

## EMOTIONAL WISDOM

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### Readings –

The supreme purpose and goal for human life ... is to cultivate love. ~*Ramakrishna*

Perhaps the most striking thing about the Buddha was his combination of a cool mind and a warm heart. The cool mind shielded him from sentimentality and the warm heart kept him from indifference. ~ *Houston Smith, The World's Religions*

Where your heart is, there your treasure will be also. ~*Matthew 6: 21*

The most revolutionary part of Jesus' teaching was that a good heart is more important than following codes for correct external behavior. God's kingdom is here, it's all around you, Jesus says, it's inside you, it's spread all over this earth and the only rules you need to worry about are loving God with your whole heart and loving one another. ~ *Gail Godwin, Heart*

The kingdom of God is like nothing we expect. It has no yesterday and no day after tomorrow; it does not come in "a thousand years." It is something experienced in the heart; it is everywhere and nowhere. ~ *Friedrich Nietzsche, "A Heart Full of Contradictions," as quoted by Frank Nager in Mythology of the Heart*

In our theme of Soul Station, we're focusing on six central spiritual practices that can help us repair and maintain our souls. Last week, Larry spoke about transforming motivation as the first spiritual practice: what it takes to harness our motivation to change or to carry through on our commitments. We also handed out small pocket notebooks that you can carry with you to jot down notes to yourself on Sunday mornings and during the week. If you didn't get one last Sunday, there are more in the foyer today.

Emotional wisdom is probably not what you expected to be the second spiritual practice we'd visit. Let me digress a little and ask how many of you have had a favorite evening television show that you watch regularly? I'm thinking of the kind of show that you look forward to chilling out in front of at the end of a long day – the kind of show where you put your feet up, let go of the stress and bustle of your day, and willingly just drift into this other tv world. Sometimes you may even catch yourself, somewhat embarrassingly, talking earnestly about the characters from this show as though they were real people. *Hill Street Blues, West Wing, NYPD Blue, ER* have, in the past, been this kind of show for me.

The closest thing I have right now is *Grey's Anatomy*. I've been watching this show for a couple of years, and I acknowledge that it's spiraling down a bit, running low on its initial quirky freshness and humor. But – I still watch it. If you haven't seen the show, one of the things that keeps me watching is the narrative at the beginning and end of each episode, in which we hear the inner thoughts and reflections of the central character, Meredith Grey. These narratives are well-written and often thought-provoking. At the same time, this character Meredith has been through every kind of

emotional up and down and complex situation you could imagine – and her relationship with Dr. McDreamy has been on-again off-again so many times that I’ve lost count. Meredith’s inability to get on with her life basically comes down to the emotional scars that she carries within her. Finally at the end of last season, Meredith shows up in a therapist’s office and says essentially, “ok – I’ve had enough – I’m ready to deal with my problems – so fix me – heal me.” And I cheered aloud to the tv screen, “It’s about time!”

So, when I thought about this subject of emotional wisdom, I thought about this character Meredith, who all these years has been unable to love, unable to move forward, because she hasn’t done the healing she needs for her heart. In this light, it is clear that emotional wisdom – healing our hearts and cultivating our ability to give and receive love – IS a foundational spiritual practice.

In the late 1990s, we began to hear a lot about something called emotional intelligence. One study notes that most managers who have MBAs have similar IQs because earning an MBA requires a certain level of intelligence. However the distinguishing feature of good managers, among MBA holders, is their level of emotional intelligence. The key factors seem to be self-awareness, motivation, self-regulation, empathy, and adeptness in relationships. If your favorite tv show is *The Office*, you certainly know what the lack of emotional intelligence looks like when you watch the clueless boss Michael, played deftly by Steve Carroll.

The characteristics of emotional intelligence also describe the emotional wisdom that we need in order to maintain and repair our souls and to grow in our spiritual journey. Assuming that we can all agree on the importance of emotional wisdom, then the question becomes how. How can we heal our hearts and cultivate the ability to give and receive love as foundational spiritual practices? We’ve talked many times here in worship services about two ways to find emotional healing. When we are truly stuck, like Meredith Grey, with the kind of hole in our heart that will not heal, there is no substitute for getting help: from a counselor, a spiritual director, a wise practitioner. Likewise, emotional wisdom is centered in forgiveness: being able to accept forgiveness and being able to forgive others and to forgive oneself. Forgiveness is another sermon - the sermon I actually did on January 13<sup>th</sup> of this year - and copies are available in the foyer.

Today, I want to focus on how in our daily routines and everyday encounters we can foster and maintain our emotional wisdom. In my reading and thinking about this issue, I’ve come up with three perspectives to share with you this morning.

The first perspective comes from Mickey Singer, in his new book [The Untethered Soul](#). He reminds us that we all have a phenomenal amount of spiritual energy inside us and available to us, energy that doesn’t come from what we eat or drink or how much sleep or exercise we’ve had. Singer believes that we all have experienced this spiritual energy at times when it just spontaneously wells up and fills us, but we often block this energy by closing our minds and especially by closing our hearts. And when we close our hearts, we pull inside ourselves, either shutting down that spiritual energy

or drowning it out with our conditioned negative responses. We can tap into this energy for the soul by simply keeping our hearts open.

Instead of falling back on the old habit of shutting down, we can intentionally choose to break that habit and keep our hearts open. We can decide that the annoyances, the frustrations, the routine daily things that happen to us, are not important enough to close our hearts. We can deal with the situation as best we can when it happens, says Singer, but after we deal with it, we let it go.

