

# “Receptivity”

DECEMBER 4, 2016

Today I want to talk about *receiving*. My aim is to lift up the value, the virtue, and the goodness of *receptivity*. My inspiration and much of the source material comes from my late and close colleague Roy Phillips’ 1985 Barry Street Lecture on just this subject: receptivity.

A brief look through the hymnbook, and through other Unitarian and Universalist hymnals as well, reveals that this topic—receptivity—sort of goes against the grain of most liberal religious teaching.

It’s true: we Unitarian Universalists tend to perceive ourselves as *makers* and *shakers*, doers, givers and helpers—and it’s strongly reflected here [hold hymnal]. Judith Walker Riggs, a highly regarded colleague, points out: how fascinatingly one-sided! “Sort of ignores reality...” Judith goes on to explain. “The reality that as infants we survive only by receiving...the reality that in old age we will survive only by receiving...the reality that NOW we only survive by receiving.”

As we sang moments ago in the opening hymn:

I walk the unfrequented road  
With open eye and ear,  
I watch afield the farmer load  
The bounty of the year.

I filch the fruit of no man’s toil  
No trespasser am I  
And yet I reap from every soil  
And from the unmeasured sky.

I gather where I did not sow,  
And bind the mystic sheaf,  
The Amber air, the river’s flow,  
The rustle of the leaf.

I face the hills, the stream, the wood,  
And feel with all akin,  
My heart expands: their fortitude  
And peace and joy flow in.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Lucian Hosmer, “I Walk the Unfrequented Road,” *Singing the Living Tradition*, #53.

Both the Redwood City and the San Francisco UU churches—two Bay Area UU congregations I recently served as interim minister—were proud that the late philosopher Alan Watts had preached to their congregations in the 1960s. I mention this because Watts appealed to California Unitarian Universalists and preached among us. In his autobiography, Watts describes a 1958 meeting with Carl Jung at the psychiatrist's home in Switzerland.<sup>2</sup> Walking along the water's edge, and in response to the 83-year-old's many questions, Watts had the temerity to suggest that the term "*the Unconscious*" was unfortunate, since psychic processes (indeed, all processes) are more verb-like than noun-ish. Jung agreed. Their conversation continued: it's not just consciousness vs. unconsciousness going on inside the psyche; there's something else, too: a differentiation between what we call the scanning, deliberative mind and *the creative unconscious*. The scanning, deliberative mind—what Cal State historian Theodore Roszak and others have called our "objective manipulative consciousness"—is to be distinguished from the creative unconscious. Best-selling author and physician Andrew Weil refers to the creative unconscious as *the natural mind*; my late UU colleague Roy Phillips called it *the spontaneous mind*.

Call it what you will. The important thing is to find a way to express (and thereby more fully notice) the truth that *in our experience there is a spontaneous functioning, an inner kaleidoscope that is turning constantly and churning up new patterns*. We can block this out of our awareness...or we can foster within ourselves an attitude of receptivity to it.

In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson

I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine. As with events, so it is with thoughts. When I watch that flowing river...I see that I am...not a cause, but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water; that I desire to look up and put myself in the *attitude of reception*, but from some *alien* energy the visions come.<sup>3</sup>

One of religion's primary functions, I believe, has been to advocate that we become ever more receptive to our inner natural, spontaneous mind—what Emerson here describes as an "ethereal inner river." Down through the centuries and across cultures much in religious myth and ritual encourages the faithful to open up to the creative activity of their own natural mind. This creativity, this inner river, is operative within us, but it has a life of its own. We cannot control it; we must allow it to be, and try to cultivate a passive receptivity to its creative working.

Thirty years ago—in August of 1986—I had a remarkable experience. My then six-year old daughter and I had just come back from a ten-day camping trip to Acadia National Park and had stopped, on our way back to Connecticut, for a two day visit with friends in Belfast, Maine, on the edge of Penobscot Bay.

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<sup>2</sup> Alan Watts, *In My Own Way: An Autobiography*. (Random House, NY, 1973) pp. 391-394.

<sup>3</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Over-Soul" *Essays*. Italics mine.

The early morning light streaming through the window awakened me, and after a moment's hesitation, I put something on, went to the front porch and quietly, *calmly* watched the sun rise. I say "calmly" because after nearly two weeks outdoors and on vacation I was *able* to just sit and watch instead of thinking all the while about events in the news, songs in my head, the million and one things I had to do, favors I owed, slights I'd received and all the other clap-trap inner dialogue that usually fills one's constantly churning head.

Across the wide waters, fishing and lobster boats plied their way to the open sea. Waterfowl glided by. Billowy clouds modulated shades of pink, orange, and purple, reflected in the gently waving bay. It was a glorious morning.

