

Faster Than Feeling

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 13 April 2008 Chip Roush

OPENING WORDS The practice of fasting—of not eating, and maybe not even drinking, for a period of a day or a week or even months—has long been a human custom. Some traditions use it to seek purification; others to demonstrate the supremacy of the will. Fasting has been used to draw attention to social inequalities, by such people as Mahatma Gandhi and the British feminist Emmeline Pankhurst. Even micro-fasts, such as putting our spoon or fork down, and taking a breath, between every bite we take, can draw our attention to our food and our good fortune in having it. Whether we fast or not, may our awareness increase, this moment and every moment we live.

FIRST READING In March of 1863, Senator James Harlan of Iowa introduced a resolution asking President Lincoln to proclaim a national day of prayer and fasting. The resolution passed, and Lincoln did sign it. The following is excerpted from that proclamation:

“...whereas it is the duty of nations as well as of men...to confess their sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon...

We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined...that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!...

I do, by this my proclamation, designate and set apart Thursday, the 30th. day of April, 1863, as a day of national humiliation, fasting and prayer. And I do hereby request all the People to abstain, on that day, from their ordinary secular pursuits, and to unite, at their several places of public worship and their respective homes, in keeping the day holy to the Lord...All this being done, in sincerity and truth, let us then rest humbly in the hope authorized by the Divine teachings, that the united cry of the Nation will be heard on high, and answered with blessings, no less than the pardon of our national sins, and the restoration of our now divided and suffering Country, to its former happy condition of unity and peace.”

SECOND READING Sheri Hostetler is the pastor of First Mennonite Church of San Francisco. She edited a magazine for the “liberal fringe” of her faith tradition, called *Mennonot*, which published articles supporting the right of women to be clergy and the right of gays and lesbians to belong to a Mennonite congregation.

Instructions

Give up the world; give up self; finally, give up God. Find god in rhododendrons and rocks, passers-by, your cat. Pare your beliefs, your absolutes. Make it simple; make it clean. No carry-on luggage allowed. Examine all you have with a loving and critical eye, then throw away some more. Repeat. Repeat. Keep this and only this: what your heart beats loudly for what feels heavy and full in your gut. There will only be one or two things you will keep, and they will fit lightly in your pocket.

SERMON How many of you have ever pushed yourself back from the table, and immediately felt like taking a nap? How many of you have ever described the time between your lunch hour and your midafternoon coffee break using the term “food coma”? How many of you have attempted to perform some actual work, or tried to relate to another person, and had that effort made more difficult because you were too stuffed from your last meal? Me, too. And that is why I sometimes find fasting to be a good spiritual practice—so I am less numb to my world, and more present to the full experience of life.

On Thursday, April 24th, a week and a half from now, I hope you'll join me in fasting and in breaking our fast together with a potluck meal that evening.

First, we must note that our fasting is voluntary. There are tens of millions of people on this planet who will not get enough to eat today. That is *not* fasting, and I invite us to hold all those hungry people in our hearts, as we talk about making a choice to fast.

The first Fast Day in our culture was held in Boston, in 1670. It was a state holiday in most of the original colonies, and eventually became a national holiday as well. As we heard in Lincoln's proclamation, it was a day of repentance and contrition, a day of humility. It was often celebrated on a Thursday in April; and so on the calendar, as well as in spirit, it was a counterpoint to Thanksgiving.

Our culture changed a lot in the 19th century, especially during and after the Civil War, and Presidents ceased to call for a national Fast Day. The last one was proclaimed as a form of mourning after Lincoln was assassinated.

Although repentance was the predominant theme of the holiday, sorrow and solemnity were not its only expressions. Henry David Thoreau wrote in his journal in 1856, about playing a game of "base" on Fast Day—I would like to think, an early variant of baseball. (Perhaps the variant that the Tigers are still playing.)

Others used the day's focus on humility as a platform to urge social change. William Ellery Channing preached the following words on a Fast Day sometime around 1812: "We have lived to hear the strange doctrine, that to expose the measures of rulers is treason; and we have lived to see this doctrine carried into practice...The cry has been that war is declared, and all opposition should therefore be hushed. A sentiment more unworthy of a free country can hardly be propagated. If this doctrine be admitted, rulers have only to declare war, and they are screened at once from scrutiny. At the very time when they have armies at command, when...their power most formidable, not a word of warning...must be heard. The press, which is to expose...abuses, must not utter one rebuke...although our best interests and most valuable rights are put to hazard by an unnecessary war! [If we] let rulers...know that, by placing the country in a state of war, they place themselves beyond the only power they dread—the power of free discussion— [then] we may expect war without end."

Channing wrote that two hundred years ago. It's not about Republicans or Democrats: it's about tyranny and free expression. In President Lincoln's proclamation, he sought mercy and pardon for our individual and collective sins. I would paraphrase his request as a plea for healing and wholeness.

