

Soul Matters, November 2013

What Does It Mean To Live A Life Of Yearning?

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We don't hear the word yearning much. Perhaps we associate it with the passionate longings of childhood and adolescence, and think of yearnings as something to outgrow. But yearnings are guides to our deepest and truest selves.

Many years ago I was working on healing from some traumatic events in my childhood. As I began to heal, a new feeling came to me – an emptiness, and a yearning for something to fill it, that I identified as “something spiritual.” I felt a longing for something to fill a spiritual void inside me. And that yearning brought me back into a relationship with God and, eventually, into ministry. These types of yearnings can guide us to wholeness as human beings.

We live in a shallow, vapid, and unsustainable consumer culture; in the face of this materialistic society, we yearn for food for our souls. With few exceptions, the “news” offered to Americans features one-sided political ‘spin,’ and details on the lives of so-called “celebrities;” in response to this, our souls yearn for beauty and depth. The lives of 21st century Americans are busier than any generations of the past; lost in the frantic pace of modern life, we yearn to hear our own “still, small voice within,” the desires of our deepest selves.

This yearning is a core of every religious tradition. It unites us in spite of our diverse beliefs. It might be called a mystical dimension of faith. You may experience yearning as coming from your deepest self. I might experience it as coming from God. Either way, it calls us to greater connection. UU theologian, Henry Nelson Wieman, called this “The Divine Lure.” Whether or not you call it divine, each of us yearns for it and knows that it is sacred. These yearnings lead us back into wholeness and integrity with our souls.

So this month, you are invited to explore your mystical self and the “divine lure.” It needn't be difficult. It may be as easy as asking, “What yearning is trying to get my attention?”

May your yearnings lead you back into wholeness and harmony with yourself.

~Beatrice

Spiritual Exercises:

OPTION A:

A YEARNING WITHIN REACH

In spiritual circles, sometimes talk of yearning is so grand that it can easily overwhelm. When told to identify “your soul’s yearning,” who of us doesn’t first think, “What the heck is that?” Sometimes it helps to take it down a notch and simply figure out what we long for from the day in front of us. So for this exercise, spend a weekend focused on a yearning within reach. One of our Soul Matters Facilitators wrote something that may help you along your way:

“What if you started each day saying yes to the yearning of your heart? Would you spend more time outside? Would you rest in the arms of a loved one? Would you laugh with your children? Would you lie on the floor and let your dogs lick your face? Would you call all the lost friends in your phone book? Would you wear the brightest, most outrageous clothes in your closet?”

To this you might add: A night with the guys. Or a night with the girls. Some of us may need to spoil ourselves with a massage or the expensive restaurant this time. Or maybe it’s as simple as asking your spouse to tell you again why they love you.

Remember to keep it simple. No need to turn it into an existential life-changing project. Just deal with the day in front of you. Begin by simply asking:

What is my heart’s desire, today?

And spend the rest of the day or weekend following up on your answer.

Pay attention to how this weekend of unfulfilled yearning changes your perspective or your commitment to staying more loyal to your yearning. Notice how easy or hard it is to reenter your normal routine. Come to your group with a report about whether or not it made a difference.

OPTION B:

A DIARY OF YEARNING

The connection between yearning and paying attention is clear. If we don’t set aside time to ask about our hungers, they will often be chosen for us. This exercise helps us pay attention and hopefully will better ensure we are the ones doing the choosing.

The instructions are simple. For a week, start and end each day filling in the blank to the following questions:

“This morning, I yearn for today to contain more _____.”
“Today left me yearning for more _____.”

At the end of this packet is a one-sheet list to help make this easier. Of course, you may find yourself wanting to write more than one blank line allows. If so, maybe a real diary is what you need.

Come to your group prepared to share how you filled in the blanks. Consider just reading the sentences as you completed them, before you explain or elaborate.

OPTION C:
FACE A PAST YEARNING

Under the Internet section in our Recommended Resources, there is a resource/video entitled, “Face to Face with a Past Yearning.”

Here is the background so you understand the video better:

“Marina Abramovic and Ulay started an intense love story in the 70s, performing art out of the van they lived in. When they felt the relationship had run its course, they decided to walk the Great Wall of China, each from opposite ends, meeting for one last big hug in the middle and never seeing each other again.

At her 2010 MoMa retrospective Marina performed ‘The Artist Is Present’ as part of the show, where she shared a minute of silence with each stranger who sat in front of her. Ulay arrived without her knowing and this is what happened.”

Your spiritual exercise is simple but maybe the hardest exercise of all this month:

[Watch the video and decide how it relates to you.](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=OS0Tg0IjCp4)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=OS0Tg0IjCp4

Remember to you keep your mind and heart open. Your past yearning may not be about a lost love as in the video. Yours is likely to be something entirely different.

