

Wisdom of Insecurity  
Rev. Amy Freedman  
Channing Memorial Church  
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Some days I long to change places with Oscar or Violet. For those of you who have never met them, Oscar and Violet live at 155 Evarts Street with my husband Peter and me. In fact, I have known Violet and Peter has known Oscar longer than we have known each other. You see, Oscar and Violet are cats, two black and white cats with asymmetrical markings.

Some days when I see Violet hop onto the window ledge to begin her morning routine of watching the birds or find Oscar snoozing in a sunny spot at three in the afternoon, I let out a sigh. There is nothing quite like petting a cat to bring down my blood pressure. The sound and feel of that deep purring vibrates through me.

On days when I must rush to appointments and meetings or struggle to meet a deadline, and catch sight of Oscar slowly and methodically washing behind his ears, the cat's life looks pretty appealing to me. Napping when you are tired. Eating when you are hungry. Always looking your best without ever having to decide what to wear. No need to worry about paying bills or any mode of transportation beyond your four paws. Not that Oscar and Violet wouldn't have something to complain about if they could talk. I know my round cat Violet does not think I feed her enough. This summer, Oscar fell in love with the great outdoors and would like to explore behind the garage some more. Even so, the consciousness of cats is different from our own. Cats live more fully in the present moment.

As human beings, we have more sophisticated brains than cats. Our ability to reason, to use tools, and to understand complex concepts has led us to develop appliances and modes of transportation allowing us to do more at greater speed than our ancestors.

Today's service is inspired by "The Wisdom of Insecurity" by Alan Watts, a book which contains a great deal of wisdom. The subtitle of the book is "A Message for an Age of Anxiety". Alan Watts died in the seventies. This book was published in 1951. The message is relevant today because unfortunately, we continue to live in an Age of Anxiety. The speed of travel and communication, growing uncertainty about employment, the volatile stock market, crime, terrorism, and war all contribute to a general feeling of anxiety. On top of that, many authority figures that were viewed as sources of strength, wisdom and guidance have been exposed as having questionable morals. Even though there are many principled people, who serve the public with honor and dignity, after hearing so many reports of corrupt politicians, pedophile priests, inept doctors, deceptive loan brokers, cheating athletes, and unsafe products, a certain cynicism begins to rise to the surface. Who can we trust? What can we hold onto?

Of course, we are in a church. You might expect me to tell you to trust in God and that religion will guide you on the path to greater security. However, this is a

Unitarian Universalist congregation with many views about the sacred just as there are many perspectives about politics and who should win the World Series. We do not have a creed- one set view of ultimate meaning. Instead Unitarian Universalists are encouraged to face life directly and learn from our life experiences.

This morning, I am here to tell you that there is no such thing as security. It is an illusion of the mind. It is a marketing strategy. It is a myth passed down for generations to try to give comfort and assurance in an Age of Anxiety. Truly, every age has been filled with anxiety as people faced the challenges and pain of living.

As Alan Watts reminds us, “The desire for security and the feeling of insecurity are the same thing. To hold your breath is to lose your breath. A society based on the quest for security is nothing but a breath-retention contest in which everyone is as taut as a drum and as purple as a beet.”

I think this explains why many people have short tempers. They are trying so hard to maintain a sense of order and stability that any unexpected happening or inconvenience disturbs them. The fast pace of communication and growing demands on our time, often does feel like a breath-retention contest!

Alan Watts offers a way of looking at belief and faith that I find helpful. Belief is a concept that we hold to be true. It is the insistence that the truth is what one would “lie” or wish it to be. Holding tightly to a belief then can cause us to only see that which confirms our preconceived notion of the truth. Watts writes, “Faith, on the other hand, is an unreserved opening of the mind to the truth, whatever it may turn out to be. Faith has no preconceptions; it is a plunge into the unknown. Belief clings, but faith lets go. In this sense of the word, faith is the essential virtue of science, and likewise of any religion that is not self-deception.”<sup>i</sup>

As your minister, I encourage you to have this sort of faith. Not blind faith, clinging to concepts out of desperation. True faith, to face life with a mind and heart open to the mystery and wonder of existence.

Life in its very nature flows and changes each moment. No matter what medical and technological advances, human beings simply cannot stay the transitory nature of existence. To do so, is like trying to grasp water. Still water becomes stagnant. Sparkling fresh running water moves and flows reflecting the light. The paradox is that the only way to encounter the infinite and absolute is by accepting our own finite nature and vulnerability.

