



Soul Matters

February 2016

*What Does It Mean To Be
A People of Desire?*



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*Fall in love with
the agony of love
not the ecstasy
then the beloved
will fall in love with you*

-- Rumi

Is it possible that this month is really about heartbreak? We may be able to indulge some desires without much cost, but we are fooling ourselves if we think we can pursue spiritual desires without suffering a broken heart. The desire for a better world. The hunger for deep connection. The longing to actualize our full potential. Leaning into *these* desires is to let yourself care deeply for what can't ever be fully attained. When it comes to the most beautiful and noble of our desires, it's all about loving and pursuing that which will always be out of reach.

And of course we reach anyway. We can't help ourselves. It's what it means to be human. Plato puts it this way: "We are fired into life with a madness that comes from the gods and which would have us believe that we can have a great love, perpetuate our own seed, and contemplate the divine." Notice the implicit plea to be grateful. It comes "from the gods" he says. This madness, this dis-ease, these unstoppable desires for great love, great change and great connection are a gift! The prize is not the moment we are finally quenched; it's that first moment when we were wonderfully cursed with thirst! Heartbreak and heartache are not dangers to be avoided; they are signs that we are living fully and leaning into the holy dis-ease that makes us most human.

It's why Rumi says "fall in love with the agony of love." He knows many of us avoid pursuing our deepest hungers because of fear. No one's deepest longings ever come true. Better to play it safe and keep those deep hungers at a distance. But in this case, playing it safe also means going numb. And we were not created to go numb.

So friends get out there this month and get your heartbroken. It won't feel good, but you will know you are on the right path. And remember Rumi's promise: somewhere in that agony you will feel yourself loved by and deeply connected to life.

Not a bad deal.

Our Spiritual Exercises

Option A: What Gets You Up in the Morning?

It's a fundamental question about desire: What gets you up in the morning? One can go through their whole life not knowing the answer to that. Routine too easily takes over our lives. Something is wrong when "the alarm clock" is the primary thing that pushes us into the day. This exercise asks us to get into relationship with a different source of momentum.

Your assignment: For one week, take 10 minutes at the beginning of your day or at bedtime the night before to identify one thing you want out of the coming day. One thing that *you* want. In the midst of all the obligations ahead of you, what one desire do you want to make room for? Keep it simple. Maybe it is nothing more than to feel the sun on your face for five minutes. Maybe it is to connect and cook tonight's meal with your daughter. Maybe it is to read or run or just have five minutes of silence. Just make it *yours*.

Come to your group ready to share how claiming your desire and your days changed your excitement about waking up.

Option B: What Does It Mean to Claim the Torch?

This is both a meditative and action-oriented exercise, both of which invite you to explore your relationship with the desire for justice:

The meditative part:

Make time to watch and meditate on this five minute video: <https://vimeo.com/146151529>

Also consider meditating on this quote that is taken from the video:

"A movement is not a flash of light. It is a flame. It is a torch passed from one generation to the next. And every so often we are blessed with moments when the smolder transforms into a blaze again and we're forced to race down the path of progress, again. Step. Move. Walk. Witness. Transform the movement forward.... Wake up! Our right to remain in slumber has been revoked. Silence and apathy are now the only crimes. Watch now how every breath is a dance of dissent. Every raised fist an act of resistance. Witness this moment in history turn blaze again. Every moment the flame is growing. But will you be the fire. This time, will you be ember? Will you be catalyst and combustion? Will you claim the torch?"

-Wyatt Closs, Policy Link Video

Use the video and words to help you find your place in the current social shifts and struggles taking place today. If this is one of those times when the embers of justice are ready to catch flame, what is your part? How can you contribute? What is your way of claiming the torch? Which leads to the action part of the exercise...

The action-oriented part:

As you wrestle with these questions - What is your part? How can you contribute? - identify one action-oriented commitment that qualifies as “claiming the torch.” Big or small. Personal transformation or group effort. It doesn’t matter. The important piece is figuring out what it means *for you*.

