

10 Rules for Living©

A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
For the Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis
Sunday, January 5, 2020

Happy New Year, everyone! Even though the year is now five days old, we're still in that place of "new-newness." Maybe you have already broken your New Year's Resolution; or maybe you're plugging along, and the reality of just how hard it is to change habits is finally settling in. I'm a list maker and a goal setter by temperament, so I've always approached New Years Resolutions with a particular kind of masochistic joy. While going through an annual purge of my belongings, I found some old New Year's lists of my ambitions; learn Hungarian in one year, was one; play all of Chopin's Etudes – regardless of the fact that I neither had a piano to play nor did I know how to play one at that time; be a nicer person – I'm still working on that one. So, we all take these resolutions with a grain of salt, knowing that they represent aspirations of who we want to be and what we hope we will become.

New Year's advertising usually focuses on the physical or the material changes we want to make. Gym membership reaches an all-time high; for about four weeks; then it ebbs down to the faithful few who have made it part of their regular life. And church attendance is often high in January, as people begin to examine the state of our lives; their souls if you will – and come to church like this one looking to do a different kind of work out – to do soul-work. If that's you – I'm happy to tell you that you've come to the right place.

Each month we examine a new theme, based on a Unitarian Universalist inspired curriculum called "Soul Matters." This year, the team that puts together this curriculum added an optional packet for each month, which were called "Sacred Words," and they are intended to augment the materials which we use for small groups. In looking over the themes for the year, your ministry team chose Soul for the month of January to examine.

Soul is not something we talk about much in a Unitarian Universalist Church, because it's one of those religious and spiritual words that overtime, has become

drained of meaning. Some forms of Christianity has equated soul with immortality; another concept that Unitarian Universalists tend to struggle with. Judaism tends to think of soul more practically; like life force, such as the breathe that was given to Adam by Yahweh – breathing him into existence. I like Mary Oliver's reflection on soul when she writes: *Ten times a day something happens to me like this - some strengthening throb of amazement - some good sweet empathic ping and swell. This is the first, the wildest and the wisest thing I know: that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness.*"

But...attentive...to what? Some theologians would say simple "attentive to the ground of our being," to that part of yourself which is frankly, a bit of mystery, it's not the intellect; it's not the heart; it's not the ego; it's as poet Gerard Manley Hopkins describes as the freshest, dearest, deep down things. To engage with one's own soul is a life-long project, and one that can't be completed by checking off a New Year's Resolutions list.

But – I love lists, so when I came across Jean Vanier's 10 Rules for Living, I knew I wanted to share it with you this Sunday. Jean Vanier's is not well known here in the United States; he's a Canadian Catholic lay person who, after witnessing the terrible suffering of the Holocaust, decided to dedicate his life to service. He created L'Arche, an international not-for-profit organization that provides housing, support and advocacy on behalf of intellectually challenged persons. Vanier has been working quietly and with dedication all his life. On his 90th birthday, some friends asked him, as we often do ask our elders – what's your secret for a long and happy life? He published a video titled "Ten Rules for Life." So here goes – this is Vanier's 10 Rules for Living:

Rule Number 1 – Accept the Reality of Your Body. To accept the reality of your body is to honor the body you've been given. This is easier to

do if you like your body; or if it's not in pain or if it does what you want it to do. . Some of us have been told that the bodies we have are not perfect or beautiful just the way they are. Some of us take our bodies for granted until they stop working; some of us hate our bodies and are constantly looking at ways to change. While there is nothing wrong with doing what you can to keep your body healthy, there must be a point at which you accept this one body you've got – and that it will grow weaker as we age. Vanier says “the body is fragile, like all bodies. We are born in weakness; we will die in weakness. And when we get to a certain age – ninety – we begin to get weaker.” He adds “I have to accept that I'm ninety. I'm not fifty or forty or thirty.” My greatest teachers so far have been the ones who gracefully accept the limitations of their aging bodies; ask for help when they need it; and do all they can with the body they have. Accept the reality of your body.

Rule Number 2: Talk about your emotions and difficulties. Vanier was particularly speaking to men whom he identifies as having difficulty expressing their emotions. In a recent article in the Atlantic magazine, entitled “What it Means to Be A Man,” Peggy Orenstein writes “There's no difference between the sexes' need for connection in infancy, nor between their capacity for empathy – yet from the get go, boys are relegated to an impoverished emotional landscape.”¹ The rest of the article details the ways in which our culture continues to discourage boys and men from accessing emotions other than anger, rage and aggression. This is why I think Rev. John's emphasis on emotional literacy is so important. Churches are typically good at working together on social justice projects and on sharing our different belief systems; but the harder thing to do is to develop the skills of emotional literacy and intimacy that is required to expand our soul life. The small groups that are so successful here at UUCA, led by Rev. John and Joshua Long are one way you get to practice this rule in your own life. Talk about your emotions and difficulties.