Emotional wisdom is not letting those negative situations cling to us, ruining our day, not letting those negative emotions that arise within us spoil our lives. We only live for a very short time, our days and nights are numbered, so we need to ask if we want to spend our life with a closed heart or with an open heart, a heart that is receiving love and energy all the time and giving it back to the world.

So, try this out this week. When something or someone annoying or frustrating comes your way, or when you find yourself in the endless loop of your own negative thoughts – and you feel yourself sinking down and your heart closing or clenched tight – acknowledge, name to yourself, what is happening. Then see if you can say to yourself, “This is not worth it. I am not going to let this cling to me for the rest of my day, ruining the day for me – and then ruining the day for everyone else around me.”

Sounds simple – makes sense – but I find it takes a lot of practice. I’ve been practicing with this all summer. Sometimes I remember to do it right away. In the aftermath of a phone call or someone’s remark to me that just sets me off, I’ve been able to do a power whine about it, then take a few breaths and say “OK, I’m done with that. I’m not letting it cling to me or to my day.” And it’s worked.

But at other times I’ve forgotten or it hasn’t been so easy to move on. One of the scary things about preaching – and I’ve mentioned this before – is that I can count on whatever the spiritual practice or faith issue I’m focusing on in a sermon, that very thing is going to pop up for me, bigger than life, with a dramatic roar. So – and this is hard for me to confess to you– after what was for me an intense interview with the Church and Ministry Committee about my request for ordination, after the answer was yes, after I was weak in the knees with gratitude and excitement, what did I think about once I got in the car to drive back to Gainesville? I kept thinking about the two questions I didn’t answer as well as I wished and what I might have said that would have been better and clearer. Even worse, it was a couple of hours before I could get myself turned around enough to be aware of how these thoughts and doubts were not only clinging to me, but also expanding like Spanish moss hanging on an old oak tree. This experience is a good reminder to me of what the words spiritual practice really mean: that we simply have to begin over and over again.

A second perspective on emotional wisdom comes from Gail Godwin in her book, Heart. She gives some additional tools for what she calls heart wisdom. To maintain an open heart, she says we must stay aware of situations that threaten to close us down and also acknowledge our own limits. Striking a successful balance between our own self-protection and an active, loving involvement with people in an imperfect world

– that balancing act can never be mastered once and for all. Never. It is always an ongoing process.

Godwin focuses on our encounters with other people, saying that emotional wisdom is following a path like this: love as fully as possible. When that's not possible, settle for empathy. When empathy fails, fall back on a firm bridge of courtesy and decent behavior. And when all that fails, stay true to who you are, remaining clear and grounded. I have watched the women who work in our front office here at UCG – women like Lisa and Alyson, Barbara, Ellen, Lindsey, Gail, Susan and Julie – I've watched these women use this heart wisdom on a daily basis. I've seen them shift from loving to empathetic to courteous and decent, and then to a clear, grounded boundary setting, depending on the situation. I respect the way these women deal with all the different requests and attitudes that people bring to the church office. And I have memorized Godwin's progression of heart wisdom: love, empathy, courtesy, decency, and finally a grounded sense of self. It helps me shift gears in situations where the most loving response doesn't work and when I need to muster an appropriate way to keep my heart open.

I believe that the third perspective on how to maintain emotional wisdom is gratitude. While forgiveness heals the heart of old hurts, gratitude opens the heart to love. Gratitude dissolves negative feelings, deflates barriers, melts anger and jealousy and even fear. Gratitude also evokes a sense of well being, which is a powerful emotion and a gift, not only to yourself, but to everyone in your life. Gratitude is the doorway to love.

Gratitude can be cultivated, so our other spiritual practice this week is about gratitude. Pick one morning this coming week, between the time when you wake up and before you leave your house, think about the day ahead in terms of the people you will encounter - and imagine greeting each person with a grateful heart. As you go through the day, remind yourself of this stance of gratitude with each person you meet. That night, in your notebook journal, jot down a list of the people from your day and then write down a specific reason you are grateful for each one of them. Notice how gratitude opens your heart and helps you to keep it open.

Emotional wisdom clears out space for the soul's energy and renewal. It unclogs the carburetor (or fuel injectors, as they are now called) and it lets spiritual energy flow to you, through you and then from you. What is the foundation of a spiritual life? Jesus – and all the prophets – and all of the world religions say in similar ways: "Love God with your whole heart and love one another." Emotional wisdom is what makes this possible.

So, as the poet Rilke says "Work of the eyes is done, now go and do heart work on all the images imprisoned within you."

One helpful tool for heart work is the loving kindness meditation from the Buddhist tradition. I invite you to join me in this meditation as our closing prayer.

Sit up – feet on ground – hands relaxed and open – neck and shoulders relaxed  
– breathe in and out – breathe in calm and openness, breathe out tiredness and worry  
– breathe in light. As you breathe, silently repeat the words of this prayer

May I be safe  
May I be happy  
May I have a sense of well-being  
May I have an open heart  
May I be peaceful

Now visualize someone you love and pray for this person

May you be safe  
May you be happy  
May you have a sense of well-being  
May you have an open heart  
may you be peaceful.

Visualize someone with whom you experience difficulty or conflict and pray for this person

May you be safe  
May you be happy  
May you have a sense of well-being  
May you have an open heart  
may you be peaceful.

And now for all beings:

May all be safe,  
May all be happy,  
May all have a sense of well-being  
May all have an open heart  
May all be peaceful.

As the bell rings, open your eyes, bring your focus back to this place, and let the sounds of grace echo through your body, your mind and your soul.

**Going Deeper:**

- Essential Spirituality, Roger Walsh, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1999
- Heart, by Gail Godwin, William Morrow, 2001
- The Untethered Soul, Mickey Singer, 2007