

## **Soul Matters 2014-15**

### **February**

# **What Does It Mean To Live A Life of Devotion?**

Devotion can be a hard topic for Unitarian Universalists. Part of it has to do with our questioning nature. We're an inquisitive and skeptical bunch. We lean heavily in the direction of spiritual curiosity and love to explore new ideas. So the prospect of being devoted to a single spiritual path, or elevating a single spiritual leader, can leave many of us feeling claustrophobic. It's not that we look down upon those who immerse themselves deeply in a particular spiritual tradition. We just like trying and experiencing new things.

Many of us have also witnessed the shadow side of devotion. In the religions of our youth, we were encouraged – or coerced – to “follow blindly.” Our first exposure to the idea of spiritual devotion involved deferring to authority, giving ourselves over to “something greater” or sacrificing our own needs to prove our worth. We've seen – and continue to see – the idea of devotion used to disempower people. Given that, we've not been overly bothered by the absence of devotion from our UU spiritual vocabulary.

Yet, maybe it's time to take another look. After all, there is another side to devotion. It's not all shadow and denial of self. For instance, one Soul Matters facilitator wrote, “I need to remind myself that devotion to a cause has brought extraordinary changes in our world: slavery ended, civil rights were won, women gained the right to vote, we are gaining equity for all relationships. Many of these oppressions took generations to change and devotion made it possible.” Whether or not we've use the word devotion, we UU's certainly have aspired to be devoted in this way.

And we've also had a long history of being devoted to ourselves. Not in the sense of being selfish, but in the sense of being true to one's core. The words of the great liberal preacher, Howard Thurman, come to mind: “Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs most is people who have come alive.” If there is a unique UU understanding of devotion, this is surely it.

So maybe the most important questions of this month are “How devoted are you to your core?” and “How loyal are you to that which lights you up?” Maybe we need to finally let go of our old definitions of devotion and proudly embrace that it is less about finding something to give yourself over to and more about simply finding and re-connecting with your deepest yourself.

Unitarian Universalists have always believed there is a sacred, unique inner voice deep inside each of us. This month, we ask each other, “Do you hear it?” and “How much of your loyalty does it have?”

Looking forward to hearing what makes each of us come alive,  
Rev. Scott

# Our Spiritual Exercises:

As mentioned in the introduction, re-connecting with and re-committing to your deepest self is a major part of what it means to live a life of devotion. This journey happens differently for each of us. So this month, we have three spiritual exercises to choose from.

## OPTION A:

### Rekindle Your Devotion to Small Things

Mother Teresa wrote, "Do not think that love in order to be genuine has to be extraordinary. What we need is to love without getting tired. Be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies." Who of us could disagree. Indeed, it is all too easy to lose sight of the small things that make a big difference. For instance, I tell people that I'm devoted to dinners with my kids and having us all say grace(i.e. something that we are thankful for from that day), but when things get busy, my commitment to this practice easily falls to the wayside. A friend used to be committed to calling at least one long-distance friend each month, but somehow this past year, it's not happened at all. Other friends describe themselves as devoted hikers, artists, runners, or choir members. They say these things re-energize them and connect them something larger than themselves. However, in the same breath, they say they haven't "gotten around to doing it in months." Reading a book to our children before they go to bed; volunteering monthly to help with the cause about which we care deeply; bringing out the fine china and treating ourselves to beauty; writing a love letter to your spouse; checking in on a homebound neighbor; writing to our congressperson: These are all "small, ordinary things" that contain great power. But we get tired, so they disappear from the world.

This month, take some time to remind yourself of "a small love with great strength" and then do at least one thing to reaffirm your devotion to it.

## OPTION B:

### Do Your Values Really Have Your Devotion?

Religion is about living in alignment with our values. We know in our hearts the values to which we are most devoted, but sometimes our lives don't reflect that devotion as much as we'd wish. This exercise offers us a chance to step back and see how well were doing.

Step One: Fill in the Blanks: "The two values I am most devoted to are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_."

