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 Arlington Street Church  
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## Spaciousness

I might have been 9 years old when Ann Fields, who was leading children's chapel at the First Parish in Concord, held up a piece of paper. "What do you see?" she asked.

It was a blank piece of paper; white, 8½" by 11" paper. She was holding it vertically. Just that. "A white piece of paper!" we all yelled.

Mrs. Fields moved her fingers just slightly, to reveal a small red dot in the upper right-hand corner. "What do you see?"

"A red dot!" we all yelled. It was the 60s; we yelled in church.

"What else?" she asked.

Well, that was it, really. Then my mind opened, and I saw it - all of it.

"A white piece of paper with a red dot!" I yelled.

"Yes," said Mrs. Fields.

Mrs. Fields' lesson was really about people, and spaciousness. She wanted us to understand that none of us is the red dot; all of us are so much more than whatever besmirched the perfectly clean piece of paper we were as we began. This is a wonderful, Unitarian Universalist lesson. And it may have been my first lesson in spaciousness - in unhinging the doors of perception, and seeing clearly.

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My New Year's resolution is to get more sleep. Go ahead and laugh! But sleep has everything to do with metabolizing our lives - with the integration of what we remember and what we envision - with restoration, and with arriving fully in the present. In his book *Returning to Silence, Zen*

master Katagiri Roshi says that what's important is not that we have achieved enlightenment. What's important is that we have *digested* our experience of truth, and that we *manifest* our truth in our lives, moment to moment. When we are deeply rested, our minds, our hearts, and our hands can open. This is spaciousness.

Writer Natalie Goldberg calls that spaciousness *wild mind*. "Sit down in the middle of your wild mind," she writes.<sup>1</sup> Wild mind includes everything - what Unitarian Universalists embrace as the whole interconnected web of life.

She tells the story of Robert, a Zen priest in Santa Fe, who was young - maybe 17 - when he read his first Buddhist book, John Blofield's *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po*. Afterwards, "he wanted to become intimate with everything. He bowed to trees ... and rows of lettuce in grocery stores." His friends thought he was crazy.

"[But] this is what Zen is about, [a feeling of space, and also a tinge of sadness.... Sadness comes from the knowledge (that) everything will ... die. And) why be sad? Because we *love*].... To [experience] an intimate connection with the world [*and*] ... to know about its passing [is both sad and sweet].... And at the heart of it, *what bravery*. We know about impermanence, but ... we dare in the face of it to stand up and become intimate" with everything, and separate from nothing.<sup>2</sup>

So far, I have found it impossible to sustain this awareness, moment by moment, to contain, at once, the experience of love and the surety of death. But this is how we are invited to live, breaking out of the box with passion and courage, breaking in on spaciousness.

Here's another Natalie Goldberg story:

"A [white] man who is now a musician said he was brought up in Pittsburgh, and his parents never allowed him to go to the black section of town. When he was sixteen, he and three of his high-school buddies went to a jazz bar there. It was the first time he had ever heard jazz. He said he'd never felt so alive and happy. The next morning at breakfast, he was so

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<sup>1</sup> Natalie Goldberg, *Wild Mind*, pp. 32-33

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, pp. 75-76

excited he told his parents about it. They were upset he went there, and said jazz was awful. As he lifted his scrambled eggs to his mouth, he had the first inkling that his parents could be wrong about the world.”<sup>3</sup>

Have you had a moment like this? Can you remember times when the kaleidoscope turned, or maybe the glass shattered; when something you held as true was suddenly untrue? These are the times that will break our hearts and break our hearts open; the whole world shifts on its axis and we are broken, open, broken open.

Years ago, a woman told me the story of her husband disappearing on a family hike. He was in the lead, and then he was just gone. She and their two children called for him, and then shouted for him, until, I don't remember how, help came, and search and rescue spread out along the mountain trail, and off the trail, and finally, there he was, unconscious but alive, having fallen off along the edge in a way no one could quite reconstruct.

By the time I heard this story, his wife had spent several weeks at his hospital bedside, and then accompanied him through rehab; he was fine, though I don't think the family had plans to hike again any time soon. What was most remarkable about his recovery, she said, was the change that had come over her husband in the wake of the accident.

“I suppose he could have died,” she said. “He knew that; he talked about it, and he definitely took it in. I don't think I'd say that it scared him, exactly, but it really woke him up. Before the accident, he was a pretty impatient guy. What can I say? Work always came first. You wouldn't call him a family man; that hike was such a rare thing, and even then, he had to walk ahead of us. He was driven.

“Now, ever since he woke up, really, it's like he's a different person. He holds my hand. He asks the kids questions, and he really listens. He tells us he loves us. I don't know what happened to him, but whatever it was, I'm glad it did. And you know what he says when people ask about that day? He says it wasn't an accident. He says he was *pushed*.”

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p. 179

I've thought a lot about that guy - how incredibly lucky he was to get that kind of wake-up call, to be shaken awake in a way he just couldn't ignore. He was pushed, and his whole life opened up.

Do we have to wait to be pushed, or can we choose those moments? Can we choose to risk sacrificing "pretty good" for what might be great? I suspect that making a leap of faith is somewhat against our nature; we're very good at clinging to our small comforts, acclimatizing to "okay," and hoping for the next fix of instant gratification.

But here's another way of framing that: *we don't really have a choice*. We *will* be pushed. Everything changes, and either we'll fight it, or we'll engage in the possibility of being changed. Either we'll contract or expand. Either we'll say no ... or we'll say yes.

There's a wonderful quote from mountaineer William Hutchinson Murray's<sup>4</sup> *The Scottish Himalaya Expedition*, written in 1951. The last two lines may be familiar to you - they're the killer - though they're not really from Goethe's *Faust*, as Murray thought.<sup>5</sup> Here you go; he's writing about his expedition. Let's imagine this new year before us, now, and what *choosing spaciousness* might bring to its creation:

But when I said that nothing had been done, I erred in one important matter. We had definitely committed ourselves and were halfway out of our ruts. We had put down our passage money - booked a sailing to Bombay. This may sound too simple, but is great in consequence. Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves, too. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents, meetings, and material assistance, which no [one] could have dreamt would have come [their] way....

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<sup>4</sup> 1913-1996

<sup>5</sup> The assumption is that W.H. Murray had read John Anster's "very free translation" of *Faust* (1835). See The Goethe Society of North America, <http://www.goethesociety.org/pages/quotescom.html>

Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it.  
Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it!

My spiritual companions, the spiritual discipline of expansiveness, *spaciousness*, is the practice of sitting through times of chaos and upheaval *with faith*, allowing ourselves to be changed, to be rearranged, to be made new, to see not just the dot but the paper that contains the dot, not just what we have lost but the possibility of being found.

Let us open our wild minds, and hearts, and hands to that possibility.  
Courage! Let us begin.