

On the Journey

Exploring themes for deepening wisdom

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Cultivating Ourselves

Chalice Lighting

(unison): We light this chalice to shine on our time together. In its light we celebrate the relationships and understanding we are creating in this place and time. May our sharing be deep.

(light chalice)

On Our Hearts

Silence

(3 minutes)

Readings 1

John Bryant: One must finally stop, find repose, and send down roots to cultivate one's garden.

William Ellery Channing: To cultivate anything, be it a plant, an animal, a mind, is to make grow.

Growth, expansion is the end. Nothing admits culture, but that which has a principle of life capable of being expanded. He, therefore, who does what he can to unfold all his powers and capacities, especially his nobler ones, so as to become a well-proportioned, vigorous, excellent, happy being, practices self-culture.

Voltaire: I also know that we must cultivate our garden.

Diane Dreher: Cultivating the soil can be a powerful spiritual exercise. Working in our gardens takes us on a journey of discovery within and around us, deepening our connection to nature and ourselves.

Mike Norton: Solitude is the soil in which genius is planted, creativity grows, and legends bloom; faith in oneself is the rain that cultivates a hero to endure the storm, and bare the genesis of a new world, a new forest.

Share reflections on these readings.

Readings 2

Wendell Berry: The seed is in the ground. Now may we rest in hope While darkness does its work.

Plato: The unexamined life is not worth living.

Elizabeth Murray: All parts of a tree speak. The roots tell about the dark underground life in the soil — like our own soul life — that sustains growth.

Victor Hugo: What a gloomy thing, not to know the address of one's soul?

Rainer Maria Rilke: I want to unfold. Let no place in me hold itself closed.

Stephen W. Smith: Soul care resembles a tree. It takes years for a tender tree to mature. Time, attention, nourishment, protection, and pruning contribute to its growth. The same is true for spiritual growth.

Share reflections on these readings.

The Reflection

Rev. Christine Robinson and Alicia Hawkins¹

The idea that part of the human vocation is to cultivate ourselves and nurture and grow our own character is found in the oldest of the world's literatures. But it took a particularly American form with the writings of the Transcendentalists, that body of mostly Unitarian early-to-mid-nineteenth-century thinkers. They included Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William Ellery Channing. They popularized the idea about cultivating ourselves and expanded it to include not just the educated or upper classes but everybody. By virtue of our humanity, they taught, everyone has a duty develop his or her gifts, expand his or her talents, add to human knowledge, and develop spiritually, and to do so throughout our lives. The Transcendentalists called this sacred duty self-culture.

In those days, the word *culture* was not associated with concerts and art galleries but rather with agriculture. Culture referred to encouraging or cultivating the growth of plants. The duty of self-culture was first articulated by the Unitarian minister Rev. William Ellery Channing (1780-1842). As a part of his ministry, he was a popular public speaker in Boston. He delivered his lecture "Self-Culture" in 1838 in Boston to an audience of manual laborers. He wanted to enhance the self-concept of these men and women. He went to some pains to proclaim that each and every one of them was a child of God and possessed a soul that made him or her great, no matter the trade they pursued. Channing told these manual laborers that self-culture is the duty we owe ourselves. This is our human calling, he said: to care for ourselves and unfold and perfect ourselves.

Channing spoke and wrote to a wide audience about both personal and ethical growth. They had to do with the quality of our own lives and of our relationships with others and actions toward others. In his Christian milieu, it was not necessary for him to emphasize our duties to others, for that was very well developed in the culture. It was much more countercultural at that time to advocate the idea that we have a duty to cultivate aspects of our inner lives, such as self-respect, self-care, wisdom, and peace of mind. However, the side of self-culture that involves our ability to act ethically, understand, empathize with and care for others, and attempt to influence society for the better was also very important to Channing, who was a social activist and abolitionist.

Channing went so far as to claim that self-culture is our salvation and the most important part of our lives. Through his writings, the phrase *salvation by character* — which meant finding ultimate meaning in life by developing our character — became one of the watchwords of nineteenth-century Unitarianism.

¹Adapted from Christine Robinson and Alicia Hawkins, *Listening Hearts*, p. 58.