Step Two: Fill in the Blanks: "You can see my devotion to these values by looking at these parts of my life:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

( As you fill in these blanks think about how you interact with your family or friends, what you've chosen to do as your employment, how you spend your free time, how you handle conflict, how you use your money, where you volunteer, what you do for fun and/or self-care, etc)

Step Three: Fill in the Blanks: "Three ways I'd like my life to more deeply reflect my devotion to these two values are:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

OPTION C:  
**Become A Devoted Person Again**

This assignment seems simple but may be the most challenging of the three. Take a week to complete the following two sentences:

"I have always been devoted to \_\_\_\_\_."  
"I am a devoted \_\_\_\_\_."

Then ask yourself the following questions: How do the two sentences matchup? Is there congruence? Or a disconnect? It's not uncommon for our deepest values and passions to be absent from the lives we lead. Does being a "devoted employee" really match up with your stated belief that you've "always been devoted to self-care"? Some "devoted parents" find it harder than they thought to remain "devoted to letting my child live their own life."

The goal is to be brutally honest. When you answer what you have always been devoted to, make sure it reflects your real life, not what you wish your real life to be. A good test is to ask your spouse, children or friends how they would fill in your blanks.

Come to group prepared to talk about how easy or hard it was to fill in those blanks, and where the words you placed in those blanks led you.

OPTION D:  
**Get Devotional**

Devotion is not just a feeling; it is also practice. Sufis dance. Buddhists chant. Catholics pray with a rosary. Protestants sing hymns. Orthodox Christians meditate on icons. Hindus gather to receive blessings in temples. Jews wrap themselves in a prayer shawl. Native Americans dance and sing to bring up the sun and remember the power of starting anew. Muslims pray five times a day. More and more Unitarian Universalists are finding that spiritual practices restore, enlighten and remind them who they want be.

Maybe this is the month you decide to join them. Maybe it's time for you to devote yourself to a regular practice as well.

Come to group prepared to talk about how easy or hard it was to find a practice that fits you.

# **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. What's something you know now about devotion that you didn't know when you were 18 years old?

Has your concept of devotion evolved? Does it need to?

2. Do you have something you could call your "greatest act of devotion"?

3. What do you tend to naturally devote yourself to?

People, goals, values, experiences, causes, etc? Is there a blindside or downside to this?

4. Does the one you are devoted to have your heart?

In the recommended resources, Rob Bell tells the story of a husband bringing home flowers to his wife out of duty rather than adoration. Over time, what has come to most characterize your primary relationship? Responsibility? Duty? Loyalty? Teamwork? Or adoration? Does your primary partner know and feel that you adore and enjoy them? And if not, how can you change that? It is the month of Valentine's Day, for heaven's sake!

5. Has devotion ever betrayed you?

In the recommended resources, one of our facilitators says that as a husband and employee he often was "un-questioningly devoted- following blindly because of the belief that the others had the 'answers'." We also know people who devoted themselves to others but had that devotion betrayed or not reciprocated. Additionally, people idealistically devote themselves to a cause, only to learn later that the cause or the comrades they were working with were not as noble as they had thought. Has this ever been true for you? Have you ever lost faith in being faithful? And how did you find your way back to faith and trust? Most importantly, is finding your way back something your life needs from you now?

6. Are you resisting the cost of devotion?

In the recommended resources, there is a quote that talks about devotion being sustained by the necessary neglect of many other things. Indeed we know that devotion requires choices and involves costs. Are you having trouble making those choices and accepting those costs? And is that cheating you out of the life you really desire?

7. Have you ever had a hard time drawing the line between devotion and devaluation of self?

Sometimes devotion fulfills and enlarges who we are. Sometimes it diminishes and causes us to lose the sense of who we are. Have you examined your loyalties lately to make sure they all fit the former description not the latter?

8. Do men and women think about and engage in devotion differently?

Do you envy the way the other sex approaches devotion? And if so, what's keeping you from tapping into the treasure they've got?

9. Has devotion ever included loving someone or something so much that you had to set it free?

Sting and Richard Bach both tell us that if we truly love something we will be willing to set it free. Is there a love in your life that needs to be set free? Has your devotion caused you to have a tight grip that is now neither best for you or it/them?

