

The Path

Perception | February | 2017

The Spiritual Theme Newsletter of the
First Unitarian Universalist
Society of Burlington



What Does It Mean To Live A Life Of Perception?

How clearly do you see things? Really?!

Truth is, all of us need help with our blurry vision. And it's not a matter of intelligence, of seeing things with "a critical eye," or through the lens of reason. With all due respect to our historic UU emphasis on logic, reason and science, these days what we seem to need most is simply the time and space to step back--to take a deep breath and ask: Is this really the life I want to be living? Am I living out of my best self? Are my choices and commitments in alignment with my deepest loves and dreams? Am I seeing life's grace and loveliness, not just its challenges and callousness?

So forget stupidity. Forget blind faith. The greatest threat to our souls these days comes from speed. Life can so easily end up living us rather than us living it.



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And that's where church comes in--at least for us UUs. Our faith has faith in us; it trusts that deep down we already know what's right, true and good. But our faith also knows we can't hear that inner voice of truth on our own. No, it takes supportive friends and spiritual disciplines to regain our sight, to help us slow down enough and be intentional enough to ensure that our choices and thoughts are really our own. So that's what this month is all about: using our friends and engaging disciplines to step back and regain control of our sight--and our lives.

Things a little blurry lately? You're not alone. Let's give things a second look together.

Self-Care for the Spiritual Journey

When we go deeper into spiritual exploration together and individually, there's always a chance we will encounter some tender spots in our own spirits and stories. Therefore, it is important, when doing deep spiritual work, to have trusted companions and adequate support on the journey, and to know you are welcome to care for yourself and your spirit along the way, engaging in the theme to the level that's comfortable for you.



Likewise, please know that we are here to offer support if you find yourself struggling with something surfaced by the monthly theme. Rev. Mara is our first point of contact for pastoral care. She may be able to set up a time to meet you, or refer you to **Andre Mol**, our ministerial intern, caring lay leaders through our **Care Network**, or outside resources. She can be reached at revmara@uusociety.org or 802-862-5630 x. 24.

2016/2017 Themes

September – Connection
October – Deep Listening
November – Hospitality
December – Expectation
January – Inheritance
February – Perception
March – Imagination
April – Resistance
May – Growth
June – Delight

Seeking Submissions for *The Path*

The Path introduces each month's spiritual theme, which we then explore in greater depth through our Sunday worship services and other programming. We welcome (and need!) your submissions of readings, stories, videos, books and movies for any of our upcoming themes.

For theme submissions to be included in the relevant edition of *The Path*, please send them no later than one month prior to publication. Do feel free to send materials in for upcoming themes at any point up until the one-month-prior deadline.

This month, we especially welcome submissions on our March and April themes, **Imagination** and **Resistance**. Please send them to themecircles@uusociety.org.

Through the Looking Glass: Four Ways to Take Another Look at Your Life

Perception is not always about getting it right; sometimes it's about seeing it all--about noticing what we're leaving out of the picture. And as the introduction said, "stepping back" and getting a wider view doesn't always come naturally. It takes work, intention, and some assistance. This month's spiritual exercise puts us in touch with that assistance. Below are three different "lenses" to help us achieve this all-important wider view. Pick whichever "looking glass" works best for you. Come to your group ready to share why you picked the one you did and what you learned from engaging that option.

Option #1

Move from Snapshots to Storybook

This lens is created from our scrapbooks. Take a day or two and go back through your old photo albums. Divide your life into 5 year or 10 year blocks. For each 5 or 10 year block, pick 2-3 pictures to represent each of those "chapters" of your life. What was the "big thing" that happened in each of those segments of time? What made the biggest impact on who you were and who you became? What 2-3 pictures tell the story of each period of your life?

Once you have 2-3 pictures identified for each 5-10 year block of time, lay all of those pictures side by side in chronological order. Literally create a photographic timeline. If you are good with your computer, you might even create a slideshow.