Option C: Go Big

In many ways, this month’s theme of desire is more intimidating than last month’s theme of resistance. Sometimes holding back is easier than wild embrace. Sometimes taking on a clear “opponent” is less overwhelming than following a passion that is guaranteed to lead you into the unknown. Sometimes, as Marianne Williamson has famously said, “It is our light not the darkness that most frightens us.” Bottom line: We often mute the voice of desire because we’re scared of what it is asking of us. We don’t want to feel desire because we know it is asking us to change, in ways that seem unimaginably hard.

But there comes a time when the voice can’t be muted. The hunger trumps the fear. The voice in your head keeps saying, “This life is too small” and “I am selling myself short.” If this is true for you, make this the month of wild embrace. Let your desire loose. Don’t just lean in, jump in.

Here’s some inspiration:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, ‘Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?’ Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It’s not just in some of us; it’s in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.” -- Marianne Williamson

Option D: Play With Renunciation

[Lent](#) begins this month. It is one of the many spiritual traditions that invite us into the spiritual practice of renunciation and self-denial. This exercise honors that tradition.

While it is often assumed that renunciation practice is all about self-control, the core aim is self-knowledge. The goal is to create just enough distance from your desires to understand what is behind and beneath them. What deeper hunger is driving your obsession with food? What deeper struggle is underneath your need to keep everything in the house clean and perfect? Don't get caught up in resisting the desire. Instead figure out what it is trying to tell you.

Here's a good short guide to help get you in the frame of mind:

<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/practices/view/21722/renunciation-practice>

Option E: Watch Where Your Mind Wanders

This one is the simplest exercise but also potentially most enlightening.

Take a week and keep track of where your mind joyfully leans. Catch yourself daydreaming. Notice when you say to yourself, "I really have to remember to..." Pay attention when the voice in your head says, "I wish I was doing X instead." And when you notice it, write it down. Keep track of it for a week. Then pay attention to what this week's worth of wandering is telling you.

Some inspiration:

"If you want to know where your heart [desire] is, look where your mind goes when it wanders." -- Bernard Byer

"Maybe prayer doesn't mean talking to God at all. Maybe it means listening to our dreams and paying more attention to what we really want from life." - Gary Kowalski

Your Question

As always, don't treat these questions like "homework" or a list that needs to be covered in its entirety. Instead, simply pick the one question that "hooks" you most and let it lead you where you need to go. The goal of these questions is not to help you analyze what desire means, but to figure out what being a person of desire means for you today. So, which question is calling to you?

1. Is life calling you to nurture someone else's desire? How can you help another lean in to the hungers and hopes budding inside them?
2. When was the last time you let yourself fall freely and fully into desire? Are you ready to go all in?
3. Are you muting the voice of desire because you're afraid of what it is asking of you?
4. Is it possible that God speaks to us in and through our desires? Is it possible that prayer doesn't mean talking to God at all, but instead simply listening to our dreams?
5. How is your relationship with the desire to consume? Is it consuming you more than you'd like? More than you are willing to admit? Why not ask someone to help you stop? Very few of us can control unhealthy desires on our own.
6. What do you want to be remembered for? What do you long (desire) to leave behind?
7. When was the last time you showed your love that you enjoyed them, not just loved them? Sometimes the way we want to be desired most is to simply be the one you most enjoy to be with. (A good thing to remember on Valentine's Day.)
8. Do you remember your childhood desire? Didn't you promise yourself you'd never forget it?
9. What about the desire to be true to yourself? We so often get lost trying to meet other people's desires that we forget our own.
10. What's your question? Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it.

Recommended Resources

As always, this is not required reading. We will not analyze or dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started, and maybe open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to be *a people of desire*.

Desire

Definition: a strong feeling of wanting to have something or wishing for something to happen.

Synonyms: wish, lust, passion; to long for, to yearn for, to crave

Wise Words

Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.

— **Proverbs 13:12 (ESV)**

It is exactly through desire that we discover what animates and moves us.

— **David Whyte**

There are seasons, in human affairs, of inward and outward revolution, when new depths seem to be broken up in the soul, when new wants are unfolded in multitudes, and a new and undefined good is thirsted for. There are periods when...to dare, is the highest wisdom.

— **William Ellery Channing**

If you want to know where your heart [desire] is, look where your mind goes when it wanders.