Self-culture is an old-fashioned sounding phrase, but the idea it points to is worthy and important. Personal growth is a critical part of the meaning and satisfaction we find throughout our lives. So is ethical growth, or our willingness to extend ourselves for others, either in the private or public realm. While individuals will naturally find different balances between these two foci, both are critical. The person who only attends to their inner growth and is content to tend their own garden, with no thought of contributing to the human enterprise, is living an impoverished life. As is the person whose only concern is saving the world but who has not developed the wisdom to manage their disappointments with human nature.

A more contemporary term for self-culture might be *cultivating ourselves*. When we engage in this activity, we are in the interesting position of being both the garden *and* the gardener who is doing the cultivation. This ability to use our minds to mold our minds (all while being a mind and having a mind) seems to be the greatest gift of higher consciousness. And using our greatest and most human gifts brings great satisfaction to our lives.

Channing told his audience of laborers that we humans have two powers that make it possible to cultivate the garden of ourselves: self-searching and self-forming. Self-searching is our ability to watch ourselves, notice patterns, and remember our past. Self-forming is the ability to decide to change directions, break habits, form new ones, and take ourselves in hand and try something new. We can figure ourselves out, in other words, guide our own growth, curb our own behavior, control our own passions, and impel our own learning.

We decide, perhaps, that we are going to come out of our naturally introverted shell and make friends in a new community. We notice that we tend to choose solitary tasks and isolate ourselves. We make a plan, therefore, and pick out events to attend, require ourselves to make eye contact with strangers, and speak with the people we meet. We learn how to make small talk and force ourselves to ask others about their lives. As we experiment with these strategies, we celebrate small successes and check the things we have tried off our list of tasks.

Or perhaps we decide we are going to do our own taxes this year, get involved in politics, get out of the debt habit, or slow down and really listen to our spouse or children. We search ourselves for the actions, habits, and patterns that might impede our chosen goal, and we make a plan. We become gardeners of our own souls.

No doubt most people through the ages have believed that we are able to make decisions, break habits, and so on. Channing's particular contribution to human thought was to convincingly state that self-culture is spiritual growth. He believed that the impulse in us to grow and develop is divine and that when we go with its flow — whether we are quitting smoking, caring for others, or requiring ourselves to do what we think is right — we are doing the religious work of cultivating our moral self, and this work is what connects us to the divine.

Channing believed that cultivating oneself requires intellectual skills, for it uses the mind's powers to seek, reason, judge, and learn. Objectivity and the ability to seek truth no matter how uncomfortable are crucial traits of the person dedicated to self-culture. He told those laborers to whom he lectured in 1838 that education is not simply the acquiring of facts but the cultivation of the ability to think. He felt so strongly about education that he finished his lecture by remarking that the foundation of self-culture lies in a basic education in childhood, without which a person is crippled for life. He commended to his audience the “recent exertions of our legislature and private citizens, on behalf of our public schools, the chief hope of our country.” He then suggested that some part of the public lands of the nation be consecrated to the education of youth, which indeed they were in the land grant colleges of our nation.

We might imagine that his audience of laborers went home that night lifted in spirit. Perhaps they were newly aware of themselves as worthy beings who, as they worked their jobs, read their newspapers, ruminated over their lives, grieved their losses, cared for their children, and conversed with their buddies, were not simply indulging themselves but cultivating their characters. Channing taught that they were not only living but finding salvation — the wholeness and health and moral growth that point us to what we are meant to be.

Channing's choice to use the language of cultivation for our human capacity of self-directed growth and development is very apt. Gardeners know, for instance, that while they must plan the garden and lay out and perform the tasks of cultivation, the growth that happens is one of those natural phenomena that can only be called a miracle. The gardener helps along a natural process and can look at the harvest — that basket of tomatoes or armful of flowers — as a wonderful collaboration between wisdom, labor, and the great powers of growth and renewal, which no gardener can create and for which gratitude is the only appropriate response. Nor is a gardener in control of the process. The most well-tended plants sometimes just don't do well, and the gardener must continually adjust to nature.