Then take some time to absorb how it all fits together. Step back and see the pictures as a whole, rather than separate unconnected parts. What story do they tell? Is there a narrative arc in those pictures that you didn't notice before? What title would you give this novel/picture book? What names would you give to each chapter? Is the story of your life a mystery? A romance? An adventure tale? Sci-Fi? How does your life look different when seen as a whole, rather than in parts?

Keep in mind some of the "wise words" from the Recommended Resources section. For instance, Marilynne Robinson talks about "dark years" that in retrospect turned out to be "answered prayers." Are there dark years in your story that turned out to be the very thing that led you to what you now treasure most? There's also that great Chinese proverb about the farmer and his son who understand that they have to "wait and see" before pronouncing anything lucky or unlucky. How do the pictures of your life resonate with the experience of the farmer? And what about Jean Paul Richter's quote: "The more sand that has escaped from the hour-glass of our life, the clearer we see through it." Has that been true for you? As you step back and look at the sweep of the snapshots of your life, is it easier to see a coherent tale? Does it tell the tale of someone who has grown steadily wiser? More clear-sighted? Or more muddled? Or maybe just more humble and more willing to let go of the driver's wheel?

If you are willing, bring your pictures or slideshow to your group meeting and share it with your soul matters friends.

Option #2

Take 10 Pictures of the World While it is Shining

This lens is for those of us who like to take (or draw) pictures rather than go through them. And it's inspired by a wonderful quote by Marilynne Robinson:

“It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance - for a moment or a year or the span of a life. And then it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know it had anything to do with fire, or light Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see.”

Your task is simple: prove that “wherever you turn your eyes, the world can shine.” And do it by capturing 10 simple things around you and in your ordinary life that may not usually qualify as containing “the Lord's breath and radiance” but upon second look--or a right look--surely count as being divinely infused. I can think of three of my pictures right away: my 8 year old getting off the bus and running toward me--arms wide--shouting, “Daaaaaddy!”; my wife's face when she comes upstairs to show me a painting she's just finished; and the sky on one those evenings when the sunset has replaced the normal blue with the most amazing and blazing reds.

Take 2 weeks and collect 10 pictures. Catch that inspiration--whatever it is--breathing radiance into this poor gray ember of creation, which of course is anything but poor or gray, when we perceive it as it deserves!

Option #3

Have a Friend Guess What's On Your iPod

Under the “First Thoughts” section, one of our facilitators talks about having her students guess what music is on her iPod. She was basically--and bravely--looking at herself through their eyes rather than her own. This option asks you to be similarly brave: look at yourself through the eyes (lens) of another.

So, call up a friend you trust and love (and who loves you!) and ask them to go to lunch, out for coffee or on a walk. Then ask the friend a bunch of questions to see how well they know you. Sort of like that old show, The Newlywed Game, just without the risk of getting into a fight with your spouse!

“What's on my iPod?” is only the beginning of what you might ask. Others might include: “What do you think is my greatest strength and/or my greatest fear?”, “Am I too hard on myself or too easy?”, “What gives me joy?”, “Am I good at admitting I am wrong?”, “Am I happy?”, “Am I good at making others happy?”, “What do I believe about God and/or about life after death?”, “Am I kind?”, “Do you trust me?”, “Can I handle the truth?”, “What's my favorite dessert?”

The point is to find questions that will help you see if others perceive you the way you perceive yourself.

Come to your group and share what you learned.

Option #4

Email the Future You

This lens is the lens of your “old best self.” We all have moments of intention or insight that we want to hold on to. We perceive something about life that we don’t want to forget or we identify a goal to which we want to stay committed. We want our “future me” to not lose sight of something precious or simply not lose our way.

Well, can you believe it... there’s a website all set to help: www.futureme.org. It’s a website that allows you to write yourself an email that you will receive at a future date. So here’s the exercise: Simply go to www.futureme.org and follow the directions. Use it to ensure that your “future you” lives the life of perception that you want it to.