— **Bernard Byer**

When it's over, I want to say: All my life I was a bride married to amazement. I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms

— **Mary Oliver**

from Consuming Desire

... I fear adulthood is the discipline of being above desire, cultivated after years of learning what you want and where and how, after insisting that you will one day have it. I don't ever want to stop noticing a man like the one at the bar in his loosened tie, reading the Star Tribune. I don't want to eat my cake with a baby spoon to force small bites, as women's magazines suggest. And you don't want to either, do you? You want a big piece of this world. You would love to have the whole thing.

— **Katrina Vandenberg**

full poem here: <http://tinyurl.com/jms4z46>

Let us become a people who desire a healthy sense of humor about ourselves and the contradictions, paradoxes, and oxymorons of life.

Let us become a people who desire the ability to deal with the inevitable suffering of life;

a people who desire to manifest our spirituality in the world so that people take inspiration from who and what we are;

a people who desire to have our faith overflow into service;

a people who desire to a spirituality that lifts us and our lives into larger frameworks of meaning so that we see our lives as worthy projects.

Let us be a people who desire to celebrate life.

— **Rev. Kelly Dignan, Soul Matters Minister, inspired by Richard Gilbert's "spiritual check up"**

Beginners

*“From too much love of living,
Hope and desire are set free.
Even the weariest river
Winds somewhere to the sea—”*

But we have only begun
To love the earth.
We have only begun
To imagine the fullness of life.
How could we tire of hope?
— so much is in bud.
How can desire fail?
— we have only begun
to imagine justice and mercy,
only begun to envision
how it might be
to live as siblings with beast and flower,
not as oppressors.
Surely our river
cannot already be hastening
into the sea of non-being?
Surely it cannot
drag, in the silt,
all that is innocent?
Not yet, not yet—
there is too much broken
that must be mended,
too much hurt we have done to each other
that cannot yet be forgiven.
We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we would join
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.
So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,
so much is in bud.

— **Denise Levertov**

from: <http://tinyurl.com/zmdtaqf>

Listening to the Desire for Justice

“A movement is not a flash of light. It is a flame.
It is a torch passed from one generation to the
next. And every so often we are blessed with
moments when the smolder transforms into a
blaze again and we’re forced to race down the
path of progress, again. Step. Move. Walk.

Witness. Transform the movement forward....
Wake up! Our right to remain in slumber has
been revoked. Silence and apathy are now the
only crimes. Watch now how every breath is a
dance of dissent. Every raised fist an act of
resistance. Witness this moment in history turn
blaze again. Every moment the flame is
growing. But will you be the fire. This time, will
you be ember? Will you be catalyst and
combustion? Will you claim the torch?”

—**Wyatt Closs, Policy Link Video,**

<https://vimeo.com/146151529>

I Want to be Better

The concern which I lay bare before God today
is my need to be better:

I want to be better than I am in my most
ordinary day-by-day contacts:

With my friends—

With my family—

With my casual contacts—

With my business relations—

With my associates in work and play.

I want to be better than I am in the
responsibilities that are mine:

I am conscious of many petty resentments.

I am conscious of increasing hostility toward
certain people.

I am conscious of the effort to be pleasing for
effect, not because it is a genuine feeling on my
part.

I am conscious of a tendency to shift to other
shoulders burdens that are clearly my own.

I want to be better in the quality of my religious
experience:

I want to develop an honest and clear prayer life.

I want to develop a sensitiveness to the will of
God in my own life.

I want to develop a charitableness toward my
fellows that is greater even than my most
exaggerated pretensions.

I want to be better than I am.

I lay bare this need and this desire before God in
the quietness of this moment.

— **Howard Thurman**

from In Every Breath

all your unfulfilled desires
are from your greed
for gain of fulfillments
let go of them all
and they will be sent as gifts

fall in love with
the agony of love
not the ecstasy
then the beloved
will fall in love with you

— **Rumi**

full poem here: <http://tinyurl.com/hn2tnta>

from Listening with the Heart

Maybe prayer doesn't mean talking to God at all. ...