Because we still need that healing and wholeness, because we still need reminded to treat each other better, Professor Dean Grodzins suggested that we re-create the holiday of Fast Day at Meadville Lombard Theological School, in 2003. This is the sixth April that Meadville students, and a number of congregations throughout our movement have celebrated it. The Fast Day holiday ends with a short worship service, followed by a potluck dinner where we break our fast together. You may have heard that hunger is the best spice—well, those potluck dinners have some *delicious* food!

As you might guess, the definition of "fast" is a little flexible for Unitarian Universalists. I usually choose not to eat after dinner the night before. I have a friend who defines his experience as a daylight-hours-fast, so he wakes up particularly early, before dawn, and has a normal breakfast on his Fast Day. I also know someone for whom one day is not a "real" fast—she usually celebrates Fast Day as the last of several days without eating.

The definition of fast is also widened to include people with food-related conditions. Someone with diabetes should not go without food for a whole day. So he might choose to go without his favorite snack. Another might really need caffeine, and so her fast might be from all solid foods. I usually allow myself to drink water or tea.

If all of this sounds good to you, I invite you to participate in the sixth annual UU Fast Day, next Thursday, April 24th. However you define your fast, you are welcome to attend our worship service and potluck, at 6:00pm in the social hall.

The Taoist master, Chuang Tzu, tells the story of a man who was so frightened of his own shadow that he tried to run away from it. He believed if he could just escape that shadow, then he would be happy. He ran faster and faster, determined to free himself, but his shadow never once fell behind. The man grew more fearful and more angry and he decided he would not give up until he'd beaten his adversary. He put on a burst of speed, and ran faster than he'd ever run before, until he collapsed and died of exhaustion. Chuang Tzu points out that if man had simply sat down to rest, in the shade of a tree, his shadow would have vanished.

That is the concept behind Fast Day. We need healing and wholeness, and we get caught up using the same old strategies, only bigger or faster or more enthusiastically when sometimes what we need is to pause a moment, and relax and just breathe.

All of us carry pain around with us. It may be pain from our childhood—even the best parents cannot be perfect; indeed, psychologists now believe that our parents *ought* to fail occasionally, in order to force us to become our own healthy, inter-dependent selves. Our needs can never be met fully met in childhood, and our evolution and our growth in adulthood is about realizing those needs.

Beyond childhood, there are the traumas of adolescence, and the difficulties of finding loving partners. We have all been used or mistreated by others. Finally, if that were not enough, there is the fact that each of us will die someday. Death is a natural part of life, and it can still be frightening for many of us to contemplate.

All of us develop coping strategies to help us deal with these pains, these injuries and fears and abuses. Some of these strategies are done consciously, like coming to church, or journaling, or seeing a professional counselor. Other strategies are unconscious. Some folks drink to numb their pain; some keep themselves busy, to distract themselves from their suffering; some take pills, or use food or sex or a hundred other methods to somehow distance themselves from the pains of living.

Food is a particularly effective tool for doing this, because the human brain does not simultaneously eat and feel intense emotion. As long as I am eating, I am feeling less of the pain that I have accumulated over my 40+ years on this planet. Unfortunately, the weight I gain from all that eating makes me feel unhappy with myself, so it actually adds to my suffering. Which I try to mask with more eating...et cetera...et cetera...et cetera...

Fast Day helps to break that cycle, at least for a day. And even if food is not your distraction of choice, so much of our time, and so much of our social interaction, is based around meals that fasting for a day breaks us out of our normal rhythms, and lets us experience our lives in a different way.

One friend, on Fast Day a few years ago, shared the story of taking a walk on his lunch hour. Instead of eating at his desk, since he was fasting, he went outside and strolled around in the sunshine. He reported that he enjoyed his afternoon much more than usual.

Sheri Hostetler, in our second reading, recommended that we keep only that which our heart beats loudly for and what feels heavy and full in our gut. She is not talking about food—she is talking about a lived experience of health and wholeness and meaning. Fasting can help us discern the difference.

In our opening hymn, we sang, “wake now, my senses, and hear the earth’s call.” Let us awaken from our food comas, let us sit down in the shade of a tree, and let us open ourselves to the full experience of Life.

Well, that sure sounds pretty simple. If it is so easy, why haven’t we already done it? Why do we need Fast Day to open ourselves to the full experience of life?

Oh, yeah, I remember: because IT HURTS! We have adopted our behaviors and addictions because we are trying to *get away from* our suffering. That’s why I overeat—to dim the pain. That’s why some people have sex with so many strangers, and why others keep their calendars jammed full, and why still others become addicted to chemical numbness.

And all of those methods are us trying to outrun our shadow.

The pain is part of us. It’s part of life. That’s the first noble truth of Buddhism: life involves suffering. Is there anyone here who has not suffered, who has never experienced any pain? No. The good news is, we can learn to get through it. We can diminish our suffering immensely—we can heal ourselves and each other—if we are willing to do one thing. All we have to do, to get through our pain, is to *feel* it.

