

ABC's of Spiritual Practice

ABC's sounds both simple and easy. The challenge is that some things that are very simple are not easy and some things that sound easy, when considered with consequences, are not that simple. I would say that the ABC's of Spiritual Practice might be simple but not always easy.

Originally this title was about Spiritual Path and that's what the marquee says outside. Turns out the sermon is more about the actual practice than just an outline of a path. It is intentionally vague about what Spiritual Practice we are talking about because honestly, everyone has their own ideas about spirituality and practice. For some, their spiritual practice is grounded in 12 Steps or Yoga or Fillmores or any of the other thousands of ways we pursue a connection with something greater than ourselves. A Higher Power. A Universal Energy. We may all call it-the divine-something different. We may refer to our practice as meditation or prayer or communing with nature. We may consider ourselves Friends of Bill or Unity members or Pastafarians. That's the parody of religion featuring a divine being that is the Supreme Flying Spaghetti Monster. Anyway, the thing is, **if** we have a spiritual practice of some sort, we probably have to pay attention to the ABC's. And I'm not saying everyone **has** a spiritual practice or that everyone **has to have** a spiritual practice. I find it helpful but everyone has to find what works for that individual. And some individuals never really reflect on what works and doesn't work for them and they just keep stumbling through life without much reflection or thought to how things might be different.

Which kind of brings us to A. What might A represent?

AWARENESS! Charles Fillmore doesn't talk about awareness in the Revealing Word but he does talk about awakening. He says that is "becoming conscious of the things of spirit". Sounds like a place to start for spiritual awareness also. I think you have to put the word "spiritual" in front of both awakening and awareness for the definition to really work.

If we go to the online dictionary for awareness we find, “knowledge of, understanding of, consciousness of”. When we embark on any spiritual practice, we begin with developing our awareness of. . . any number of things. I begin each meditation inviting you to become aware of your breath and your posture. The 12 Steps begin with an awareness that there is a problem in our lives we don’t seem to be able to manage on our own. Unity encourages us to become aware of our own divinity and the power within us to focus our thoughts and become a channel for good. Fundamentalists might become aware of their sins and what their faith holds out as the path to redemption. The bottom line is that our spiritual practice is a **conscious** decision that requires us to awaken from the sleep walking of the unconscious ramble through life we might have been engaging in and **start paying attention** to what we think, say and do. Now that doesn’t sound all that complicated so we might say it was simple. It is not always easy. How much of the time during the day are we consciously deciding, noticing that we have choices and are making a decision? Choosing not to act is a choice. Ignoring a situation is a choice and yet, are we aware of our choice?

Awareness is best cultivated in the moment. Sometimes we call that mindfulness. Or just paying attention. It is simpler to identify what we want our focus of attention to be. Our brain is bombarded with a gajillion fragments of information every millisecond. We cannot be consciously aware of all of them. So the first step in awareness is identifying a focus. Consciously choosing a focus. Anyone turn the radio off when you get lost or get in intensive traffic situations? I need my attention to not be distracted by sound. How many of us have found ourselves focused on negatives when we really want to be aware of blessings and gifts? Every moment is a new opportunity to change our focus and become aware all over again. Good news, huh? Spiritual practice is ongoing and one moment of going unconscious and unaware does not destroy the whole practice!

And we can say yes to some things and no to other things. Which brings us to B: Boundaries. Sometimes we think of boundaries as divisions; the line between us and them. In Spiritual Practice I think of boundaries as self-discipline; Let your Yes be Yes and let your No be No. When we are unaware and unconscious, anything goes. We'll say yes sometimes and no sometimes, occasionally in the same conversation or in the same day. Which frankly can make us seem unstable, unreliable and untrustworthy.

