand that _____.
3. I am on this Earth to _____.
4. I am avoiding _____.

5. When I am gone, people will remember me by these two adjectives: _____ & _____.
6. If I won a million dollars, the first thing I would do is _____.
7. When I stop procrastinating, I will _____.
8. I want to spend the rest of my life becoming _____.
9. I am most happy when _____.

Here are questions to think about after you fill in your blanks:

- *What surprises you?
- *What would you change after giving the completed sentences a second look?
- *Would your closest friend agree with how you filled in the blanks?
- *What 2 or 3 sentences seem to merit your greatest attention right now?
- *What single intention are you ready to make based on listening deeply to what the list of completed sentences is trying to tell you?

I'm will put all of this in the newsletter on Wednesday.

I close with these words from *Susan Fryborg*:

What if you didn't
make it to the front of the line,
finish the marathon, or
beat the crowd?

What if you didn't
inspire vast ripples on the web,
go viral with your gospel, or
create new cyber trends?

What if you didn't
learn to speak another language,
drive a car across country, or
blossom into a true blue yogi?

What if you didn't
use more time to just listen,
be still and reflect, or
simply hold out your hand?

What if you didn't
permit yourself passion,
take one more chance, or
allow your soul to be seen?

What if you didn't
give heed to your heart,
feed all those fears, or
walk boldly through that door?

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You will develop in each season
to ripen wholly into your prime.

So what does it matter,
the things you did not do
in this blessed allotted time,
when the tour de force
is within every treasured moment
when you cup your worthwhile life inside the love of your divine hands
to kiss full on the mouth,
all its cherished wonder.

May you find out all the 'what ifs' that reflect your deepest intentions, your self, the ground of your being.
May you stretch deep inside, always towards that self. Loving wholeheartedly your life.

Blessed be, Amen.