Our self-cultivation is similar. We may set a goal of making a contribution to our world by becoming politically active and choose the school board election as the cause closest to our hearts and seemingly most accessible. But we may find that our attempts to get elected lead to disappointment. Instead of continuing to try to force our initial decision to bear fruit, it might be time for a change in focus. The good gardener learns from the plants that don't thrive but doesn't indulge in self-blame, and neither should the cultivator of self. When it comes to taking new directions in our lives, we can adopt an attitude of experimentation and an awareness that, like the gardener, we're not in control of most of the crucial factors. This will help us to gracefully back off of what's not bearing fruit in our lives and try new directions.

The good gardener works with reverence for nature's gifts, including the gifts that come through the gardener: labor, knowledge, perseverance, and hope. The person who has embarked on cultivating the self will do well to have a similar reverence for both sides of the cultivation equation. Just as the gardener takes credit for her labor and honors nature's miracle of growth, so the self-cultivator gives herself credit for the hard work of growth and the strengths she has previously developed, and she honors the gifts of love and help from those around her and her own natural impulses to grow, learn, and better herself.

A good gardener is also realistic, adapting plans to reality and working with nature. It's nearly impossible to grow blueberries in the soil of the southwest or oranges in northern climes. There are avenues of self-culture that are probably closed to us as well. We have to understand and work with the personality, body, skills, and past that we have and make realistic plans for our self-development. If math has always come hard and numbers are a mystery, it would be foolish to attempt to embark on an engineering career. The person whose childhood has left them with a scarred heart may find that their contribution to the world must be made with animals or as a lone scholar. Finding the right goals and best containers for our personal growth is part of what a good gardener learns to do.

Finally, the good gardener takes a holistic view of the situation in planning the garden. Even if eggplants grow wonderfully in her climate and she herself loves their beautiful color and variety, if nobody around her likes eggplant, she should probably not make the cultivation of eggplant her life work. Gardening, like self-culture, requires balancing the gardener's satisfaction with the needs of the world. Similarly, as we choose our own goals as we cultivate ourselves, it's important to think about what the world needs from us right now, as well as what goals will give us the most

satisfaction. In his book *Wishful Thinking*, writer-minister Frederick Buechner put this duty best: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”

These days community organizers talk about “capacity building” as they help groups of people figure out how to make their communities better. The gardener's work could also be considered as capacity-building. No matter what he plants, he will work the soil to make it more fertile, make wise and careful choices of crops and varieties and planting conditions, be diligent about watering and weeding, and even take out plants that are not thriving. A good gardener tends not only the garden but the compost pile, and cares not only about the plants but the soil and the needs of those who will use the product. All this thought and care builds the garden's capacity to produce more food, products, or beauty.

Similarly, we have a duty to ourselves to always build our own capacities: to learn, to keep our hearts open, to discover the ethical way and follow it, to develop our creativity and our ability to care. Whatever specific goals or products we tend, we will notice the whole ecology of our situation and appreciate both the goodness of nature and the needs of the people around us. When we are about that, we are truly cultivating the garden of our lives.

Exercise

Before coming to the gathering, think of a few words, phrases, or metaphors that describe self-cultivation. Complete the sentence: “The areas of myself I'd like to cultivate are...”

Questions

Activities and Questions

1. What's already in the garden of your life that pleases you (traits, skills, desires, etc.)? What needs to go? What would you like to encourage with extra TLC?
2. Who are some fellow gardeners in your life (books, companions, helpers, etc.)?
3. Channing thought that there were two areas in which we cultivate ourselves: our interior lives (including patience, self-discipline, or mindfulness) and our ethical lives (including the courage to stand up for what is right, being courteous to others, caretaking). Are there traits in both these areas that you would like to cultivate in yourself?
4. How are you a good gardener as you go about cultivating yourself? Are you kind to yourself? Patient? Careful to set realistic goals?
5. Channing spoke of our ability to watch ourselves, notice patterns, and remember our past. He called this self-searching. When have you successfully made a change in yourself using this approach?
6. Channing called the ability to decide to change directions, break habits, or try something new our ability to self-form. When have you done some of these?
7. What do you think of the idea that the work of self-development is guided by us (the gardeners), but the miracle of growth is awesome natural phenomena? Can you tell a story of self-development that seemed to blossom on its own in your life?