As I watched I paid—just ever so slight—attention to my breathing. Suddenly I realized what the breathing exercises so important to yoga are all about. You spend months and years learning to breath in one nostril and out the other, to slow breathing, to pace it, to manipulate it, to discipline it, and the paradoxical intent of such discipline is to show you at last—to show you with world-shattering, mind-set demolishing impact—the momentous truth that all along you had missed: that you do not breathe; that the fundamental existential truth is, rather, that breathing happens in you. You do not ultimately control it. The truth is not "I breathe." The truth is, rather, "I am breathed."

Something beyond the controlling self—something beyond the ego—is at work within me, something beyond within me; some "it" is breathing me, some "thou." The Beyond is within me; when I am awake, when I am asleep, it breathes itself through me.

It breathes me. And beyond this, it lives me. It is up to me to develop a full receptivity to its life within me. When I can do this—become fully receptive to the natural spontaneous mind within—I will live as a fully integrated human being, at one with myself.

Openness to the beyond, the beyond within—this is not cultivated enough among us, especially in this day and age. Instead we are pressured to keep our eyes hard-focused on a publicly agreed upon external world all of us hold in common. And to that "outer world" we are constantly urged to pay attention. Serious attention. With no navel-gazing!

Just for the fun of it, let's stop for a moment and think about that: "No navel-gazing." Navel-gazing: a term used to refer to the wasted time spent by a self-absorbed narcissist. In our age, contemplating one's navel is seen by most people as an enormous waste of energy. Yet, just for a moment, truly contemplate your navel. It is a physical symbol of our contingent nature. Your navel—ponder it! It is scar tissue from your original primal connection. Even after the umbilical cord is cut, no one is on his or her own. No longer dependent on an individual mother, the newborn begins his or her unmediated direct dependence on, instead, *an entire nexus* of others: community, culture, traditions, ecosystem, the plenitude, the mystery of being....

Were we to allow ourselves to engage in navel-gazing we might be more aware of our continuing status—no matter how much we also give—our continuing status forever as receivers.

Many of the symbols and practices of religion, I believe, have as their subliminal intent the cultivation of an open receptivity towards the workings of “the beyond”—the beyond outside ourselves, surely, but even more “the beyond *within*.” Interestingly, religious myth and symbol usually advocates *trust toward* and *faith in* this “beyond,” whereas conventional wisdom urges caution. For example, psychoanalysis refers to the unconscious, spontaneous mind as the “id.” It urges guardedness and caution when approaching what it considers the rapacious seat of infantile craving and sexual desire. Religion, by in large, is kinder, urging trust in the natural mind with references to “the presence of the Holy Spirit” within.

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No doubt many of you here saw the highly acclaimed play or movie *Amadeus* about the life of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and his anguished contemporary, Antonio Salieri. One of the show’s most vivid scenes has Salieri looking over some manuscripts of Mozart’s music, which he first took to be copies, only to suddenly realize that, in fact, what he was looking at were drafts: first and only drafts.

The scene dramatizes what Mozart himself reported of his own inner experience as he wrote scores. In the movie, Salieri spoke of the music Mozart heard in his head as “the voice of God” sounding within. Call it what you will, the testimony clearly demonstrates the artistic and creative value of cultivating one’s receptivity to the workings of the spontaneous mind.<sup>4</sup>

A friend of mine, the late Dr. Art Gladman, was the owner and director of an Oakland rehabilitation hospital and a pioneer biofeedback researcher. Having conducted biofeedback experiments with thousands of patients, Art told me that those most successful at adapting his techniques were artists, especially musicians, and in particular *jazz* musicians. For these musicians, the art of spontaneous composition—what makes authentic jazz jazz—is the practice of just listening to the spontaneous mind within and simultaneously playing what you hear; or as Dr. Gladman, the scientist, put it: tuning out the beta waves and tuning into pure alpha.

The movie *Fences* was just released, starring Denzel Washington and Viola Davis. I want to see the film. I saw a stage production of *Fences* in the ‘90s and was powerfully affected. Pulitzer-prize winning playwright August Wilson grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Wilson wrote his first plays there, but his artistic breakthrough didn’t come until 1978 when he moved away from the Hill, Pittsburgh’s historic African-American community, to St. Paul, Minnesota. In doing so Wilson left a *neighborhood* that had

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<sup>4</sup> [*Amadeus*, 1984; directed by Miloš Forman and written by Peter Shaffer; adapted from Shaffer's stage play *Amadeus*]

55,000 black people for a *state* that had about the same number. “There weren’t many black folks around,” he wrote. “In that silence, I could hear the language for the first time. I could hear the music.”<sup>5</sup>

Not only have artists learned how to do this; many top scientists have described the experience of *scientific discovery* in roughly similar terms. The German chemist Fredrich Kekule’s discovery of the benzene molecule is a classic case. Kekule had spent years wrestling with the structure of the molecule but could not figure it out. Then, one afternoon he pushed his papers aside and lay his head down for a nap—whereupon he dreamed of an oroboros—the well-known mythological image of a snake swallowing its own tail. As he came out of dreamland and into consciousness he knew immediately and intuitively that this was his answer: the carbon atoms took a ring, not a chain, formation.<sup>6</sup>

Then there’s the example of the poet, William Blake. In two 1803 letters to a friend, Blake commented on a poem he had recently completed.