Come to your group prepared to talk about how the video impacted you and maybe even what it led you to do.

OPTION D:
YEARNINGS THAT NO LONGER CONSUME

The instructions for this exercise come from the spiritual teacher, Ram Dass. In his book, Paths to God: Living The Bhagavad Gita, he writes:

"If you want to play a little bit with a renunciation practice, pick some desire that you encounter every day. You decide which one: the desire to eat something or other, the desire for a cigarette, whatever it is you want to play with. Pick something that you usually give in to every day — like, let's say, a cup of coffee in the morning — and for one day, don't do it. Then the next day, do it much more than you usually would — have two cups of coffee. Start to study your reactions. Notice the difference in your feelings toward the desire on the first day and on the second day.

“Maybe another time you'll want to take two desires to work with: one day don't satisfy one and doubly satisfy the other, and then flip them around. Try to be very attentive to what's going through your mind about it. If you're keeping a journal, write about it in your journal. Start to relate to your desires as something you can scrutinize rather than as things that totally suck you in all the time, things that consume you. Get into a friendly relationship with your desires. Play with them, instead of being driven by them all the time. Desires get to be fun, really, once we're observing them instead of mechanically reacting to them.

“The whole game of renunciation and purification is an experiment — an experiment in how quickly we can extricate ourselves from being attached to our desire systems. Notice that it isn't a question of getting rid of desires — that's a misunderstanding. Trust me, the desires will stay

around! We're just loosening their hold on us, getting clear enough of them so we can see them in some sort of context."

Questions To Live With:

As always, don't treat these questions like "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find the one that hooks you most, then let it take you on a ride. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into, and break open, your ordinary thoughts. And then, come to your Soul Matters meeting prepared to share that journey with your group.

1. As you've become older, does yearning play a larger or smaller role in your life?
With age, have you gotten better or worse at distinguishing between yearnings that arise from within versus yearnings imposed from outside yourself? Would you say your longings have become more spiritual or less?
2. Has yearning ever led you astray? Are you still a bit lost?
What has your yearning done to your life and its horizons — broadened them or crippled them? Sometimes we try to feed our hungers or quench our thirst with the wrong thing. It takes time to learn what we truly yearn for. Where are you in this process of learning?
3. Has yearning ever made you feel like a mystic?
Does it have a dimension of "otherness" to it? How do you make sense of and articulate that for yourself? Do you need to articulate it? Or just listen to it more deeply, and let it more fully lead your life?
4. Has yearning ever felt fun?
In religious circles, yearning is often taken very seriously. Does it have to be that way?
5. What if you started each day saying yes to the yearning of your heart?
6. How are you doing at balancing your yearnings to save and savor the world?
E. B. White writes, "If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy; if the world were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I wake up each morning torn between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor the world. This makes it very hard to plan the day." How is E.B.'s struggle impacting your efforts to plan your day?
7. What yearning brings you to church?
8. Have you ever felt a yearning to feel one with all that exists? Was that yearning fulfilled? Did it stay around?
9. Has your yearning for unconditional love been quenched?
10. Do you yearn for rest?
11. Are you listening to your yearning for an alignment of soul and role?
Quaker writer Parker Palmer writes, "We all yearn for a life that is whole—where 'soul and role' are aligned." How's your life matching up to this yearning?
12. How do your sexual yearnings line up with your spiritual yearnings?
How do you want them to line up? Is there work for you to do here?
13. How did you overcome a yearning denied?
We've all yearned for something but seen it slip through our fingers or remain forever out of reach. The longing to have a child. The dream of starting our own business. A lover that didn't love you back. How did you heal after a yearning denied? What are you doing to continue to heal?

Recommended Resources:

As always, this is not required reading. We will not analyze or dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started, and maybe to open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to “live a life of yearning.”

First Thoughts:

yearn-ing v.

1. Have an intense feeling of loss or lack and longing for something.
 2. Be filled with compassion or warm feeling.
- Synonyms: craving, drive, hankering, hungering, itching, jonesing [slang], driving, longing, lusting, pining, thirsting, desiring

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The following are initial reactions to this month's theme by some Soul Matters facilitators. As always, their willingness to share is a gift, as it helps stimulate and open up our own thinking!

I never in a million years thought I'd go into ministry. But I had an experience of being close to something that seemed like the core of the universe, the foundational truth of the world (I call it God now.) and I wanted to stay there. I yearned for it. Fast forward many years: Now I'm in ministry and I get to think about it all the time and lead people to it all the time. But none of that structure, that end result, was what really mattered – what mattered was the yearning and sticking with that. The rest was just boat building. I don't want to build a boat. I want to be on the sea in whatever way works.

Yearning can be both beautiful and devastating.