Self-Culture, Excerpts

Rev. William Ellery Channing, 1838

Self-culture – the care which every man owes to himself, to the unfolding and perfecting of his nature – is possible, not only because we can enter into and search ourselves. We have a still nobler power, that of acting on, determining and forming ourselves. This is a fearful as well as glorious endowment, for it is the ground of human responsibility. We have the power not only of tracing our powers, but of guiding and impelling them, not only of watching our passions, but of controlling them, not only of seeing our faculties grow, but of applying to them means and influences to aid their growth. We can stay or change the current of thought. We can concentrate the intellect on objects which we wish to comprehend. We can fix our eyes on perfection and make almost everything speed us towards it. This is indeed a noble prerogative of our nature.

Of all the discoveries which men need to make, the most important at the present moment, is that of the self-forming power treasured up in themselves. There is more of divinity in it, than in the force which impels the outward universe; and yet how little we comprehend it! How it slumbers in most men unsuspected, unused! This makes self-culture possible, and binds it on us as a solemn duty.

The passions indeed may be stronger than the conscience, may lift up a louder voice; but their clamor differs wholly from the tone of command in which the conscience speaks. They are not clothed with its authority, its binding power. In their very triumphs they are rebuked by the moral principle, and often cower before its still, deep, menacing voice. No part of self-knowledge is more important, than to discern clearly these two great principles, the self-seeking and the disinterested; and the most important part of self-culture is to depress the former, and to exalt the latter, or to enthrone the sense of duty within us.

There are no limits to the growth of this moral force in man, if he will cherish it faithfully. There have been men, whom no power in the universe could turn from the Right, by whom death in its most dreadful forms has been less dreaded, than transgression of the inward law of universal justice and love.

Self-culture is Religious. When we look into ourselves we discover powers, which link us with this outward, visible, finite, ever-changing world. We have sight and other senses to discern, and limbs and various faculties to secure and appropriate the material creation. And we have too a power, which cannot stop at what we see and handle, at what exists within the bounds of space and time, which seeks for the Infinite, Uncreated Cause, which cannot rest till it ascend to the Eternal, All-comprehending Mind. This we call the religious principle, and its grandeur cannot be exaggerated by human language; for it marks out a being destined for higher communion than with the visible universe. To develop this, is eminently to educate ourselves.

Now I reverence, as much as any man, the intellect; but let us never exalt it above the moral principle. With this it is most intimately connected. In this its culture is founded, and to exalt this is its highest aim. Whoever desires that his intellect may grow up to soundness, to healthy vigor, must begin with moral discipline. Here is the first and grand condition of intellectual progress. I must choose to receive the truth, no matter how it bears on myself. I must follow it, no matter where it leads, what interests it opposes, to what persecution or loss it lays me open, from what party it severs me, or to what party it allies. Without this fairness of mind, which is only another phrase for disinterested love of truth, great native powers of understanding are perverted and lead astray; genius runs wild; "the light within us becomes darkness." The subtlest reasoners, for lack of this, cheat themselves as well as others, and become entangled in the web of their own sophistry.

To build up that strength of mind, which apprehends and cleaves to great universal truths, is the highest intellectual self-culture; and here I wish you to observe how entirely this culture agrees with that of the moral and the religious principles of our nature, of which I have previously spoken. In each of these, the improvement of the soul consists in raising it above what is narrow, particular, individual, selfish, to the universal and unconfined. To improve a man, is to liberalize, enlarge him in thought, feeling and purpose. Narrowness of intellect and heart, this is the degradation from which all culture aims to rescue the human being.

In looking at our nature, we discover, among its admirable endowments, the sense or perception of Beauty. We see the germ of this in every human being, and there is no power which admits greater cultivation; and why should it not be cherished in all? It deserves remark, that the provision for this principle is infinite in the universe. There is but a very minute portion of the creation, which we can turn into food and clothes, or gratification for the body; but the whole creation may be used to minister to the sense of beauty.