I have written this poem for immediate Dictation twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time without Premeditation & even against my Will. The Time it has taken in writing was thus rendered Non Existent & an immense Poem Exists which seems to be the Labour of a long Life all produced without Labour or Study.... I may praise it since I dare not pretend to be other than The Secretary [. T] he Authors are in Eternity.<sup>7</sup>

Blake’s poem came to him. He did not work it into being. He was the recording secretary. He wrote down what he received. The “Authors” were in “Eternity,” beyond him, beyond his control. Whatever else it means to say, “The Authors are in Eternity,” I take it to mean, at least, that the creative unconscious, the spontaneous mind, is the source of the poem.

I’m concerned that some may protest that to speak of receiving—as I have been urging we do—will encourage a self-centered, narcissistic life stance. But I don’t think so. It seems to me, instead, that it grounds us by providing a more honest and realistic and less grandiose picture of ourselves as beings who oscillate continually between dependence and independence, between waking and sleeping, between giving and receiving.

And there are those who will voice the fear that if we urge people to be more trusting of their spontaneous mind, we will be allowing and encouraging licentiousness and violence and unleashing all of us to become murderers and rapists. No. I think otherwise.... For while surely there *are* murderers and rapist in this world, we are not they—certainly not the vast majority of us. Let the murderers and rapists be guarded. *We* ought not to mute

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<sup>5</sup> *The New Yorker*, “Profile” by John Lahr, April 16, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> The discovery of the benzene molecule. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benzene>

<sup>7</sup> The Letters of William Blake; April 25, 1803 and July 6, 1803 to Mr. Thomas Butts, [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Life\\_of\\_William\\_Blake\\_\(1880\),\\_Volume\\_1/Chapters\\_16%E2%80%9418](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Life_of_William_Blake_(1880),_Volume_1/Chapters_16%E2%80%9418)

*our* spirits because there are evil persons and processes in the world. Most of us, I am quite certain, are more likely to become dangerous to ourselves and to others when we bind ourselves in, when we tone ourselves down, when we suppress, mute, and restrain.

This is *the* question, I suppose: Is it the dangerous id or the presence of the vaulted Holy Spirit stirring there, inside our heart of hearts? My answer, I contend, is fully continuous with the teachings of our tradition, which holds to belief in a spark, a touch of the divine, within every person. There is a deep wisdom there, which is greater than we think. In our lives and in our work we are the locus of creative impulses whose origins are lost in the mystery beyond us. We are here to do the bidding of this creativity, to learn to wait for it receptively, and to struggle bringing it to expression.

So may it be. Namaste. Amen.

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# Meditation

12/4/16

The distinction is often made by religious scholars between two varieties, or aspects, of religious experience →

- the activist; and,
- the contemplative.

I don't think that's quite it, because the contemplative can be—and often becomes for Unitarian Universalists—inwardly activist.

Meanwhile, Zen Buddhists have a whimsical expression:

Don't just *do* something...  
Sit there!

Don't just do something. ( Do not merely **ACT** )  
SIT THERE — enter a state of *non*-action.

Zen couplets work upon us to illustrate this idea.

First, this one:

Sitting quietly, doing nothing  
Spring comes, and the grass grows by itself.

And this one:

The wild geese do not intend to cast their reflection;  
The water has no mind to receive their image.

And this, too, from St. Matthew's gospel:

Why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow.  
They toil not, neither do they spin, and yet I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

Don't just do something.... Contemplation can be more *doing*. The geese do not *intend* to cast their reflection yet the reflection is cast. The water has no mind to receive their image, yet the image of the geese is received and moves across the water as they fly. *Without willing or intending it the thing is accomplished.*

The Zen poem is working upon us. It is trying to entice us to experience without intention...

...without activity,  
...to allow that image of the geese to move, on its  
own, across the water within us....

Contemplation, alas, can be just more *doing*: inner  
activism →

*do* your meditation  
*go* on a quest  
*search* within....

But this morning I want to talk, not of activism—outward or inward—but of passivity;  
or rather of  
the *value*. The *virtue*, and the *goodness*  
of *receiving*.

Now by “receiving” I don’t mean receiving help or gifts from other people—though this  
is something we must learn to do as well—rather I am speaking of *receiving as a mind-*  
*set*, receiving as a *mode of experiencing*.

I am speaking about moments of passive receptivity—  
of letting go—  
letting come.

Moments of *non-striving*; of what the Zen masters call  
*no-mind*.

Let us venture to share, for a moment, this no-mind....

The geese do not intend to cast their reflection.  
The water has no mind to receive their image....

And so *may we let it Be*.