Leela Sinha Nov 4. 2007

Wool socks were the bane of my existence for much of my childhood.

My parents love to hike. In fact, they met on a hiking trip with the Sierra Club in university. They believe in nature. As an engineer and a mathematician, they also believe in doing things by the book. My mother carried me in one hand and Dr. Spock in the other, and did everything she could to figure out why I was not growing up according to the instructions. My father was forever assigning motives that never even crossed my mind, and in retrospect I think I know why. It was probably in a book--somewhere. At any rate, this was before Smartwool and Superwash and fleece, and the books on hiking called for two layers of socks--one regular cotton blend, and the second one wool. This was also before the resurgence of hand knitting and specialty yarns and my mom didn't like to knit anyway, so the wool socks in question were universally uncomfortable and scratchy and too tight over the athletic socks I wore everywhere, and it tainted my entire experience of hiking. It speaks very well for Mother Nature and the four seasons of a New England year that I continued to adore spending time in the woods.

I detested wool on principle for many years.

I did not rediscover it until college in Minnesota. Dry it may be, but a dry cold is still COLD, and my feet were getting the worst of it. At the urgings of better equipped friends, I agreed to give wool socks another try. I found that in the intervening ten years, inventors had done wonderful things: blending it with other fibers. Processing it differently. Growing better sheep, even. The sheep were cute. My friends were knitting. I didn't make my own socks yet, but I started to think about it. Suddenly it didn't seem so crazy.
I went from double layers of socks to wool-only, tucked into Thinsulate boots or the mandatory Sorels, swaggering across campus not out of wool-induced pride but because there is no other way to walk in boots that are one and a half times the size of your feet. That spring my parents beamed with pride to see that their wisdom had finally prevailed. I didn't mention the sheep.

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My opinion of wool socks had changed dramatically. But what really made a difference for me was learning to knit them. For many years I have dallied with fiber and fabrics of various types. Last time I lived in Maine I almost bought a sheep. Did I mention that they were cute? But it wasn't until I was living in Portland, Oregon, where I learned to appreciate wool's wet-insulation properties, that I learned to knit socks. They always seemed so complicated, all that ribbing and turning a corner, taking stitches off the needles and putting them somewhere else…sleeves seemed easier. hats seemed easier. I even managed a pair of mittens years before I tried a pair of socks—only one thumb ended up inside-out. When I finally made a pair of socks, it opened up a whole new world—knitting projects that had balance. Work, but not too much, followed by immense satisfaction and the gratification of true usefulness. Best of all, a pair of socks requires only one skein of yarn. That makes it possibly the only financially logical knitting project I've found, because one ball of suitable and interesting yarn is almost always less expensive than one soft and fuzzy pair of socks. The great irony is that socks are actually simpler than sweaters and mittens and only marginally more complex than hats. They allow plenty of room for experimentation, and if you really mess up, you've only lost one ball of yarn.

So now I have orange socks and purple socks, and Janine, my partner, has pink socks. I have decided that they make wonderful birthday presents. Also Solstice and Christmas and no-reason-at-all gifts. Of course right now the knitting is in the garage in boxes along with everything else, but it will come back soon. Leagues from my original opinions, now I long to wrap people in wool. It keeps them warm. It keeps them cozy. It tells them I love them.

In the best incarnation, all holidays and all gifts are about expressing love: love for others, love for environment or culture, love for gods or family or the world. Love is the greatest giving out there, an incredible gift of hope and possibility. Many of the great religious narratives have at their heart an unfathomable, endless love: the love of creator for created, the love of parent for child, the love of supreme compassion and grace. The story of Jesus is like that: it carries the ideal of a parent who would be able to make a complete sacrifice in the spirit of love. We want love in our lives, some kind of ultimately dependable example of us at our best. That's why if gods are created, we must understand them in our own image. We cannot set ourselves after a symbol in which we cannot see our own reflection; we cannot try to be something that we know we can never be—an example is useless if it's an example of something else. Even when we understand natural forces and phenomena as sentient and holy we give them names that bring them closer to us—Father Sun and Sister Moon, Mother Earth and Father Sky, tree spirits, Diana, goddess of the hunt and the face of the moon. The entire Hindu pantheon is cast with very human characters, like the Romans and their Greek predecessors. We are desperate—not only to see the human in the sacred, but also to see the sacred in the human. We can only see the holy in each tiny thing if we see each tiny detail reflected in what we know to be holy. The mirror works in two directions.

This is especially important in Unitarian Universalism. For us, without a central creed or dogma, without a common god, we have only our own consciences, the sacred spark that is our humanity, to call us to account.

