



Soul Matters

Finding the Sacred In
Our Everyday Spaces



December 2020 Stillness

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Week one:

The Welcome Mat

What Does it Mean to be a Family of Stillness?

In 2006, the Unitarian Universalist Beacon Press published *Thirst*, a volume of Mary Oliver's poetry in which the poem, "[The Place I Want to Get Back To.](#)" appeared. The poem tells the story of the day that Oliver sat in perfect stillness in the pine woods, and two deer approached her. Silently sizing her up, one of the deer, in an almost impossibly compelling moment, nuzzles her hand.

While the magic of the wild deer's soft, warm muzzle is the big surprise, it was made possible because Oliver was practiced--even very skilled--at being still. In the poem, the place Oliver wants to get back to is that perfect oneness found through stillness; stillness is both the path and the destination.

And this is a good way for us UUs to think about stillness, too. This month, we practice and play with stillness together both for its intrinsic value, and for its usefulness for the work ahead. In stillness is where our courage grows; check out the On the Message Board section for more on this.

We're hoping you might be up for choosing-your-own-adventure in the Around the Neighborhood section this month. We're using our list as something of an adaptable, customizable "advent" calendar. We'll all be celebrating and experiencing different things in December, so one idea is to pick a relevant number of items from our treasure hunt, search for one each day, and then come together as a family for a still moment in the afternoon or evening to share what you found. The section itself has some specific ideas.

We've been through a lot together this year, Soul Matters families, and while lessons and opportunities will certainly emerge in the coming months, right now, like silent seeds tucked into rich soil, we pause in dynamic stillness together.

-- Teresa, on behalf of the whole Soul Matters team

At the Table

Exploring Stillness Through Discussions

At the Table questions explore the monthly theme through a discussion for all ages. They are designed for a family gathering - maybe during a Friday night meal, a quiet moment in the living room or before a board game night.

Introducing the Activity

Family members who are readers can alternate who reads the questions. Those who are not readers are invited to share their own impromptu questions. Discussion partners might answer as thoughts come to them or take turns in a circle.

Discussion Questions

1. Who in the family would win a stillness contest?
2. Are you still when you sleep, or do you toss and turn? (Did you know that quality is [genetic](#)!?)
3. What day of the week feels the most still to you? What season of the year?
4. Sometimes people get very still when they are scared. Has that ever happened to you?
5. What does it mean to “still your mind”? Have you ever tried that?
6. What is stillness good for?
7. When it is really hard to be still?
8. What would you rather sit still and watch for five minutes: a deer, the clouds, a sparkling Christmas tree or the stars?
9. What does your mind think about when you lie still at night just before falling asleep?

Return to the Discussion Throughout the Week

Thoughts develop with time. Find opportunities to bring up particularly compelling questions again during the month, maybe on walks, rides home, when tucking your child in to bed, etc. If thoughts grew or changed, notice together how we are all evolving beings, opening ourselves to new truths and understandings as we live our lives and connect with others.

On the Message Board

A Monthly Reminder

The On the Message Board section lifts up a theme-related mantra, graphic, quote, or gesture for your family to carry with them throughout the month. Think of these “family sayings” or “family signs” as tools for the journey, reminders that help us refocus and steady ourselves and our kids as we navigate through life’s challenges and opportunities.

December’s Message:

“Don’t just do something, sit there!”

In the 1951 Disney movie *Alice in Wonderland*, the White Rabbit, always in a hurry, always discombobulated, mistakes Alice for a helper of his named Mary Ann. Attempting to upbraid her for her maddening calm in the face of his frantic rush, he botches a cliché and says to her: “Don’t just do something, stand there!” (Here’s a recording of the chapter:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8x3Z895eRng>)

We use a version of this comical phrase as our mantra for the month.

Too often, when confronted with a challenge (within or without), we scramble to do *something*, anything! It feels better in the moment to match turbulence with turbulence. But stillness is often a good and valid response.

Stillness is not inaction; it is the making of space for action. Stillness is not complacency; it is an invitation for understanding to precede change. Stillness is not reluctance; it is humility in the face of complicated challenges that likely require more of us than we are positive we can deliver. In stillness, we gather, we root, we call on our sources of strength, and we grow our courage.

This month, when you are confronted with situations that feel scary or overwhelming, remind each other that stillness is a gift and a tool; try not just doing something, but being there.

Week two:

Around the Neighborhood

Around the Neighborhood activities engage families with their surroundings through the lens of the theme. It's about perceiving our well-known world in new ways. As you safely move around your neighborhood during this time of Covid, these suggestions help you transform your everyday backs-and-forths into a family adventure!

A Treasure Hunt for Stillness

Each month, we set off on our treasure hunt as much to find exciting things as to practice slowing down and noticing. Stillness allows us to take more control over our attention, to be present with what is often right there in front of us, but which goes unnoticed in the regular bustle of our lives. In that spirit, this month's hunt gives you different options for intentionally slowing down enough to notice a different, wonderful thing each day, and then come back together to share your treasure!