Rule Number 3: Don't be Afraid of Not Being Successful or, another translation “Do not fear

failure.” I once had a brilliant friend, who got his PhD in Italian cinema and literature who constantly berated himself as a failure because he could not earn what his friends who were lawyers and physicians were earning. Although he was beloved by his students; admired by his colleagues, the gnawing sense of failure eventually compromised his health. His definition of success was firmly rooted in the expectations his father had of him and it damaged his ability to see his life as full and healthy and whole.

I was recently at the home of a young woman who had three children, but who had not completed college. She home schooled her kids, and they were not only bright and curious, but kind. I could see her in them; her wisdom, her humor, her moral clarity. Yet, she constantly made self-deprecating remarks about her lack of higher education. While I can appreciate the fact that she longed for her own life and her own education, I also wanted her to see that her work mattered; that the lives she was influencing on a daily basis, was frankly, more useful than my MDiv degree. She was a stunning success as a human being in my eyes, and I wanted her to own that for herself.

I have known friends and colleagues who have literally spent hours on social media platforms looking at what other people have done or achieved; and they have felt sick and depressed about their own lives. They don't make as much money as others; they aren't recognized in their field, they have not been given the attention or praise or accolades that they feel they deserve; they feel they are a failure because they are not successful in love or money or fame or that their children are none of the above. This is why this is soul work – because the soul does not care about these things. The soul does not want you to rack up any more awards on your wall. The soul – your soul – wants you to have the resilience in store when life does not go as planned; when things and people and even your body fails you. When you hit that dark night of the soul, you need to know you also have the resources to get out of it.

¹ Orenstein, Peggy. *The Miseducation of the American Boy*, Atlantic, January/February 2020.

Musical Interlude: Dark Night of the Soul by Van Morrison

Rule Number 4. In a relationship, take the time to ask: “How are you?” When we ask someone “how are you?” we too often don’t wait for an answer. And when someone asks us that question, we understand that it’s usually not the time to go into a lengthy explanation about what’s *really* going on in our lives. But when we are in a relationship, whether with a partner or a close friend or our fellow church members, “how are you,” is a meaningful question. Perhaps in our church life, we should reframe that question. For the last 15 years or so, I’ve met monthly with a Spiritual Director. We begin our conversation with the same question. She doesn’t ask me “how are you?” She says “How goes it with Thy Spirit?”

By that she means more than just my irritation with the traffic or concerns about the church’s budget; she is asking “tell me about the place where your inner and outer worlds meet. Tell me about the wisest thing you know about yourself.” So as a member of this church, consider when you ask “how are you?” you are actually inviting that person to share a bit of their soul with you; that place where inner depth meets the shore of our daily living. How are you? How Goes it With Thy Spirit?

Rule Number 5. Stop Looking at your phone. Be present! (holding up a cell phone). This is not the enemy of the people – but it is the opposite of presence. Vanier told a group of young people that “you are a people of communication, but are you a people of presence? Are you able to listen?” This is not a rant about having cell phones. I love all the things that a phone can do; it can look up instant information, it can help me navigate a city, and when I’m feeling lonely and lost in a crowd of people, it’s my own private best friend.

But what it does fray is our ability to sit with one another sometimes uncomfortably. Have you ever noticed that while at dinner people may be able to hold small talk for a little while, and then we all pull out our phones and sometimes get lost in them? What if we did what the youth group is asked to do – what if we put our phones in a basket at the beginning of any social gathering and committed ourselves to simply being present with and for each

other? It seems both scary and liberating at the same time. I challenge you this year to take up the Cell Phone Basket Challenge and vow, for an entire evening, not to look at or interact with your cell phone. Instead, cultivate the habit of presence. Notice when you’re feeling awkward and uncomfortable. Resist the temptation to type “feeling awkward and uncomfortable” into your Search Engine.

Rule #6: Ask People: What is Your Story? We are all people with profound stories, regardless of age or stage in life – each one of us has a story. I remember last fall, during a multigenerational service, I got into a conversation with a boy, probably around eight years old, who told me this astonishing story about a relationship with his uncle. His uncle listened to him respectfully; asked thoughtful questions about his life; and shared with him his love of art and music and poetry. He told me there was nobody else in his life like his Uncle and he always looked forward to when he would come to visit. I told him about my Aunt Frankie and of how important she was to me when I was growing up.

She did my makeup for my dance recitals; she was there at Christmas; she shared her love of art and David Bowie and books with me. She was – and continues to be – an inspiration to me. That conversation reminded me of how important we are to each other. And now, when I see that boy, we smile or fist bump because we know something of each other’s story. Vanier emphasizes the importance of relating to people and listening to them. He says, “To meet is to listen: Tell me your story? Tell me where your pain is? Tell me where your heart is? What are the things you desire?” He adds, “I need to listen to you because your story is different to my story.”

