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 Arlington Street Church  
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## **Attention and Devotion**

Theologian and civil rights leader Rev. Howard Thurman said, “We cannot get through the great anxieties that surround us until, somehow, a path is found through the little anxieties that beset us.”<sup>1</sup> G\*d knows these times are filled with anxieties great and little. Alice Walker writes, “This is not a time to be without a [spiritual] practice. It is a time when all of us will need the most faithful, self-generated enthusiasm in order to survive in human fashion. We will be doubly bereft without some form of practice that connects us, in a caring way, to what begins to feel like a dissolving world.”

Spirit: from the Latin words meaning breathe and breath. A spiritual practice is anything we do with attention and devotion. A spiritual practice is a gateway to catching our breath — a second wind, perhaps, or maybe just a first, conscious breath. I try not to let this happen, but there are days that hours have passed before I remember that I’m breathing ... and give thanks.

Thirteenth century Persian Sufi mystic Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī writes,  
 Today, like every other day,  
 we wake up empty and frightened.  
 Don’t open the door to the study and begin reading.  
 Take down a musical instrument.  
 Let the beauty we love  
 be what we do.  
 There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

Before you think, “I just can’t add one more thing to my day,” let me say that “adding” is not what we’re after; spiritual practice has to do with doing what we’re already doing, and going deeper. Spiritual practice sustains us.

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Centering Moment*, p. 85

When our younger daughters were very young, there wasn't a quiet moment in the day and sometimes not all night, either. There came a time that every last spiritual practice I had cobbled together in the previous decade began to fray. Time and again, we sat down to dinner, I lit candles and reached for their hands to say grace. But no; they simultaneously dove onto the table to blow them out, busting out into a loud, tuneless version of the "Happy Birthday" song. On one memorable occasion, having finally put the girls to bed, I sat down to meditate only to be catapulted from my cushion by a noise that would awaken the dead. My little Zen masters were sitting on the floor in the moonlight, shrieking in delight as they cut each other's hair. I could go on.

At some point, I accepted that my children had become my spiritual practice. I had heard a colleague say, "Pray as you can, not as you can't." They were what I had to work with, and play with, and pray with. But could I choose just one, thin line of connection to my former, monkish self? To what was I going to give attention and devotion, no matter what? I chose flossing my teeth. I kid you not. If I were going to die of sleep deprivation, at least I'd still have my teeth. It was the best I could do. So no matter what, every night, I flossed. I flossed and, even in my stupor, I said a wildly truncated version of a lovingkindness prayer — the mettā phrases:

May all beings be free of danger  
May all beings be peaceful and happy.

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I carry with me the story of a moment during World War II, when a woman answered a knock at the door to a messenger who had come from the front, bearing the news that her husband had been killed. It was obvious why he had come, but before he could relay the terrible news, the woman invited him in for tea. The messenger was astonished; how could she think of tea at a time such as this? She explained, "It's teatime. Yesterday, I had tea, and tomorrow, I will have tea." No matter what happens, there is tea.

This is that steadying influence of a spiritual practice — a center to which we can return when we're thrown off-center. Ideally, it should be life-giving. Tea is good, or maybe a cup of coffee; I don't recommend any stronger mind-altering substance in our spiritual practice.

Ancient Zen monks practiced calligraphy, tea ceremony, archery, marital arts, and sword — all extensions of long periods of seated meditation and a highly ritualized life in the monastery. Their minds were very steady, indeed. The story is told that, during the civil wars in feudal Japan, everyone fled a particular village

except the abbot of the local monastery. The general of the invading army went to the temple and found the old priest, sweeping the walkway. “What are you doing here, you fool?!” he shouted, unsheathing his sword. “Don’t you know who I am? I am the one who could run through you without batting an eye?” Very calmly, the master replied, “And I, sir, am one who could be run through without batting an eye.” The general bowed deeply, and left the village.

I bow deeply to this serenity, this fearlessness. Courage is a spiritual practice ... and spiritual practice gives us courage.

Gratitude is a spiritual practice — not just for easy times, the polite times, but for when the going gets rough. The discipline of finding things for which to be grateful — and, sometimes, giving thanks for the challenges that inure our spirits — can be transformative.

Thrive Global Community’s Tod Evans tells the story of going as a young seeker to hear a Central African holy man named Fu-Kiau.<sup>2</sup> Tod worked really hard to clarify the question he most wanted to ask, and when the time came, his hand was in the air and his heart was beating out of his chest. “Fu-Kiau,” he said, “I was hoping you could share with me what you believe is the most powerful spiritual practice.” He held his breath, waiting for the magic formula, which he was sure was some combination of various esoteric and sacred rites. “I would have to say,” Fu-Kiau responded, “that the most powerful spiritual practice is gratitude.”