Think about what you want to count down to. There are three different lists below for you to use as-is, or mix-and-match. What holiday or celebration would be fun to lead up to? (We have some suggestions below.)

At the end of each day, find a quiet, still moment to gather and speak or show what you found. The sharing can happen in many ways, with cell phone pictures you took, images you sketched in a journal or keep it simple and use verbal descriptions. You might light a chalice to mark this special time of stillness, too.

This activity was inspired by the [#UULent](#) practice developed by Mr. Barb Greve, Karen Bellavance-Grace, and Alex Kapitan.

Countdown ideas:

- From the New Moon to the Solstice (7 days)
- Christmas to [Watch Night](#)/Freedom's Eve (6 days)
- [Chalica](#), December 7-13 (7 days)
- The week or ten days leading to Christmas

Treasure list ideas:

Words gleaned from UU Principles

1. Dignity
2. Compassion
3. Encouragement
4. Truth
5. Democracy
6. Justice
7. Interdependence

This year's Soul Matters themes

1. Imagination
2. Renewal
3. Stillness
4. Beloved community
5. Deep listening
6. Healing
7. Play
8. Commitment
9. Becoming
10. Story

Seasonal/holiday-themed objects (good for younger seekers)

1. A star
2. A bell
3. Candles
4. A pair of warm socks
5. A garden that's been put to bed for winter
6. A very young baby

At Play

Playing Games with Stillness

At Play activities and questions are a way to joyfully, playfully, and imaginatively experience the theme.

Option A: Salsa-Stillness-Salsa!

Sometimes we can extend the range of our abilities by playing with extremes. So, to fully experience stillness, we're first going to get really active and energized. How about salsa dancing? Check out the two how-to clips below and learn or practice steps together as a family. Dance for about 10 minutes, or however long works with your family's attention spans:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C4MAFLeWY7c>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=waYhRNdK9G8>

Once you are good and energized, have everybody get into a comfortable position, and put on this video of rain in the rainforest. Listen to it for the same amount of time that you danced and try to be as still as possible. Make sure family members know it's ok to scratch an itch, or sneeze; the goal is to really feel stillness as opposed to exuberant movement:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c9pQYOGIWM8>

One great gift of stillness is that it rejuvenates us for more play. So end your session with another bout of dancing!

Note: Afro-Latin partner dancing has been undergoing a gender revolution for some time, with groundbreaking dancers such as [Eli Torres](#) and [Yen Dorado](#) challenging the notion that partner dancing must be male-female. One way to honor this work toward inclusivity within the dance community is to refer to the two different roles not as “man” and “woman,” but as “lead” and “follow,” or “leader” and “interpreter.” Try it out as you learn and practice salsa together as a family.

Option B: Stillness, Sneaking & Pouncing

Reading an animal-themed children's magazine a few years ago, my son and I learned that animals with eyes in the front of their heads (such as humans, tigers, and bears) are more than likely predators, while animals with eyes on the sides of their heads (deer, rabbits) are more likely prey. Predators need front-facing vision to focus on and target their prey.

This is how our game of stalking began. On weekend mornings, whomever gets up second stalks whomever got up first, sneaking up on them and then “pouncing,” jumping out from behind a couch, springing outstretched fingers onto a shoulder, sneaking into a room and around the side of a bed if someone is awake but playing on their phone, etc.

It's a silly thing, but such a delight! In reality, this game is breaking the spell of the stillness of just-before-everybody-else-wakes-up. But it marks that transition playfully. My kids especially love it when it's the parent who does the stalking.

Note that it's only fun if everybody likes to get surprised, of course. Family members who get genuinely uncomfortable when jolted can pass.

From the Mailbox

Our mailboxes connect us to the wide world outside our Soulful Homes. Sometimes, these connections ask things of us (a donation letter or flyer encouraging us to vote), sometimes these connections offer things to us (a letter from a friend or a special delivery), and often, they do both. This section applies this metaphor to today's call for families to engage in the work of dismantling white supremacy culture. There are so many brave, inspiring and wise leaders “sending” us messages of hope and “delivering” us ideas about what we can do to fight racism. So each month, this section will contain two “notes” from these leaders in anti-racism and its related fields. Every family will relate to them differently. Engage them in whatever way connects with your family best.

Stillness Through Self-care

Oftentimes, though we may appear still, actually we are clenching tightly in body and mind. We're setting our jaws, or bunching our shoulders up by our ears, or even holding our breath. In our minds,

we hold tightly on to thoughts we are worried we'll forget, or that we get stuck on, or that cause us anxiety. Achieving stillness doesn't often happen naturally. It takes work. But internal chaos robs us of future energy that we need and want for other purposes, so it's work worth doing.

Check out [the video here](#) from teacher, author, and body positivity advocate [Jessamyn Stanley](#). It's just 11:20 long. Stanley leads a powerful meditation on clearing the mind, letting go of tension, and finding stillness and presence through breath and release.

Invitation: Do absolutely nothing after watching this video. Take no action, make no plan. Accept the gifts that whole-self stillness offers you and recognize it to be preparation for the work ahead!