Beauty is an all-pervading presence. It unfolds in the numberless flowers of the spring. It waves in the branches of the trees and the green blades of grass. It haunts the depths of the earth and sea, and gleams out in the hues of the shell and the precious stone. And not only these minute objects, but the ocean, the mountains, the clouds the heavens, the stars, the rising and setting sun, all overflow with beauty. The universe is its temple; and those men, who are alive to it, cannot lift their eyes without feeling themselves encompassed with it on every side. Now this beauty is so precious, the enjoyments it gives are so refined and pure, so congenial with our tenderest and noble feelings, and so akin to worship, that it is painful to think of the multitude of men as living in the midst of it, and living almost as blind to it, as if, instead of this fair earth and glorious sky, they were tenants of a dungeon. An infinite joy is lost to the world by the lack of culture of this spiritual endowment.

But one thing I would say; the beauty of the outward creation is intimately related to the lovely, grand, interesting attributes of the soul. It is the emblem or expression of these. Matter becomes beautiful to us, when it seems to lose its material aspect, its inertness, finiteness and grossness, and by the ethereal lightness of its forms and motions, seems to approach spirit; when it images to us pure and gentle affections; when it spreads out into a vastness which is a shadow of the Infinite; or when in more awful shapes and movements it speaks of the Omnipotent. Thus outward beauty is akin to something deeper and unseen, is the reflection of spiritual attributes; and of consequence the way to see and feel it more and more keenly, is to cultivate those moral, religious, intellectual and social principles of which I have already spoken, and which are the glory of the spiritual nature; and I name this that you may see, what I am anxious to show, the harmony which subsists among all branches of human culture, or how each forwards and is aided by all.

Self-culture, if seized on clearly and vigorously, burns like a living coal in the soul. He who deliberately adopts a great end, has, by this act, half accomplished it, has scaled the chief barrier to success. The truth, that progress is the very end of our being, must not be received as a tradition, but comprehended and felt as a reality.

A man must unfold himself freely, and should respect the peculiar gifts or biases by which nature has distinguished him from others. Self-culture does not demand the sacrifice of individuality. It does not regularly apply an established machinery, for the sake of torturing every man into one rigid shape, called perfection. As the human countenance, with the same features in us all, is diversified without end in the race, and is never the same in any two individuals, so the human soul, with the same grand powers and laws, expands into an infinite variety of forms, and would be woefully stunted by modes of culture requiring all men to learn the same lesson or to bend to the same rules.

Especially if there springs up within you any view of God's word or universe, any sentiment or aspiration, which seems to you of a higher order than what you meet abroad, give reverent heed to it; enquire into it earnestly, solemnly. Do not trust it blindly, for it may be an illusion; but it may be the Divinity moving within you, a new revelation, not supernatural but still most precious, of truth or duty; and if after enquiry it so appear, then let no clamor, or scorn, or desertion turn you from it. Be true to your own highest convictions. Intimations from our own souls of something more perfect than others teach, if faithfully followed, give us a consciousness of spiritual force and progress.

Undoubtedly nature has her nobility, and sends forth a few to be eminently "lights of the world." But it is also true that a portion of the same divine fire is given to all; for the many could not receive with a loving reverence the quickening influences of the few, were there not essentially the same spiritual life in both.

The power of original thought is particularly manifested in those, who thirst for progress, who are bent on unfolding their whole nature. A man who wakes up to the consciousness of having been created for progress and perfection, looks with new eyes on himself and on the world in which he lives.

A man in the common walks of life, who has faith in perfection, in the unfolding of the human spirit, as the great purpose of God, possesses more the secret of the universe, perceives more the harmonies or mutual adaptations of the world without and the world within him, is a wiser interpreter of Providence, and reads nobler lessons of duty in the events which pass before him, than the profoundest philosopher who lacks this grand central truth. Thus illuminations, inward suggestions, are not confined to a favored few, but visit all who devote themselves to a generous self-culture.

Closing

Facilitator: We extinguish this flame, and we remember the warmth of our community, the light of our wisdom, the generosity of our sharing. We keep these in our heart until we meet again.
(extinguish chalice)

All (unison): Thank you for your loving hands, your loving heart, your loving ways. Thank you for the gifts you bring into the world each day. And if you ever doubt yourself, remember us, who love you well. We know all the gifts you bring into the world each day. So thank you for your loving hands, your loving heart, your loving ways. Thank you for the gifts you bring into the world each day.



On the Journey is produced by Community Unitarian Universalist Congregation at White Plains, NY for use in small groups. Each month (ten months a year) explores a different theological or spiritual theme.

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