Don’t forget to bring a copy of what you wrote to your future self to your theme circles group to share. Why, out of all the things in the world you could write to your future self, did you write what you did?

Questions To Wrestle 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 was your greatest misperception? And could a similar blind-spot happen again? Is it happening right now? What are the signs that your sight may be out of focus?
2. What was your greatest moment of clear perception? When did you see more clearly than everyone else around you? What made you different? And do you honor and cultivate that gifted part of yourself still today?
3. How well do you use perception to shape reality? And is it for the better or worse? Some of us are very skilled at the power of positive thinking. Others of us are equally skilled finding reasons to worry even on the sunniest of days. Is it a silver or asbestos lining that you see in every cloud? And who taught you this skill?
4. Have you ever healed (or hurt) yourself by thinking good (or bad) thoughts? They say there is a powerful “mind-body” connection. Do you buy it? More importantly, have you lived it?
5. Are you good at “altering” your perspective? Or to put it more simply, can you admit that you are wrong? Can you even remember the last time you admitted you were wrong?
6. What are you doing to shape (and protect) your child’s perception of themselves? In the Recommended Resources, there’s a video called “Miss Representation.” If you are a parent, you need to watch it. Afterward, your perception--and parenting--won’t ever be the same.

7. Whose perception do you most trust when yours is unsteady? Do you even have someone whose views you trust?
8. Do others really know you? Is what they see really what they really get? One of the quotes in Wise Words is: "Character is what you do when no one is watching." Is there a piece of your character or heart that no one sees? But you'd like them to? Or need them to?
9. Have you ever purposely closed your eyes? Are you trying to keep them turned away from something right now?
10. Has pain or loss ever made you perceive life more clearly? Give voice to what your life and loss made you realize?

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 awakening."

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 may stimulate and open up our own thinking!

"Coincidentally, we just talked about perception in the relationships class I teach. I started off class by having the students guess what artists are on my iPod. Quickly it's revealed that I confirm some of their stereotypes and often disconfirm many. hilariously, one kid noted just the way I hold my iPod is "old-ladyish." We then discuss how stereotypes serve us by simplifying our world and reducing anxiety, but mostly divide us and create friction since they are mostly wrong."

"To me, living a life of perception means living a life of humility. When I teach conflict management, I call it "Managing Different Points of View." If we accept that so much is simply our perception, we cannot be self-righteous. We have to put energy into understanding others' points of view, versus simply castigating them."

"The only thought I have is that when a counselor said, "Your hope will kill you," I could not believe him. He said I was too hopeful that the man I loved for years would appear and become the person I hoped he would be. In reality, the more I accepted the reality before me, the less hopeful I became, and the more alive I became."

"In personal communication, our messages are not just content, but our diction, speed, loudness, intonation, pause, or lack of pause, and our syntax will change everything."

"We drove down to northcentral Pennsylvania to meet some friends camping. It was a Friday night after work - by the time we arrived at the wilderness area it was about 1:00 AM. We hitched up our packs and went in search of our buddies. "It's easy... park in the clearing and head off to the south... you'll pick up a trail that will take you right to us... It'll be great."



The two of us headed out as directed under the brightness of a full moon- couldn't have been brighter. But alas we couldn't pick up the trail--- we felt our way along, every direction was a real possibility. After 45 minutes we walked down a slope to a hedge row.... Before us I saw the most beautiful lake, amazing-- wind rippling the surface - FRESH air wafting over that clear little lake. The most relaxing calming, centering place I have ever been.

We followed the shore- found a trail- and walked right into the camp. The next morning - as we got caught up with each other's lives, we were asked if we had any trouble getting in. A little I said, but once we found the lake it was a cake walk. Why didn't you tell us to come in by the lake? Puzzled looks all around from the natives. "Ahhhh, we are on top of a plateau- there is no lake." We grabbed our coffee...walked down to the trail which led to the lake.....the "lake" was a field of wheat.....with rippling waves.....and fresh air.....no water.