These days I am more aware than ever of the finite nature of life. My father has dementia and my mother is caring for him at home. Robert Freedman has always been an intelligent man with a twinkle in his eye and a keen sense of humor. His youthful energy and good health masked the fact that he is significantly older than my mother. Over the past ten years or so, there has been a gradual decline in his abilities. It began with motor

skills then difficulty recalling certain words. We believe that it may be a series of small strokes that led to these specific losses.

What makes my father's decline so difficult is the knowledge that he will not get better. The day will come when he is released from his failing mind and body. Sometimes, I find myself wishing that day would come soon. Only then I will have to experience life without my Dad calling me "Baby" and his face brightening when I enter a room.

Why am I telling you this? Believe me, there were many times when I wondered if I could share my deep feelings of grief with you. Along side this pain is also a love for my mother and respect for all she is doing to keep my father at home with caregivers who help meet his physical and emotional needs. Some days, all I want to do is hold her hand all day long.

However, just like I will not be changing places with my pet cat, life does not allow me to abandon my responsibilities and although holding my mother's hand does make both of us feel better, ultimately it does not change the fact that my father is failing and death will come at a time we cannot foresee or predict.

In the meantime, the gift is to enjoy each moment we have together to the best of our abilities. Instead of clinging to how my father used to be or trying to imagine what might happen next, when I can my practice is to be with him in the present moment, to laugh, listen to music with him or just sit. My practice is to offer my steadfast love and support to my mother even when we are apart.

Every Sunday, we have a Time of Sharing. As a part of our Lectionary, we read together words written by Fred Gillis who served as the minister of our neighboring UU congregation in East Greenwich. These are the Concluding Words to our weekly ritual:  
 We are part of a web of life that makes us one with all humanity,  
 one with all the universe.  
 We are grateful for the miracle of consciousness that we share,  
 the consciousness that gives us the power to remember, to love, to care.

Human consciousness allows us to remember, to love, to care for one another in a way that is powerful. Life requires neither myth nor despair. Life requires faith, an opening of our hearts to the beauty of the present moment. When we face death, illness, and accident, we become conscious of reality; the reality that life changes and flows each moment in ways that we cannot contain; that each moment is precious and sacred.

Another way to open our minds and hearts to the present is through the practice of meditation. The reason meditation is called a practice is that it takes mindfulness and intention to be fully awake to the beauty and mystery of life.

So, I am going to lead you in a meditation practice which I have adapted from Rev. Bob Deen<sup>ii</sup>, who received it from a Balinese priest, who I am sure was inspired by

another person before him. A gift of human consciousness is we are vessels of spiritual teachings.

So, I invite you now to place your feet on the floor.  
 Allow your hands to lie open on your lap.  
 Release any tension in your neck or shoulders.  
 Find your head perfectly balanced on the straight supple column of your spine.  
 If you are comfortable doing so, allow your eyes to close or your gaze to be soft.  
 Relax the muscles of your face.  
 Take a few moments now to go within...  
 To allow your attention to turn away from the world around you...  
 And turn to that world within, that awesome consciousness that you are...  
 Take a few moments to allow the chatter in your mind to slow down...  
 You'll notice that you have a committee at work at times in your mind,  
 allow that committee to simply be quiet...  
 They can be adjourned for a while...  
 And as they are, we turn to the time of inner awareness...  
 inner peace, inner quiet...  
 We do that by taking three good deep breaths...  
 And as you inhale fully on the first breath...  
 And release, you release any attention to the past simply by letting it go,  
 letting it dissolve...  
 Breathing in with a good deep breath again...  
 And as you exhale, release any attention to the future...  
 Any attention to what will be tomorrow or in the next few minutes...  
 And on the third deep breath simply allow your focus to come into the moment...  
 Breathing to this time, to this place, this moment...  
 Opening your mind and heart to what is...  
 Knowing that you can return to this conscious place anytime,  
 Bring your attention back to the pew cushion beneath you,  
 Wiggle your fingers and toes,  
 Slowly open your eyes, and take in the beauty of this place,  
 the community of people who surround you.

As is our practice, the offertory will now be given and received,  
 an expression of what we value,  
 the offering in support of this liberal religious faith.

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<sup>i</sup> *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, (1951) Alan W. Watts, p. 24

<sup>ii</sup> "Opening the Heart Meditation," Rev. Bob Deen