Now, twenty five years later, Tod writes, “Fu-Kiau’s answer to my question, which had been so disappointing at first, has turned out be like a many-layered onion. As I have committed to my own conscious evolution, engaging in mindfulness and other meditative practices, I have been moving through the layers, getting closer and closer to the core of this most compelling teaching. [And I have come to experience] the deepest feelings of gratitude in the most mundane of places: ... silent, spacious, fully present awareness of gratitude in a given moment of time; ... a full submersion into ... *here and now*.... Gratitude has indeed become the most powerful spiritual practice.”<sup>3</sup>

Spiritual practice makes us grateful ... and finally, it makes us wise. Terry Dobson holds a fourth degree black belt in Aikido. He works as a consultant in

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<sup>2</sup> Fu-Kiau’s full name is Kimbwandende kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau. Just saying.

<sup>3</sup> Tod Evans, *Discovering the Most Powerful Spiritual Practice*, at [thriveglobal.com/stories/14018-discovering-the-most-powerful-spiritual-practice](http://thriveglobal.com/stories/14018-discovering-the-most-powerful-spiritual-practice)

conflict resolution for business executives, conducting seminars called *When Push Comes to Shove*. One of my favorite stories is his encounter with the wisdom that arises from long devotion to spiritual practice.

Many years ago, on a drowsy spring afternoon in the suburbs of Tokyo, Terry was gazing absently out the window of a train when a man staggered aboard, bellowing violent, obscene curses. He was filthy and very drunk. He swung wildly at a woman holding a baby, who lost her balance and went spinning into the laps of an elderly couple. They all got up and scrambled to the back of the car. In a fury, he grabbed a metal pole and tried to wrench it free, cutting his hand. The train lurched ahead. The passengers were terrified.

At six feet tall and 225 pounds, Terry had been putting in eight hours of Aikido training every day for the past three years. The only problem was that his skills were untested in combat; Aikido students are not allowed to fight. His teacher taught peace. “Aikido,” he would say, “is the art of reconciliation. Whoever has the mind to fight has broken his connection with the universe. If you try to dominate other people, you are already defeated.”

Terry felt, he said, both tough and holy. He was dying, though — dying — to be a hero. And this was his chance. He stood up.

The man saw a chance to focus his rage. “A foreigner!” he roared. “You need a lesson in Japanese manners!” Terry looked at him with disgust and dismissal. Pursing his lips, he blew him a kiss. This was it.

A split second before he moved, someone shouted, “Hey!” It was strangely joyous, lilting, excited. Terry wheeled to his left, the man spun to his right, and they found themselves staring down at a tiny, elderly Japanese gentleman, dressed immaculately in a kimono jacket and hakama pants. The gentleman took no notice of Terry, but beamed up delightedly at the man, gesturing to him.

“Come talk to me,” he said. “Talk to you?” yelled the man, towering over him threateningly. “Why should I talk to you?” He was standing with his back to Terry. If he so much as moved, it was going to be all over for him.

The elderly gentleman continued to smile happily. “What have you been drinking?” he asked, his eyes sparkling with interest.

“I been drinking sake,” the man yelled, “and it’s none of your business!”

“O, that’s wonderful, wonderful,” said the elderly gentleman. “I love sake, too. Every night, my wife and I — she’s 76, you know — we warm up a little bottle of sake and take it to the garden and sit on the old wooden bench that my grandfather’s first student made for him. We watch the sun go down, and we look to see how the persimmon tree is doing.” He went on about the tree, apparently delighted to be in conversation with the man.

As he struggled to follow the elderly gentleman’s soliloquy, the man’s face began to soften. His fists unclenched. “Yeah,” he said. “I love persimmons.”

The old man beamed. “And I’m sure you have a wonderful wife.”

“No,” said the man. “My wife died. I don’t have a wife, or a home, or a job, or money.” Suddenly, he was weeping. A spasm of pure despair rippled through his body.

“Now it was my turn,” says Terry Dobson. “In [all] my righteousness, I suddenly felt dirtier than he was.”

The old man clucked sympathetically. “My, my,” he said. “That is a very difficult situation, indeed. Sit down here and tell me all about it.” The man sprawled on the seat and put his head in his lap. As the train pulled into Terry’s station, the elderly gentleman was looking down at the man with undiminished delight, stroking his hair with tender compassion.

Terry Dobson got out and sat down on a bench. “What I had wanted to do with muscle and [mean-spiritedness],” he said, “had been accomplished with a few kind words and gentle gestures. I had [just] seen Aikido tried in combat, and the essence of it was love.... It would be a long time before I could speak about the resolution of conflict.”<sup>4</sup>

Beloved spiritual companions,  
 I commend to you spiritual practice;  
 this is not a time to be without it.  
 With attention and devotion,  
 let’s go deeper.

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<sup>4</sup> For the complete story and to visit Terry Dobson’s website, please see [easternhealingarts.com/articles/softanswer.html](http://easternhealingarts.com/articles/softanswer.html)

Let's find what steadies us,  
bringing serenity,  
courage,  
gratitude,  
wisdom.  
The essence of it  
is love.