10. Are you devoted to your whole self?

We all have pieces and parts of ourselves we wish weren't there, but nevertheless make us who we are. When was the last time you forgave and embraced your flawed self? When was the last time you noticed that even our brokenness is worthy of love?

11. Are you devoted to something greater than yourself?

If not, you know this is the question you need to be wrestling with. It is in giving ourselves away, that we find ourselves. Be gentle with yourself here, but also get busy finding your larger self again.

12. Who is devoted to you?

And have you told him or her lately how much that matters?

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# 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 devotion."

## First Thoughts:

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

Sometimes you are aware that everything else falls away and the only thing is that short list of people and things to which you are devoted.

My favorite image of devotion is of the love my father had for my mother as she was dying; of the devotion my husband has for me as my disability increasingly limits me over the years; the devotion our dogs have to us – always loving us unconditionally even when we are grumpy.

Devotion (often linked with "undying") brings up images of being locked in to a person or situation or an obligation that limits my personal freedom. People & situations change, & not always for the better; perhaps my loyalties need to change too . . . .

Over the years I've questioned the idea of devotion, being the devoted husband, the devoted employee, the devoted team member. Looking back I was often unquestioning- following blindly because of the belief that the others had the "answers". If I did good, what I was told and played by the rules, I would be rewarded. As time and life went by I felt more and more troubled because one by one the elements of my world were falling apart. Since that time I have shied away from devotion. Now I believe that being devoted isn't a passive activity.

I don't think devotion is a word or habit that I practice. Piety, worship, loyalty... Says the dictionary. I'm in for loyalty at least.

It's easier for me to be devoted to adjectives rather than nouns.

## Other Wise Words:

"Do not think that love in order to be genuine has to be extraordinary. What we need is to love without getting tired. Be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies."  
-Mother Teresa

"To succeed in your mission, you must have single-minded devotion to your goal."  
-Abdul Kalam

"There is nothing in the world like the devotion of a married woman. It is a thing no married man knows anything about."  
-Oscar Wilde

"Her garden is work because it is of devotion, undertaken with passion and conviction, because it absorbs her, because it is a task or unrelenting quest which cannot be satisfied."  
-Donald Hall in Life Work

"Devotion takes many forms: the solemnity and joy of prayer; the ecstasy of song, poetry, or art; the intimate connection between individuals in marriage, family, or community. It involves opening the heart fully..."  
- LaVera C. Draisin, quoted in Opening the Inner Gates

"Just before Christmas, I had the privilege of visiting a young man at the Wyoming County Correctional Facility...As I sat in the converted cafeteria waiting for him to be brought in, I watched the prisoners and their families and friends all spread out at arms-length distance from one another - all watched over closely by roving guards with stern faces and attentive gazes. "As I sat and waited one particular family caught my eye. It was an older couple - parents I presumed of their imprisoned son who sat at one end of the table in his matching shirt and pants. Few words were exchanged among this family that morning - but in so many ways words seemed unnecessary.

Off in the corner vending machines and microwave ovens loomed - and family members of all the prisoners took turns pumping quarters

into the machines to get hot wings and pizza slices, hamburgers and sodas and chocolate bars for their loved ones. The mother that caught my eye had been up walking around - going back and forth from table to vending machine and microwave and back to the table again throughout her short visit - gathering napkins and plastic silverware, pizza and hot wings for her easily fifty year old son. As she moved back and forth she deftly set the table there in the visiting room - carefully unfolding the institutional paper napkins to create a table cloth, lining up the napkin and the silver ware just so - removing the wilted plastic wrap and presenting the steaming food to her son as if it were a three course Thanksgiving dinner. No words were exchanged by there she was - offering the best she had to give to a son she longed to reach."

-Rev. Jen Crow, "Help, Hope, and Healing" (2008)

"[Martin Luther King, Jr., in his 'I Have a Dream Speech'] says..., 'I have faith that we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together.' And there it is, isn't it?! This isn't just a dream of children walking hand in hand; this is a dream of children being able to walk hand in hand TO JAIL... for the sake of what they believe. Realizing this raises the stakes. Changes the question. Forces us to ask...when was the last time we acted with such radical commitment that it could have landed us in jail?!"