Maybe it means listening to our dreams,
Paying more attention to what we really want
from life,

And less attention to all the nagging, scolding
voices from our past....

Maybe prayer doesn't mean talking to God at all,

But listening with the heart,
To the angel choirs all around us.
Those who have ears,
Let them hear.

— **By Gary Kowalski**

full meditation here:

<http://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/listening-heart>

Wanting God: A Zen Story

A hermit was meditating by a river when a young man interrupted him. "Master, I wish to become your disciple," said the man. "Why?" replied the hermit. The young man thought for a moment. "Because I want to find God."

The master jumped up, grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, dragged him into the river, and plunged his head under water. After holding him there for a minute, with him kicking and struggling to free himself, the master finally

pulled him up out of the river. The young man coughed up water and gasped to get his breath. When he eventually quieted down, the master spoke. "Tell me, what did you want most of all when you were under water."

"Air!" answered the man.

"Very well," said the master. "Go home and come back to me when you want God as much as you just wanted air."

— <http://www.hermeticsource.info/zen-stories.html>

from What is our Deepest Desire

To be held this way in our mother's arms,
to be nestled deep in the warmth
of her body, her gaze ...

When the old woman, small and light,
can be carried in the arms of her son, ...
rocking to the rhythm of her breathing.
This is the way to enter and leave the world.

— **Miriam Pederson**

full poem here: <http://tinyurl.com/hjee6he>

As a Buddhist oriented UU, I have more than mixed feelings about the word desire (and the word 'passion' for that matter). Yet I also know that drive, energy and commitment are very important in meditation practice. One doesn't do meditation practice without a strong desire for awakening and liberation."

— **Sam Trumbore, Soul Matters Minister**

The Priest Writes His Desire

by Jessie Dolch

A poem about the shift of desire during the journey of dying

<http://tinyurl.com/z2eo55y>

My Daughter at 14: Christmas Dance

by Maria Mazziotti Gillan

A poem about a mother witnessing and making space for her child's budding romantic desire

<http://tinyurl.com/ju4sa46>

Videos & Podcasts

Finding God in All Things

Podcast exploring the idea that God speaks to us in and through our desires. Krista Tippet's interview with father James Martin where he talks about desire in Ignatian spiritual terms, including desire as our deeper calling:

<https://www.onbeing.org/program/james-martin-finding-god-in-all-things/7121>

Our Moment: Responding to the desire for justice (5 minute video)

<https://vimeo.com/146151529>

Luminosity [and Longing]

from one of the creators: "In making this video in June and I took snippets of each other's poetry and writing and wove them into a love story. We didn't know where we were going in the beginning, but we knew it was about longing...."

<https://vimeo.com/24449670>

The Extraordinary Power of Ordinary People

"Surgeon and writer Sherwin Nuland meditates on the idea of hope — the desire to become our better selves and make a better world. It's a thoughtful 12 minutes that will help you focus on the road ahead."

http://www.ted.com/talks/sherwin_nuland_on_hope

The Coffinmaker

"My friend wants to be cremated and I understand his desire. But I can also understand the desire to lie in wood and be carried by others to a grave. And I would like to carry others, too. Aren't we meant to carry each other?"

<http://www.jesusjazzbuddhism.org/the-coffinmaker.html>

Articles & Online

"The Case for Reparations"

by Ta Nehisi Coates

This article makes the case that reparations are one way to come to terms with centuries of denying desires: "Two hundred fifty years of slavery. Ninety years of Jim Crow. Sixty years of separate but equal. Thirty-five years of racist housing policy. Until we reckon with our compounding moral debts, America will never be whole."

<http://tinyurl.com/nopprgt>

"Forever Incomplete: Alanis Morissette, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Bats of Austin, Texas"

by Reverend Teri Daily

from the article: "There is at the core of every human being ... this desire, hunger, or passion that Plato calls "madness." This dis-ease drives everything we do. This restlessness fuels our search for love, underlies our pull towards that which is beautiful, and forms an "unquenchable fire" in us."

