Peace of Mind
Service offered by
Revs. Kathleen Rolenz and Katie Norris
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West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church
Rocky River, OH

Rev. Katie Norris
We have all seen what happens when people do not have peace of mind. It shows up in many ways in our society but I think one of the most recent examples is all of the bullying we have been seeing. People bully others when they don’t feel good about themselves, when they do not have inner peace, and they want to feel powerful.

It is essential for each of us to find peace, because without inner peace, we hurt ourselves and others.

I remember when I first started to search for peace of mind. I was six years old. I remember feeling scared, sad, anxious, and angry all the time and I did not know why this was happening.

Even though I started looking early, inner peace was the one thing that had eluded me for most of my life. I went to therapists and tried dozens of medications for what they eventually found to be bipolar disorder, but nothing really worked all that well. I didn’t know why I couldn’t get better, and the doctors said that some people just never do.

I know we do not often talk about mental illness, even in churches, because of the stereotypes and stigma around it, but our peace of mind is linked to our spiritual health. In the musical Next to Normal, which is about a woman with bipolar disorder, at one point when all the the medicines and therapies have not worked, she asks “What happens if the medicine wasn't really in control? What happens if the cut, the burn, the break was never in my brain, or in my blood, but in my soul?”

Most of us struggle with peace of mind at some point in our lives, or we will. My search for inner peace is linked to my illness, but of course not everyone who struggles with inner peace is in the same situation. I do think however that lack of inner peace for all of us is a spiritual issue. For me the reason I was not getting better was because I had only treated my loss of peace of mind from a medical aspect, and not from a spiritual one as well.

I had been taught by the religion of my childhood and the society I was raised in that mental illness was not real and people who acted like me were bad, weak and lazy. To them the spiritual problem was that I was a bad person, flawed since the day I was born. Living in that kind of environment, I would never find inner peace because my soul was broken. Living in that environment I would never be able to cultivate the three things I now know lead to peace of mind.

Those three things are acceptance of self, an accepting community, and a plan.

Psychologist Carl Rogers says “When I accept others as they are, they change. When I accept myself as I am, I change.” He was a humanist psychologist and by change he did not mean getting people to do or believe what he wanted. He meant finding peace of mind. I agree with his assessment, because it was not until I came to this church environment of acceptance that I began to find peace.

When my husband, son and I started attending West Shore six years ago, my bipolar disorder and panic attacks were ruling my life and often ruining our family. After we were here for a little while and I shared what was going on with a few people, no one turned me away. This church and faith said I was accepted and loved just as I was, bipolar and all. I was not flawed, weak and lazy. I had found the accepting community I had needed, and so my path to inner peace began.

This community acceptance led me to the second element of finding peace of mind, accepting myself. Before coming here, I rarely accepted myself because up until that point, the majority of the communities I was in had not accepted me, so I did not believe I had inherent worth and dignity. However, after I was accepted by others here I started to accept myself because of your example.

Acceptance, especially self acceptance was the spiritual aspect of my mental illness that I had not understood before. As long as I thought I was worthless and deserved to be punished, I would never be able to maintain the extensive
and immensely difficult life changes needed for me to get better.

While I learned here that I am loved just as I am, I also learned I had to take responsibility for myself. I had to be an active participant in my inner peace. Part of being responsible is creating and sticking with the third element in cultivating inner peace, a plan.

Creating and sticking with a plan is not always easy, especially when no one has taught us how to do it. While we spend years of our young lives in school, almost no one teaches us how to find inner peace.

However, there is an amazing woman, who realized it was essential to the health of our world to teach peace. One of her best known quotes is “preventing conflicts is the work of politics; establishing peace is the work of education.”

In the 1880’s, this woman, Dr. Maria Montessori created a whole new system of education, of which an essential component was teaching peace. She believed that adults waged warfare on the souls of children by imposing on the child what the adults want. This means children learn they are not accepted as they are, but that they have to become who the adults want them to be. In such unaccepting environments, we lose self acceptance, we lose touch with nature and the universe, and we loose our inner peace.

Maria Montessori believed children should learn in a way that honors their individual gifts and talents. As a result, they will feel accepted and learn to accept themselves. To this accepting environment, she added a plan to cultivate peace so the children would know how to create peace with each other and how to maintain their own inner peace.

I have been inspired by Montessori’s method and how I have seen it work at my son’s school, Montessori Children’s School in Westlake. At this school, they give kids a clear plan for peace, a plan I think we can learn from.

Each classroom at the school has a peace corner. For kindergarten, the peace corner is actually in the playground because the teacher knows how important it is for kids to be connected to nature and something greater than themselves. When children have a disagreement, they go out and talk about it at the peace pole.

There is also a spot in the classroom for activities that cultivate peace of mind. My son enjoyed this spot which had a labyrinth to trace and cards with yoga poses on them and a mirror so the kids could practice yoga to focus their mind, calm themselves, and create inner peace.

One of my favorite parts of the school though is the meditation spiral outside made up of thousands of flowers. All students are encouraged, when they are feeling sad or upset, to walk the spiral. It is made of flowers in the summer, pumpkins in fall, and rocks in winter. The idea of the spiral is that as you walk to the center, you walk towards the center of yourself and also the center of the Universe. You create a connection between your spirit and the greater spirit of the Universe which helps you find inner peace.

This year in his elementary school room, the corner includes many meditative elements such as books about peace and photos of fun times the class has had together. They also have a peace rose which is used to handle conflict in the classroom. There are no time outs and there is no demeaning discipline, kids learn how to solve conflict on their own. For example, if two children want to use the same work and they are fighting over it, they go to the peace corner. One of them picks up the peace rose and only the person with the rose is allowed to speak. You must only use I statements and you can not interrupt each other. They pass the rose back and forth until they reach a compromise or understanding. The teachers do not have to be disciplinarians all day, and the kids feel confident that they can work out problems on their own. This is their plan for creating peace between individuals, a plan that I actually learned once too, but not in school. I learned it six years ago when I was in a connection circle here at church.

Each one of us must chose our own plan, but many of the things Jeffrey’s school uses are things I know adults use as part of their peace plan. Yoga, meditation, nature walks, labyrinths, reading, and removing yourself from a situation that is too emotional for you.

My plan includes going to church every Sunday, maintaining a relationship with accepting communities, limiting time with unsupportive people, exercise, a strict diet, a
sleep schedule, inspiring music, spiritual practice, and hobbies that I love.

When I have my three things, a plan, an accepting environment, and self acceptance, I can cultivate peace of mind. I will not say this is easy though. I still struggle with peace of mind every day.

Probably the most important lesson I learned about inner peace is that for most of us it is not something we find and keep, it is something we cultivate and maintain.

Cultivating peace of mind is a covenant, a promise we make with ourselves. When we break that covenant we make adjustments, we ask for help, and we try again.

What is special about talking about peace of mind together in church is that our church community is in a unique situation. It has the ability to help us all discover the one thing many people yearn for but never find, peace of mind. By creating an environment where we accept people just as they are, we are creating a space for people to be uplifted, accept themselves, and find their own inner peace.

Our events, classes, and groups give people tools for their plan. We can learn how to meditate, we can join a small group, and we have friends to call when we need help. Each one of us has the ability to cultivate our own inner peace and assist others in cultivating theirs.

And that makes a huge difference because peace of mind matters, not only to us as individuals but to the world.

The Dalai Lama said: “Peace starts within each one of us. When we have inner peace, we can be at peace with those around us. When our community is in a state of peace, it can share that peace with neighboring communities, and so on.”

By cultivating our own inner peace, we can help create the peaceful world we dream about. May this be so for us.