-Rev. Kaaren Anderson, "Contagious Sainthood" (2008)

"Perpetual devotion to what a man calls his business is only to be sustained by perpetual neglect of many other things."

Robert Louis Stevenson

"If you love someone, set them free. If they come back they're yours; if they don't they never were."

-Richard Bach

"Recently a car mechanic told me this story: He was depressed at work but stuck with his job because of family responsibilities. Then he encountered a Sufi teacher who said to him, 'Each time you turn the ratchet as you repair a vehicle, speak the word Allah.' The mechanic did so, and his whole life changed, the whole relation with his work changed. 'Now,' he said, 'I love my work. I love cars. They are alive. It was

a mistake to think of animate versus inanimate. A car will tell you, if you listen deeply enough, whether it wants to be repaired or whether it wants simply to be left alone to die.'"

-A teaching story from Sins of the Spirit, Blessings of the Flesh: Lessons for Transforming Evil in Soul and Society, by Matthew Fox

"If I bring home flowers for my partner, I look for ones that aren't wilted, and I want the color just right--you know the drill. When I bring them into the house, she breaks out into a great big smile. She grabs a vase, says she loves them and she's so surprised. What if I say, 'Well, I'm your husband, it's my duty' or 'It wasn't a big deal, they were on sale, it's nothing much' or 'I figured you needed them'? Does she even want these flowers now? No! She wants my heart."

-Rob Bell

"I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain."

-James Baldwin

"Love is reckless; not reason.

Reason seeks a profit.

Love comes on strong,  
consuming herself, unabashed.

Yet, in the midst of suffering,  
Love proceeds like a millstone,  
hard surfaced and straightforward.

Having died of self-interest,  
she risks everything and asks for nothing.

Love gambles away every gift God bestows.

Without cause God gave us Being;

without cause, give it back again."

-Rumi, Mathnawi VI, 1967-1974

The Sun Never Says

Even

After

All this time

The sun never says to the earth,

"You owe

Me."

Look

What happens

With a love like that,

It lights the

Whole sky.

-Hafiz,

translated by Daniel Ladinsk

## Books:

The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business

By Charles Duhigg

"What habits are you devoted to? Do they control you or do you control them? Part of living a life of devotion is consciously choosing what we are devoted to. This book helps us make those devoted choices in a more empowering and heal healthy way."

Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers  
By Anne Lamott

"Lamott makes her contribution to succinct devotional literature by reducing prayer to three words: help, thanks, and wow."

Another Insane Devotion: On the Love of Cats and Persons

By Peter Trachtenberg

"'Not many things are better than a kitten.' A confession: I'm predisposed to love Peter Trachtenberg's new memoir, Another Insane Devotion, because of that one sentence, which is written without irony and appears in an author's note before the main narrative even gets under way. If you agree with it, I'll bet you a giant toy mouse that you will adore this book outright for its scrutiny of the domestic cat in all its cuddlesome glory. (Trachtenberg's hilarious descriptions of catty antics are like viral videos transposed into print.) If you don't agree, you may still adore this book for everything else it offers: a suspense story, a love story, a falling-out-of-love story, sex and yearning, literary gossip, economic hardship, conspicuous references to the Western canon, meditations on Being, picturesque Italian getaways, medieval torturers, death. That's a lot to pack into a pet memoir. But then, this is not just a pet memoir. Trachtenberg, whose previous work, The Book of Calamities, explored the varieties of human suffering, may at first seem to have traded woe and wickedness for cuteness, but make no mistake: his feet remain planted firmly in the shadows. His memoir is about the torments of grief and separation as much as it is about the nature of desire and devotion."

-New York Times Book Review

[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/30/books/review/another-insane-devotion-by-peter-trachtenberg.html?nl=books&emc=edit\\_bk\\_20121228&r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/30/books/review/another-insane-devotion-by-peter-trachtenberg.html?nl=books&emc=edit_bk_20121228&r=0)

Mountains Beyond Mountains

By Tracy Kidder

"This compelling and inspiring book, now in a deluxe paperback edition, shows how one person can work wonders...Tracy Kidder tells the true story of a gifted man who loves the world and has set out to do all he can to cure it."