To this day - the perception of that lake is the most relaxing calming, centering place I have ever been.

Other Wise Words

Origin of “perception”: Middle English from Latin percipere, from per = thoroughly, and capere = to take

We perceive by means of the kaleidoscopic mirror of this life. This means that our ability to perceive is at once tyrannized by our expectations, and at war with them.

— James Baldwin

The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to sharpen.

— William B. Yeats.

“The Lord is more constant and far more extravagant than it seems to imply. Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?”

“The moon looks wonderful in this warm evening light, just as a candle flame looks beautiful in the light of morning. Light within light...It seems to me to be a metaphor for the human soul, the singular light within that great general light of existence.”

— Marilynne Robinson, Gilead

If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks.

—William Blake (1757 - 1827) The Marriage of Heaven and Hell



“I am grateful for all those dark years, even though in retrospect they seem like a long, bitter prayer that was answered finally.”

— Marilynne Robinson, Gilead

A farmer and his son had a beloved stallion who helped the family earn a living. One day, the horse ran away and their neighbors exclaimed, “Your horse ran away, what terrible luck!” The farmer replied, “Maybe so, maybe not. We’ll see.”

A few days later, the horse returned home, leading a few wild mares back to the farm as well. The neighbors shouted out, “Your horse has returned, and brought several horses home with him. What great luck!” The farmer replied, “Maybe so, maybe not. We’ll see.”

Later that week, the farmer’s son was trying to break one of the mares and she threw him to the ground, breaking his leg. The villagers cried, “Your son broke his leg, what terrible luck!” The farmer replied, “Maybe so, maybe not. We’ll see.”

A few weeks later, soldiers from the national army marched through town, recruiting all the able-bodied boys for the army. They did not take the farmer’s son, still recovering from his injury. Friends shouted, “Your boy is spared, what tremendous luck!” To which the farmer replied, “Maybe so, maybe not. We’ll see.”

— Chinese proverb

“If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.”

— Wayne Dyer

We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are.

— Anais Nin

“Be still. Stillness reveals the secrets of eternity”

— Lao Tzu

“At the center of your being
you have the answer;
you know who you are
and you know what you want.”

“So the unwanted soul
sees what's hidden,
and the ever-wanting soul
sees only what it wants.”

— Lao Tzu

“Character - what you do when no one is watching”

— Anonymous



The more sand that has escaped from the hour-glass of our life, the clearer we see through it.

- Jean Paul Friedrich Richter

“We stood out on the porch before we went inside and she told me her secret. Pretend you're just visiting, she said. That way you'll forget that they're family.”

-Brian Andreas

A woodcutter went out one morning to cut some firewood and discovered that his favorite ax was missing. He couldn't find it anywhere. Then he noticed his neighbor's son standing near the woodshed. The woodcutter thought, "Aha! That boy must have stolen my ax. I see how he lurks about the shed, shifting uneasily from foot to foot, greedy hands stuffed in his pockets, a guilty look on his face. I can't prove it, but he MUST have stolen my ax."

A few days later the woodcutter was surprised and happy to come upon the ax under a pile of firewood. "I remember now," he said, "Just where I'd left it!"

The next time he saw his neighbor's son, the woodcutter looked intently at the boy, scrutinizing him from head to toe. How odd, he thought, somehow this boy has lost his guilty look .

-A Taoist Tale from China

Perhaps the most famous Yoruba story about Eshu concerns two inseparable friends who swore undying fidelity to one another but neglect to acknowledge Eshu (God/divine mystery/holy humility). These two friends work on adjacent fields. One day Eshu walks on the dividing line between their fields, wearing a cap that is black on one side and red (or white) on the other. He saunters between the fields, exchanging pleasantries with both men. Afterwards, the two friends got to talking about the man with the cap, and fall to violent quarreling about the color of the man's hat, calling each other blind and crazy. The neighbors gather about, and then Eshu arrives and stops the fight. The friends explain their disagreement, and Eshu shows them the two-sided hat.