There is an expression that “pain is mandatory but suffering is optional.” We sometimes get so caught up in fearing our pain, in denying our pain, in trying to avoid our pain, in worrying about the pains we have or might yet absorb over our lives, that we suffer a lot more thinking about it than we would if we just faced it, felt it, and got past it. Let us accept, honor, and move through our pain, and let us not suffer any more by fearing it. To be sure, this is not an easy task. It can be really difficult to face our fears; it can be traumatic to feel our anger; it can seem like we will never recover, if we allow ourselves to feel and grieve

our sorrows. Emotions are powerful things. They give us energy and meaning, and they can drain energy, if we don't know how to accept them.

Feeling our emotions can be difficult, but if we work at it, and especially if we get some professional help with it, we can learn to feel without being overwhelmed. We'll still have pains, certainly, but we will no longer suffer from them, or give them more energy than they deserve.

I will end with the story of one woman who learned to face her fears, and transformed her life—and the lives of her loved ones—in doing so. The story is taken from Tara Brach's book, *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha*. Dr. Brach is a clinical psychologist and a Buddhist teacher in Maryland. She writes that a woman named Laura came into her office one day.

Laura had had a really bad day the previous day: she had become angry with her supervisor, and quit her job, and when she tried to tell her husband about it that evening, he took a call on his cellphone, which upset her, and she ended up throwing a book at him, and sleeping on the couch that night. Laura felt out of control, and asked Dr. Brach to help her.

Over the course of their first sessions, Laura recounted growing up with a volatile and critical mother. As a youth, she avoided her mother as much as possible, and learned to scream back at other times. Though it was years later, Laura still felt defensive and easily injured in all her relationships. Her husband called her a "landmine set to blow up at any misstep." The day she quit her job, her supervisor had asked about the tension between her and one of her coworkers. Laura was openly hostile, and when her boss asked her to calm down, Laura marched away.

Brach writes, "No matter what situation she was in, when the raw feelings of not being 'good enough' were triggered, Laura was thrown back to her childhood...Any of us, when our particular place of insecurity or woundedness is touched, easily regress...At these times there seems to be no choice as to what we feel, think, say or do. Rather, we '*go on automatic*,' reacting in our most habitual way...to cover over the rawness of our hurt. [However,] the behaviors we use to keep us from pain only fuel our suffering. Not only do our escape strategies amplify the feeling that something is wrong with us, they stop us from attending to the very parts of ourselves that most need our attention to heal."

Brach began to teach Laura how to "pause" within her feelings, how to experience her emotions without immediately reacting to them. At first, they practiced during their therapy sessions. Asked to remember the day when she quit her job, Laura's body stiffened, and her mouth grew tight. Brach asked Laura to pause in those intense feelings, and to describe how her body felt. "My face is burning..." she replied, "and there is a huge swelling pressure in my chest that feels like it's going to explode."

Over the course of several months, Laura became better and better at remaining present within her feelings. Finally, Laura came to therapy with a look of joy on her face. At a party the previous weekend, her mother had criticized her. Laura reported that her heart pounded wildly, and she felt a searing heat in her chest, as if she'd been stabbed. Everything in her wanted to scream out in rage, but she tried to pause in the middle of those intense feelings. Her mother, perhaps surprised by the lack of fireworks, turned to talk to someone else, and Laura continued to focus on her bodily perceptions. She was trembling, and her heart felt like it would burst open. She heard the old themes in her head: "Laura the one who screws up...Laura the raging maniac..." In the midst of this turmoil, she heard another voice say "This feels horrible...and *I can handle it*." Because she had practiced so much, she was able to remain with her feelings. She knew it was bearable, and that it would not last. She was able to relax a little, and felt a spaciousness growing in her chest and throat. The sharp hurt began to dissolve, and in its place a profound sense of sorrow arose. She felt as if she were caring for all the wounded places inside her.

No longer trapped by her habitual responses, Laura imagined new choices. She could stay, or go home. She could confront her mother, or let the incident slide. Whatever her response, it would now arise from a fresh way of responding to her own self. Having accepted everything she was feeling, Laura was left with a surprising warmth and kindness. When she looked over at her mother, she felt an upsurge of tenderness, and realized her mother was trapped in her own web of insecurity. Later that evening, as she left, she was able to look her mother in the eye, touch her arm, and smile.

Some time later, as she and her husband began a fight, Laura was again able to pause within her feelings. When she did not jump up and react, something seemed to shift in him, and after a few

moments he responded in a softer tone, telling her about his feelings. She continued to pause, and they interacted in an entirely new way. They decided to seek marriage counseling, to stay together and heal their relationship.

One Fast Day may not give us the strength to face our fears. Healing and wholeness may require more than a few skipped meals. But April 24th's fast could be the first step toward discovering what life is like beyond our habits and avoidance strategies.

So may we be.