Rule #7: Be Aware of Your Own Story For many years I taught a class called “Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography.” The purpose of the class was to help members identify and clarify the arc that is your life – and *what it means*. Our lives are a collection of days, weeks, months, years and embedded within all of those moments are meanings. And like a good story, it has a beginning, it has exposition and description, themes and sub themes, plots, sub plots, narratives, climax, and the

ending of course, is still being written with every breath we take. So we must ask ourselves, “how well do I know my own story?” And – have I told my story so often that I have stopped examining it for the truth? What am I running from? What am I hiding? Vanier says this about his 7th Rule: “You are precious. You have your ideas: political, religious, non-religious, you have your vision for the world. Your vision for yourself,” says Vanier.

He acknowledges that when we fear our identities, worldviews, and cherished opinions are being taken away from us we are liable to become angry. He adds, “we have to discover where our fears are because that is the fundamental problem.” He asks, “Maybe in your story there is a story about fear?” Let this be the year that you examine more closely your own story. We pause now to reflect on these rules and to hear “Easy Living” sung by Nicole Rumeau.

Music: Easy Living by Billy Holiday

Stop Prejudice, meet people. I believe that all of the earlier of Vanier’s seven rules prepare us for this one. In a relationship, ask “how are you?” Ask people, “what’s your story” and “know your own story.” This church has multiple opportunities to practice rule #8 – whether it is engaging our community organization, ACT (Anne Arundel County Coming Together) or Connect the Dots or Showing Up for Racial Justice or Coming to the Table; all four of these groups practice one on one conversation; sometimes with people very different than you. Building Beloved Community’s Friday Night Film Series features a facilitated conversation after the film; once again, an opportunity to talk with one another, with the goal of eliminating racism and oppression one conversation at a time.

At the Interfaith Service on December 31st, I told the congregation about an event that was created by a church member of the congregation I served in Cleveland. Distressed by the awful rhetoric about Muslims around the time of the 2016 election, she had a simple idea which she called Tea Time for Peace.

She imagined our church making tea and having sweets, and inviting our Muslim and Interfaith friends to tea and conversation. We worked together on how to lightly structure the conversations so that people could not only get to

know each other, but to discover common values in our diverse expression of faith. It is an idea that has continued to grow and spread and dispel prejudice while building lasting friendships.

Listen to your deepest desire. When Vanier was asked to explain his 9th rule, he said “We are very different from other creatures. Unlike with animals there is a “sort of cry of the infinite within us. We’re not satisfied with the finite.” Each of us have a lot to do to simply maintain our daily living. The same is true of our souls. Rev. Steve Garness Holmes, writing in the Soul Matters packet, reflects on this question when he writes: “We each have areas in which we can tell when our plants need watering or our pianos need tuning, or what’s needed to make the salad taste right. How often do we attend to what our souls need? At any particular time we may need rest or challenge, solitude, community, answers, questions, clarity, mystery, healing, forgiveness, light, darkness, courage, color, beauty, comfort, tension, words, silence... What a gift we can give ourselves by paying attention to what our souls need, and doing our best to give them that. What does your soul need today— right now? Don’t try to figure it out. Your body will probably give you some hints. It’s not merely a matter of “doing what feels right.” (Our feelings will often gladly lead us astray.) It’s a matter of being still and listening to your soul until it tells you. Try to take some time every day – even if it’s five minutes – to listen to what your soul needs.

Vanier concludes his list with **Rule #10.**

Remember that you’ll die one day. All religious traditions have different interpretations about what happens after death – but there are none – to my knowledge – that don’t acknowledge this one, common reality to us all. The Christian spiritual practice, known as *Memento Mori*, is meant to cultivate our constant awareness of death. Engaging with this rule – this practice means that we give up the frantic quest for immortality, whether through fame or wealth, achievement, supernatural magic – even declarations of faith – we remember this terrible and wondrous truth. In Vanier’s reflection on his final rule he says: “I’m not the one who’s the king of the world and I’m certainly not God,” “I’m just somebody who was born ninety years ago and will die in a few years’

time and then everybody will have forgotten me.
This is reality.”

So as you look to the year ahead, think about what kind of person you want to become. I want to become more self-aware, patient, humble, compassionate, reverent, a commitment to challenging white supremacy in myself and others; faithful in word and deed; and at peace with my mortality. These are the qualities I expect my church to help me nurture in myself and others², and this is one of the reasons to join a church.

For those new members among us, we welcome you – we will be changed by you – and we are grateful for the ways you will help all of us, live into this new decade together. May it be so.

² Inspired by Kendyl Gibbons keynote on Spiritual Maturity;
<https://mdduua.org/news/rev-dr-kendyl-gibbons-mdd-assembly-keynote/>