Uncomfortable though it sometimes makes us, we want power—as individuals, as a faith tradition, as a movement, as a community with shared values and common goals. To tell people who we are we *need* a certain amount of clout, but when we are well-nourished we *want* to share what we have in this faith community. And the strength of our voice comes from living in integrity—from communicating well, from loving well, and from living out our values as well as we can. The worst thing for our sense of identity is a departure from the best we know we could be without a compelling and certain reason. Here, where the heart meets the intellect, is the core and the balance of our spiritual path—one which we encounter time and again. At our best, we live our lives as spiritual practice—as prayer—and we must pray, as Benedict said, "in such a way that our minds are in harmony with our voices."

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A friend, trying to start a diet, recently said, "I decided to celebrate the three salads a week rather than berate myself for the five I didn't eat." It's a process. But finding the sacred in our daily lives can leave us open and breathless with wonder, not just on Sunday morning but every day. If we are nourished by our very being, we cannot help but be stronger, gentler, more available for the work that we make central to our days when we choose a values-based life. The simplest answer is often the best.

This ideal of simplicity is not new. Modern scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers of many stripes will recognize their beloved Ockham's razor—a principle most simply restated thus:
All other things being equal, the simplest explanation is generally preferred. Developed in the 14th century by English friar and logician William of Ockham, Ockham's razor has been central to logical thought for centuries. For many people it's intuitive—simple is better. For others it borders on offensive—there are even people who specialize in counterarguments because they feel so strongly about it. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occam's_Razor: *Religion*, accessed Nov 2, 2007).

Then there are those who seek a middle ground. Ockham's razor is often compared and contrasted with the Golden Mean, summarized by Einstein as: "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler." This is a clear argument for balance between asceticism and excess, between too little and too much; between too long and too wide. The golden mean is related to the golden ratio, a proportion found often in geometry and aesthetics, which suggests a not-quite-equal but very balanced relationship that many people find beautiful, among them the ancient Greeks...and the Shakers.

Like the Greeks, Shakers often employ the Golden Ratio in their popular, beautiful, and practical furniture. Combining some of the best of the arts and crafts movement and the grace of classical architecture, there is rarely anything without purpose or beauty in a Shaker design. Founder Mother Ann Lee said, "Hands to work, hearts to God," and that one principle has created some of the greatest furniture forms of westernized American history.

It also created one of the more balanced Utopian community models to come out of the 19th century. Modern-day Shakers follow a schedule not dissimilar from the one followed by their forbears: rise as necessary, eat, worship, work, worship, eat, work, eat. The schedule follows a balance and logic that, like their furniture, defies modern multitasking.

Stress is killing us. We are having heart attacks, strokes, high blood pressure, cancer. We don't exercise or eat well because we are too busy to find the time. We discard spiritual practice in favor of effortless habits and family time in favor of down time. The life or death of the American family has nothing to do with same-sex marriage. It's about cultural support for the priorities we wish we had.

There is something deeply appealing about focusing on one task at a time, either work or worship or food, and letting the whole of one's life be the practice of one's faith. As long as there have been ideals in religion there have been people trying to live them out in every breath. If you truly believe something—anything—how can you reasonably choose to leave it behind? Busy though we are, we don't have to.

Quaker singer-songwriter Carrie Newcomer sings,

holy is the dish and drain
the soap and sink, and the cup and plate
and the warm wool socks, and the cold white tile

showerheads and good dry towels
and frying eggs sound like psalms
with bits of salt measured in my palm
it's all a part of a sacrament
as holy as a day is spent

She is not far at all from the Shakers, striving to make every moment an act of worship.

Quakers and Shakers are not the only ones to measure their days by prayer and labor, work so steeped in religious practice that the separation is blurred to invisibility. The Benedictines, hosts and teachers for author Kathleen Norris, keep a very similar schedule, interleaving prayer and work and food; they make holy work of cooking and gardening and maintenance, and they make daily practice of prayer. In both cases the prayer is a reminder to reconnect with the sacred in the midst of a daily routine. It reminds us to seek awe in the everyday: Newcomer calls it "folding sheets like folding hands, to pray as only laundry can." There's nothing more fitting for our theology, with which we call on the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes as easily as we call on Calvin, and on Mary Oliver at least as often as Mary Magdalene. Of all the many sacred sources available to us, the written word offers only a small fraction. Our spaces and our ritual objects, the clothing, the lives we choose are as much readings of wisdom as what we do here in our sanctuaries. We do ourselves a disservice if we fail to "read" our world in its entirety—as much as if we read only the Cliff Notes of a Dickens novel or the table of contents of a cookbook.

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--When we read everything with an eye for the holy and the wise, we start seeing it everywhere, and it transforms us and our relationship with the world. A world that is sacred must be honored, must be respected, must be treated with care. We are not owners so much as stewards, with all of the grave responsibility that that implies, all of the power and all of the hope. There are gems around every corner, in every stone, and we dare not destroy any of them without very good reason. For Quakers and Shakers this translates to pacifism, a powerful call to peacefulness in word and deed.
For Jains the call to peace is not just about people—some of them even wear masks to avoid harming insects that they might otherwise inhale. For all of us, a holy world goes well beyond a philosophy of peace, past mere respect—when we truly understand the gift before us, it is a lesson in celebration and humility, seeking the learning and the wisdom in whatever we see in our world.