<http://tinyurl.com/zewsfus>

30 Days of Love

Our UUA's Thirty Days of Love program runs Saturday, January 16 through Sunday, February 14. This year's weekly focus is on racial justice as it intersects with other core justice aspirations, such as immigration justice and LGBTQ equity. 30 Days is a part of our Standing on the Side of Love work and is designed to help all UUs bring deeper reflection and engagement during the 30 days in between Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and Valentine's Day.

<http://tinyurl.com/zgz4qvk>

Objects of Desire (12 TED Talks)

An iconic painting. An ancient manuscript. A cylinder with 2600 years of history. Learn about

artifacts and images that have intrigued humans for centuries, and why we find them so alluring. https://www.ted.com/playlists/61/objects_of_desire#

Movies

Fire

In this Canadian drama, set in India, two disparate wives united by the oppressiveness of Indian tradition of arranged marriages find solace and love in each other's arms.

<http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1095795-fire/>

Madame Bovary

Screen versions of Flaubert's novel about a woman who is devoured by her desires, high expectations, and disappointments.

1991 version (highly rated):

http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1042062-madame_bovary/

2015 version:

http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/madame_bovary_2014/

Songs

“Desire” by U2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8rQ575DWD8>

“Make You Feel My Love” by Adele

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0put0_a--Ng

“At Last” by Etta James

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-cbOI96RFM>

“You Can’t Always Get What You Want” by the Rolling Stones

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EM_p1Az05Jo

“Monticello” by Erin Rae

Note the link includes the song as well as a reflection about “the process of growing up, from sweet nostalgia and a wild desire for novelty to wisdom, compassion, and creativity.”

<http://tinyurl.com/hy499tx>

Books

Justice and Spirit online book club (run by Skinner House books) for February:

Listening Against the Stone by Brenda Miller

“These deeply personal essays paint a picture of how [Miller’s] sense of spirituality has evolved and shifted through the years: always rooted in a strong desire for connection.”

Book available here:

<http://www.uuabookstore.org/Listening-Against-the-Stone-P17180.aspx>

Sign up for online book club here:

<https://www.goodreads.com/group/show/173731-justice-and-spirit-unitarian-universalist-book-club>

Open to Desire by Mark Epstein

It is common in both Buddhism and Freudian psychoanalysis to treat desire as the root of all suffering and problems, but psychiatrist Mark Epstein believes this to be a grave misunderstanding. Bringing wisdom to a fresh and compelling topic, Epstein shows how desire can be a teacher in its own right,

A Billion Wicked Thoughts: What the World's Largest Experiment Reveals about Human

Desire by Ogi Ogas & Sai Gaddam

Two maverick neuroscientists use the world's largest psychology experiment—the Internet—to study the private activities of millions of men and women around the world, unveiling a revolutionary and shocking new vision of human desire that overturns conventional thinking.

Also see: <http://tinyurl.com/hpxm6jc>

***Embracing a Beautiful God* by Patricia Adams Farmer**

from the book review: “Mystical and magical, Embracing a Beautiful God opens our eyes to the beauty that is God surrounding us. Every reflection draws us into relationship with the living God, unmasking the mystery that lures us to deep communion with all creation.”
http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2065149.Embracing_a_Beautiful_God

***Anatomy of Desire: How to be Happy Even When You Don't Get What You Want* by Gina Lake**

from the book review: “We expect that getting what we want will finally make us happy, but what we find is that it mostly just leads to wanting more or wanting something different. Our desires toss us to and fro until we tire of this and begin to question the value of following our

desires. *Anatomy of Desire* will help you understand desire and its purpose in your life. It will also help you discriminate between your Heart's desires and the ego's and to relate to the ego's desires in a way that reduces suffering and increases joy.”

<http://www.amazon.com/Anatomy-Desire-Happy-Even-When/dp/1496098897>

***The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* by Michael Pollan**

***On Desire: Why We Want What We Want* by William B. Irvine**

List of books for children and families about desire:

https://www.amazon.com/gp/registry/wishlist/2ARVZOAPMOTZ7/ref=cm_sw_su_w

If you've enjoyed this packet and are not a part of Soul Matters or a Unitarian Universalist congregation, please learn more about how to join us at www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com

Join the Soul Matters Facebook page to engage in the theme with participants from all around the US and Canada: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/soulmatters/>