“Good leadership [and living] requires you to surround yourself with people of diverse perspectives who can disagree with you without fear of retaliation.”

- Doris Kearns Goodwin



Recommended Resources

For children and families

Story: The Water Bearer's Garden <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/windows/session5/143528.shtml>

Activity: Some People Think They're Better Than Others

<http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/windows/session12/143792.shtml>



Online Videos, Website & Podcasts

Amazing Street Art that Changes How We Perceive The Ordinary World Around Us:

Art that wakes us up!

http://www.streetartutopia.com/?page_id=4183

Miss Representation

A video about how the media is shaping our (and our kids') perceptions... for the worse!

<http://vimeo.com/28066212> (8 minutes)

How others control our perceptions and behavior (17 minutes)

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

Beau Lotto: Optical illusions show how we see (16 minutes)

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

Jonathan Haidt on the roots of liberal and conservative views and perceptions (19 min.)

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

Itzhak Perlman talks about Easy and Hard (1 minute)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3richcoCUI>

Questioning the perception that science can only tell us about facts, not morality (23 minutes)

http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/sam_harris_science_can_show_what_s_right.html

Willie Nelson, - "Are You Sure?": (song - 2 minutes)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IARIX1EMbwA>

Bobby McFerrin & Judi Donaghy "I Can See Clearly Now" (song 3 min.)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cXeY696gZW4&feature=related>



Books

Gilead by Marilynne Robinson

From the book: “It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance - for a moment or a year or the span of a life. And then it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know it had anything to do with fire, or light Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it? Theologians talk about a prevenient grace that precedes grace itself and allows us to accept it. I think there must also be a prevenient courage that allows us to be brave - that is, to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm.”

The Heart of Buddha's Teachings by Thich Nhat Hanh

In it, he talks about the five Aggregates. The third Aggregate is Perceptions (samjna). Peace and happiness come from the simple but profound awareness that perceptions rise, stay for a period of time, and cease to be.

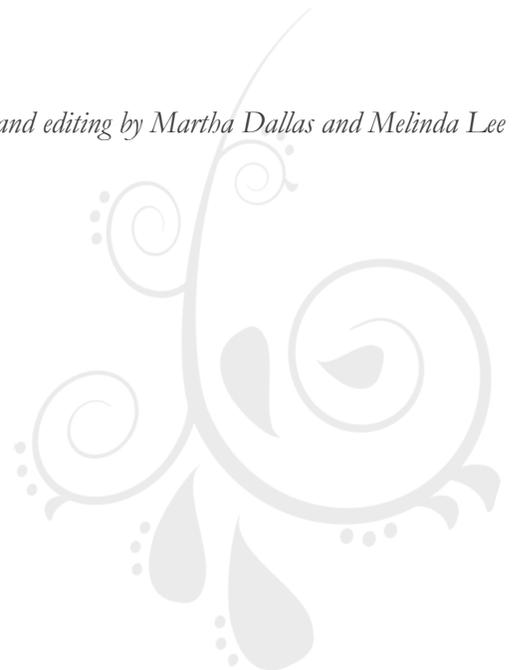
Brightsided by Barbara Ehrenreich

About how the power of positive thinking is often not all it's cracked up to be. A surprisingly hopeful rant against looking on the bright side!

Seven Blind Mice by Ed Young

A children's book that ends with the following "Mouse Moral": “Knowing in part may make a fine tale, but wisdom comes from seeing the whole”

This packet was developed by Soul Matters Sharing Circle members, with additions and editing by Martha Dallas and Melinda Lee of the FUUSB.



Use this section to write, doodle, and create!

AHA! Moments



Notes