So does having healthy boundaries mean you are rigid? Boundaries are a difficult concept for many people because honestly, we are not a culture that promotes self-discipline. It is a part of emotional intelligence and spiritual intelligence but it is often portrayed in our society as punishment or deprivation rather than something healthy. How many of us abstain from something due to how it affects us? Alcohol, drugs, foods, shopping, gambling, anything? And in social situations, how many of us are pressured by others to engage in the very thing we have already said directly or indirectly is harmful for us? We're not used to boundaries. We're not used to having No mean No. I have seen a meme recently that says, "When someone complains about your boundary, they are confirming you needed it." If we have trouble identifying what it is we need to say no to—we are not alone. If I have an allergy, I need to say no to that item. But what if my reaction isn't really that bad and it is an item that comes up socially quite a bit. What if what I need to say No to isn't a thing but a thought or a belief or a habit? What if my belief is, "People will only like me if I agree to help them—every time I get asked." This belief keeps me from saying Yes to my own health, my self-care and my desires. It also keeps me from saying Yes to my self-worth; the divinity in me that is independent of how others view me. Healthy boundaries not only allow us to say No to some things, they allow us to say Yes to other things. Think about that. Saying No to one thing is saying yes to something else!

Unity teaches that Lent is a time of releasing that which does not serve us AND accepting what is for our good. It is not penance or deprivation—it is self-discipline and healthy boundaries.

Which brings us to the C of spiritual practice: Commitment. If we are not that good at boundaries, we are maybe worse at commitment. Maybe some of our resistance to commitment is our fear of losing our freedom. We are, after all, the land of the free and the home of the brave. So long as it is a voluntary commitment, I would submit that we gain rather than lose.

When we commit to practice, whether it is playing the piano or meditating or using nonviolent communication, we gain skills. We gain a sense of mastery. We gain confidence. Although, we have to commit to practice more than once a year. Spiritual practice is really meant to be a part of our every day life, not something set aside in isolation. Commitment is a way of saying Yes to something over a period of time. That does not mean there is never a day we can discern that something no longer serves us and end a commitment. However, it is difficult to develop a sense of the benefit and value of a practice without really committing to it.

Here's a secret: sometimes I trick myself into commitments. I give myself a specific timeframe for the commitment. I will do this for a week. My ego self says, "I can do anything for a week, then we're done with this nonsense." If I keep my commitment and begin to notice a benefit, I commitment to another week or two. "Let's really see if this works," my skeptical intellect injects into the conversation in my head. My higher self is usually quiet, resisting a cheerful, "I knew this would work!" I've done a few dietary changes in the last several years and I admit, not everything I tried had the beneficial affect I was hoping for. So, depending on how much I liked it, I let go of a commitment to abstain or engage in eating the item. On the other hand, around the year 2000, I was trying to decide whether or not to really commit to ministry. I was a successful lawyer, minding my own business, attending Unity and taking SEE classes in the summer. I tried to keep one foot in law and one foot on my spiritual path. As Jesus noted in Luke and Matthew, "No one can serve two masters." Not because practicing law was bad or I wasn't good at it, but until I made a commitment to where my heart was, I wasn't going to be happy.

Commitment says, “Count me in!” At least until we discern this is no longer for our highest and best. Marriage is the most common social commitment we are familiar with. And we’ve learned to let go of “til death do us part” because we’ve learned that sometimes we’ve committed to an unhealthy relationship for any number of reasons. No one’s good is really served by keeping the commitment. I have discovered that avoiding any commitment because it might turn out to be one that ends means I deny myself all the benefits that also come with commitment.

Many of us come to Unity from other traditions. Some refer to themselves as “recovering Catholics” or “recovering Baptists”, yet time spent committed to a spiritual practice tends to have benefits. Maybe not fully realized until we leave the practice. Then we notice what we miss.

What we commit to can evolve and change. What we say Yes to and what we say No to can evolve and change. Certainly, what we are aware of and consciously choose to focus our attention on can evolve and change. Spiritual practice isn’t a static, *one thing forever* kind of concept for me. It is an ongoing process of engaging with something bigger than myself, deepening my awareness of all that spiritual practice can bring to my experience here on earth. It means setting healthy boundaries and knowing my values and what I will say Yes and what I will say No to and making a commitment to whatever practice I choose to engage in until Spirit tells me something else is my highest good.