Yearning can be poisonous. For instance, in our consumer-driven capitalist society we are encouraged to buy and accumulate as a way of life (even as the practice destroys the planet and blames those with the least resources for their disenfranchisement). [This kind of yearning leaves us] spiritually impoverished. We become destabilized by advertising that promises instant fulfillment but offers only a desperate yearning for that which will never be realized. In the midst of this, it becomes a Herculean feat to ask, “Do my yearnings connect me to my best self, commit me to others and sympathize me to the earth's plight?” [But in our congregations] we find others that hunger

(yearn) for larger things, like peace, love, and justice. This is the kind of yearning I wish to incite!

I find the essence of yearning in the second movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. It starts as a quiet stirring and grows. Whenever I hear it, I have to stop what I'm doing. It pins me against the wall and unearths something in the center of my being that wants expression. It's a deep emptiness that yearns to be filled. However, it's not an emptiness that is painful, it is welcomed and reaffirms my insignificant small place in the world.

I experience yearning as a force of nature. Like the tropism of a plant or the howl of Rumi's dog. A kind of moving towards something that is already there!

Other Wise Words:

“If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.”

-Antoine de Saint-Exupery, *The Wisdom of the Sands*

“A soul that longs for something is a soul that is growing — one way or another, smaller or larger. What have your longings done to your life and its horizons — broadened them or crippled them?”

-Joan Chittister, *The Psalms*

“Art, like prayer, is always the expression of longing.” -Wendy Beckett, *The Gaze of Love*

“I have a dream that one day little black boys and girls will be holding hands with little white boys and girls.” -Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” -Emma Lazarus

“If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy; if the world were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I wake up each morning

torn between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor the world. This makes it very hard to plan the day.” -E. B. White

“Every age yearns for a more beautiful world. The deeper the desperation and the depression about the confusing present, the more intense that yearning.” -Johan Huizinga

“Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.” -Kahlil Gibran

“The absolute yearning of one human body for another particular body and its indifference to substitutes is one of life's major mysteries.” -Iris Murdoch

“Nature senses the longing that is in us, the restlessness that never lets us settle... When we go out alone and enter its solitude, we return home to our souls.” - John O'Donohue

“Yearning is the force field of desire that draws us to God. It grows out of our sense of incompleteness and our deep need for something more which we know can only be met by The More. It is characterized by a restlessness in our souls. We desperately want to move beyond the petty wants of the ego and break out of the self-constructed prisons that confine us. Yearning draws out the mystic inside us as we sense the sacred presence in the world and feel one with all that exists.” -Spirituality & Practice Blog

“There is some wildness of divinity in us, calling us to live everything.” - John O'Donohue

“Longing is a compass that guides us through life. We may never get what we really want, that's true, but every step along the way will be determined by it.” - Joan D. Chittister

“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” -St. Augustine, Confessions

“There is a pull to wholeness, to being fully alive, even when we have forgotten. The Hindus tell us that the child in the womb sings, ‘Do not let me forget

who I am,’ but that the song after birth becomes, ‘Oh, I have forgotten already.’” -Jack Kornfield

“Yearning is the homesickness of the Soul.” - <http://blog.kashiashram.org/spiritual-yearning/>

Love Dogs by Rumi

One night a man was crying,
"Allah, Allah!"
His lips grew sweet with the praising,
until a cynic said,
"So! I have heard you
calling out, but have you ever
gotten any response?"
The man had no answer for that.
He quit praying and fell into a confused sleep.
He dreamed he saw Khidr, the guide of souls,
in a thick, green foliage,
"Why did you stop praising?"
"Because I've never heard anything back."
"This longing you express
is the return message."
The grief you cry out from
draws you toward union.
Your pure sadness that wants help
is the secret cup.
Listen to the moan of a dog for its master.
That whining is the connection.
There are love dogs no one knows the names of.
Give your life to be one of them.
(watch/listen at
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrUd62LwJBY>)

“Today, like every other day, we wake up empty and frightened. Don't open the door to the study and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument. Let the beauty we love be what we do.” -- Rumi

“Blessed be the longing that brought you here and that quickens your soul with wonder. May you have the courage to befriend your eternal longing. May the sense of something absent enlarge your life. May you succumb to the danger of growth. May you listen to your longing to be free. May you never place walls between the light and yourself.” - John O'Donohue

“Maybe this is why some people like worship...to have a whole moment where we

hold still. To hold our partner's hand while we try to see a bigger picture. Once in a while, if we're lucky we'll even feel it. It might just be for part of that hour, and it's likely to be different parts of the hour for most of us. But regardless, we pause and the glory of life fills our senses, renews our hearts, shows us how much need to feel connected or how much we've suffered when we missed feeling connected."