Sometimes the learning will be unexpected or uncomfortable; it may not fit with what we think we know or believe; it may force us beyond our comfort zone into a place we never thought we'd go, but there we are, and the spiritual growth is in the struggle.

The Ministerial Fellowship Committee is a committee of the UUA Board of Trustees whose entire occupation is with the formation and continued integrity of our ministers. The Fellowship Committee sees every single ministerial hopeful for an interview which comes after the equivalent of nearly four years of study and fieldwork. At the conclusion of the interview, they assign a category from one to five. A category one is a clear granting of denominational

approval in the form of preliminary fellowship, and a category five is encouragement to explore a different line of work. The other three numbers are shades of grey. Category two is still very encouraging—with a few straightforward contingencies the candidate is granted fellowship. Category four is meant to be discouraging but not completely insurmountable—a truly determined candidate might find a way through to ministry from there. The hardest for candidates, is generally a three. Neither yes nor no, it often comes with recommendations, but they are not clear instructions or a list of tasks. Instead, a three is designed to draw the candidate into struggle, both with their identity as a minister and with whatever issues gave the panel pause. It could be anything, but the key difference between a two and a three is the panel's desire to call something about the candidate into profound questioning and thus deeper into the formation process itself. The struggle is a large part of the point of a category three assignment. Nothing is quite like it. But the committee is, in fact, being encouraging, because it sees the possibility for ministry on the other side of the struggle. That does not, however, mean that it generally feels good when it happens.

By comparison, finding the sacred in the world should be easy. It requires no schooling and no interviews. Of course, you don't get the help of a committee's oversight, either…unless you ask for it.

One of the brilliances of Quaker practice is the Clearness Committee—kind of a personal MFC, convened for your own spiritual or personal growth. A Quaker can convene such a Committee at any time within reason, for consideration of a particular question. Over a period of days or months or years the committee will meet with its convenor and ask clarifying questions, the goal being to help the seeker discern their true calling from God, as represented by their own Inner Light. Sometimes in the world it's hard to get clear about what the best spiritual or personal choice is; a Committee will help.

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Earlier, I read the story educator and writer Parker Palmer told of his Clearness Committee when he was considering taking a position as president of a local university, and the simple, obvious question: "Parker, can you think of an easier way to get your picture in the paper?"

Of course, he didn't take the job.

(Parker Palmer, Let Your Life Speak)

That book, entitled 'let your life speak' is part narrative, part advice, and works as a very clear spiritual directive as well as a path to greater fulfillment. The bottom line is, when we seek vocation we seek work that we love, because cliché though it is, life is not a dress rehearsal.

And if life is not a dress rehearsal then we'd better figure out what we plan to love this time around--not what we plan to *do*--doing rises from and falls back on some higher motivation, or it is nothing and can be stopped with little consequence—but what we plan to love. We should live so that we grieve when we consider dying too soon; we should have some sense that something beautiful and vital would be lost, not an essential for the sun's rising but something that would be better in the world than out.

One of the most insidious aspects of depression is the vast sense of not-mattering-ness, the feeling that eventually moves past motivation to die into a vast and bottomless apathy.

We are entering that season of public celebration that often brings depression: that time when the light dims and the pressure builds until even the generally immune can smell the foreboding around the edges of the holiday cheer. It can be devastating, and the devastation can be compounded by a profound sense of isolation.

Simplicity allows space for mindfulness, minding the faces and hearts of our beloved ones amidst the hustle and bustle and tinsel. The best memories are usually of people, even when the gift was perfect, because what it symbolizes is being heard and seen and understood. Mindfulness is related to living deliberately, making choices on purpose. It is a way of living in rebellion against default.

Default has two faces: on the one hand, we default on a loan when we fail to make payments. On the other, the default is the choice made by not making a choice.
We are in default when we don't actively engage the choices of our lives, and we can easily skid into spiritual bankruptcy if we keep ignoring them. Our lives are meant to be lived with some deliberateness and some deliberation, some struggle and some activity. It is vital to co-create, as H.N. Weiman would say, to co-create our corner of the universe with whomever and whatever is out here with us. We have choice, and as with voting, we have a compelling call to use it! --not because some disgruntled deity is necessarily going to take it away, but because we must use every power we have at hand to make the best possible use of our lives. When a hunter makes a kill, they have a responsibility to make good use of the life they have claimed. The first life any of us have inarguable claim to is our own, and if theology makes us independent then it also makes us responsible.

Sometimes the best we can do is survival, and there is no shame in that. But if there is anything we can do to make more than survival possible--any care we can take, any choice we can make...our religion compels us to get moving.

Make of every moment the best you can.
We are surrounded, not by the enemy, but by the holy. May we throw our arms wide to the possibilities embedded in the values we hold dear this winter season.
Blessed be and amen.