For the Love of Aimee

By Julie Riera Matsushima.

"The story of a grandmother's devotion, and the courage and faith it took to help her granddaughter--diagnosed with irreparable brain damage from birth--beat the odds."

The Giving Tree

By Shel Silverstein

## Internet:

The Devotion Project

THE DEVOTION PROJECT is a series of short documentary films celebrating LGBTQ couples of all stripes.

The first film, MORE THAN EVER, premiered at Newfest: The New York Gay & Lesbian Film Festival in July 2011 and won the Audience Award for Best Short. It also has won festival awards in Los Angeles, Atlanta, Seattle and Austin. These stories show that devotion is about compromise, growing together, overcoming obstacles-- lessons for both gay and straight couples.

An Introduction to The Devotion Project

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-gh-YAEfkU>

More Now Than Ever-A life-long devotion

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vyFt65gkbbY&list=PL51C37A434AA735C0&index=1>

Build Your Wings-A young and budding relationship

<http://www.youtube.com/user/TheDevotionProject?feature=watch>

My Person-the devotion of a transgendered relationship



[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kK-yo0XX9dc&playnext=1&list=PL51C37A434AA735C0&feature=results\\_main](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kK-yo0XX9dc&playnext=1&list=PL51C37A434AA735C0&feature=results_main)

"What Would You Be Willing to Sacrifice for your devotion ?"

<http://www.onbeing.org/blog/what-would-you-be-willing-sacrifice/3749>

"The story of one photographer trying to create the world's largest camera. It's a story about doing what you love, that asks 'If you had been searching your whole life for something you love, what would you be willing to sacrifice?'"

"Sue Swenson, part 03 of 16, 'Being a Mom of a Disabled Child'"

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DI\\_gP7rSn0g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DI_gP7rSn0g)

## Movies:

"Of Gods and Men" (2011)

[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/of\\_gods\\_and\\_men/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/of_gods_and_men/)

"Once" (2007)

<http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/once/>

"The Lady" (2012)

An inspiring portrait of the passionate freedom fighter Aung San Suu Kyi and an exquisite love story set in the darkness of violence, repression, and tyranny in Burma.

<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/films.php?id=22696>

"A Better Life" (2011)

[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/a\\_better\\_life/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/a_better_life/)

Extraordinary film about a father who is an illegal immigrant to the United States and a single parent struggling to find work. His adolescent son is looking for outlets and is slowly getting taken into the gang world of Los Angeles. The father makes conscious shifts in his life to connect more with his son and express his love more clearly. This shift makes all the difference. The movie shows how a positive relationship can save a life.

"The Devotion of Matthieu Ricard" (2008).

"Nearly forty years ago Matthieu Ricard left his native France and a promising career in cellular genetics to become a monk in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition in Nepal. He is now a translator, photographer and bestselling author (The Monk and the Philosopher, Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill) and an active participant in scientific research on the effects of meditation on the brain. He is involved in a number of humanitarian projects in Tibet and Nepal, where he resides."

"The Notebook" (2004)

"...This adaptation of author Nicholas Sparks' bestselling novel revolves around Noah Calhoun's regular visits to a female patron of an area nursing home. Rather than bore her with the inanities of everyday life, Calhoun reads from an old, faded notebook containing the sweeping account of a young couple whose love affair was tragically put to a halt after their separation in the midst of World War II. Seven years later, the couple was reunited, and, despite having taken radically different paths, they found themselves unable to resist the call of a second chance."

"Fiddler on the Roof" (1971)

A look at devotion to tradition, religion, family, and new love.

## Articles:

"'Hopelessly Devoted to You': Towards an Extended Conceptualization of Consumer Devotion"

"In the Western consumer society, a world of wealth and abundance, yet a world almost demystified, secularized, and seemingly controllable, people feel an increased desire to find new forms and opportunities to give sense to their lives. Some consumers evidently fill this void by sacralizing products in order to fulfill their deeply rooted desire for spiritualism... Through an extended conceptualization of consumer devotion, this article attempts to further our understanding about strong emotional bonds between consumers and products."

[http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/v34/500613\\_100182\\_v1.pdf](http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/v34/500613_100182_v1.pdf)