- Rev. Erin Gingrich

Internet:

Face to Face with a Past Yearning

(You must watch-read description below first)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=OS0Tg0IjCp4

Marina Abramovic and Ulay started an intense love story in the 70s, performing art out of the van they lived in. When they felt the relationship had run its course, they decided to walk the Great Wall of China, each from one end, meeting for one last big hug in the middle and never seeing each other again.

At her 2010 MoMa retrospective Marina performed 'The Artist Is Present' as part of the show, where she shared a minute of silence with each stranger who sat in front of her. Ulay arrived without her knowing and this is what happened.

A Yearning for Love Letters When We Need Them the Most

http://www.ted.com/talks/hannah_brencher_love_letters_to_strangers.html

A Pep Talk from Kid President to You

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-gQLqv9f4o>

"It's time to do something, man!"

"Are You My Brain Double?"

www.radiolab.org/2011/apr/18/soul-mates-and-brain-doubles/

In this podcast Robert re-tells a 2400-year-old love story about the longing many of us feel for another half to make us whole.

"From a Distance"

<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/20/from-a-distance>

In this podcast: Stories about unrequited love, and yearning from a distance.

Love Dogs by Rumi

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrUd62LwJBY>)

Books:

A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life

By Parker Palmer

"We all yearn for a life that is whole—where "soul and role" are aligned and our innermost wisdom guides us in our actions. Perhaps no one has explored this topic more deeply than bestselling author and distinguished educator Parker J. Palmer."

Thirst

By Mary Oliver

A book of poems written for her beloved partner of 40 years and her Dog Percy.

The Essential Rumi

Translated by Coleman Barks

Jelaluddin Rumi, the thirteenth-century Sufi mystic who is the most popular poet in America today, is the best teacher you could ever have for the spiritual practice of yearning. In The Essential Rumi, Coleman Barks presents the best of his Rumi translations, many of which express a desire for union with God.

Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections on Our Yearning to Belong

By John O'Donohue

"There is a divine restlessness in the human heart, our eternal echo of longing that lives deep within us and never lets us settle for what we have or where we are. In this exquisitely crafted and inspirational book, John O'Donohue, author of the bestseller Anam Cara, explores the most basic of human desires - the desire to belong, a desire that constantly draws us toward new possibilities of self-discovery, friendship, and creativity."

Yearning for the Wind

By Thomas Dale Cowan

"Explores...interactions and interconnected pathways, looking at the interdependence of our material life with our inner life and that of nature. Each chapter is a small window into the mysteries of nature and soul as they infuse daily life."

Yearning

By Marcela Mendez

“The novel tells the emotional story of living with infertility. By experiencing the ups and downs along with Amanda, readers who haven't been through similar circumstances will have a better understanding of those who struggle with getting pregnant. Readers who understand Amanda's pain will find comfort in knowing they are not alone.”

Consuming Desires: Consumption, Culture, and the Pursuit of Happiness

By Roger Rosenblatt

Reviews found at

<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/books.php?id=1722>

An American classic with its celebration of the deep yearning for freedom inherent in all the characters.

Wall-E

In a distant future, a small waste collecting robot inadvertently embarks on a space journey that will ultimately decide the fate of mankind. Wall-E, the robot, yearns for companionship on the desolate, abandoned Earth.

Movies:

Hide Away

“Directed by Chris Eyre, Hide Away follows the story of a successful businessman (Josh Lucas) attempting to resurrect his life.

Entering an idyllic harbor as a broken and haunted man, he buys and boards the dilapidated sailboat, Hesperus. Disturbed at night by unsettling dreams of his family, the boat becomes a beacon of hope as he begins the challenge of bringing back the shine to the tarnished star.”

Being John Malkovich

An Alice-in-Wonderland extravaganza about the yearning we all have, occasionally, to be someone else.

Billy Elliott

A wonderful film about an 11-year-old growing up in an English mining town in 1984 who follows his heart's desire to become a ballet dancer.

The Hours

A mesmerizing and multidimensional drama based on a Pulitzer prize-winning novel about the yearning of three women and their varied paths to passion, meaning, and happiness.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

WORKSHEET FOR SPIRITUAL EXERCISE B:

A DIARY OF YEARNING

DAY ONE:

This morning, I yearn for today to contain more _____.”

Today left me yearning for more _____.”

DAY TWO:

This morning, I yearn for today to contain more _____.”

Today left me yearning for more _____.”

DAY THREE:

This morning, I yearn for today to contain more _____.”

Today left me yearning for more _____.”

DAY FOUR:

This morning, I yearn for today to contain more _____.”

Today left me yearning for more _____.”

DAY FIVE:

This morning, I yearn for today to contain more _____.”

Today left me yearning for more _____.”