Week three:

On the Porch Raising a Child of Stillness Together

On the Porch supports sharing realizations, challenges and hopes around the theme with other supportive adults. Perhaps this happens on a literal porch or front stoop, but it could happen wherever parents and their circle of support gather and talk (online or in person) over the soulful parts of parenthood. The "A Sip of Something New" section invites you and your discussion partner to take in a new idea shared by someone else. The "Spiritual Snacks" section stimulates personal storytelling and the sharing of your own wisdom and experience.

A Sip of Something New

It's natural--and popular!--to do retrospectives at year's end. We're going to do a special kind of looking back, one aimed at helping us find equanimity, peace, and stillness as we say goodbye to 2020.

This activity is adapted from our Soul Matters small group ministry packet.

You and your trusted friend or parenting partner, separately, read Carrie Newcomer's poem, "Three Gratitudes." (You can listen to it here, too: <https://vimeo.com/112893555>)

Then, ahead of your On the Porch meeting time, make your own list of things you're grateful for from 2020. Take your time and make your list as long as you need to. Special challenge edition: see if you can list as many gratitudes as you have disappointments about the past year.

When you get together again, begin with a moment of stillness together--no words, no fidgets--just you, together, being. Then read your lists.

When you're finished, place the lists for a week or two in a location where you can notice them when you start your day, on the refrigerator or bathroom mirror, for instance. Let the lists be a small refuge, and a reminder to use stillness to pause throughout your day to notice other blessings sitting still right in front of you.

Spiritual Snacks to Share

Bring these questions with you when the time comes to hang out with your co-parent or buddies. Don't treat the questions as a list to go through one by one. Instead pick the one or two that speak to you the most. Treat the questions less as a quiz and more like doorways inviting you into the world of storytelling and memory.

Questions

1. What music inspires stillness inside you?
2. Where is the stillness in your parenting?
3. Is there a calming practice you teach your kids, a recuperation practice you use for yourself, or both?
4. Despite many challenges in 2020, our society is still _____. (Use this question to not only get at what is hopeful for you personally but also what makes you hopeful for the future of your children.)
5. Are you afraid of stillness, or comfortable in it? Has that always been the case?
6. Has parenting made you more or less connected to "the still, small voice inside"?
7. What do you do when there's too much stillness in your life? How do you like to stir things up?
8. Who represented stillness-- inner peace, quiet dignity, self-possession--for you as a young person? Who, in your life now, represents that for you?
9. In perfect stillness, does your mind fill with sounds, pictures, words, sensations, or something else? (Or maybe nothing at all?)
10. In what ways do you carry stillness for those you care about, and care for? Who carries stillness for you, and how?

The Extra Mile

The Extra Mile section is for families who want to continue exploring the theme of the month through larger adventures, more complex projects or simply through additional modalities not otherwise included in the packets. The Extra Mile suggestions often surpass what is considered an "everyday moment" in a family, and may involve more preparation, planning, or time to accomplish. A bit more effort, but well worth it!

Solstice Stillness in a Home-Made Cave

This activity comes from the book, *Celebrating the Great Mother: A Handbook of Earth-Honoring Activities for Parents and Children*, by Cait Johnson and Maura D. Shaw (Destiny Books, 1995). If this activity resonates with you, you can find the book on used books sites for very affordable prices.

A brief overview: To connect with the sacred stillness of the longest night of the year, families will create a quiet, holy, protective cave to shelter Mother Earth and the Sun Child, symbolically reborn the night of

December 21, the winter solstice. The cave will be filled with the helpers and protectors a family needs to grow in love and justice in the year ahead. This activity comes from the Earth-centered spiritual tradition and harkens to the Christian creche scene. It can be adapted to your own path.

First, earlier in the month of December, Celebrating the Great Mother authors Johnson and Shaw invite readers to make a cave. Outdoors, the cave might be made of rocks or bricks. Indoors, you might build your cave out of toy blocks, or even stacked books. Your cave should have three walls and a roof and be big enough inside to shelter a handful of figures of your choosing, and a couple of votive candles (flame or electric, depending on location and materials). Make this a family project. It might take a few minutes, or a few days, to get the cave just right.

Next, you're going to add figures to go inside the cave. The cave is the shelter for the Earth Mother and the Sun Child, so a parent-and-child duo goes in first. In my family, we use favorite dolls who aren't exactly reserved for this purpose, but who, over the years, have come to feel like the right characters to us. Johnson and Shaw suggest you might also make the two figures out of wax, wood, clay, papier mâché, etc.

Once the parent-and-child figures are placed in the cave, you can surround them with other characters who can help and protect them. Fantastical creatures? Plants and animals? Magicians? Healers? Warriors? Teachers? Each family member might choose a character to represent themselves, too; in this way, we can all see ourselves in the powerful role of helper. Make sure all the figures you want will fit, but then bundle them up and keep them in a box or basket until the evening of the Solstice.

Then, just after sunset, make an event out of processing them into the cave all together. The authors recommend decorating the cave with evergreen sprigs at this time and placing your unlit candles in and around the cave. When you've finished, let a moment of silence fall. You might say something such as, "Even in the stillness and dark, each of us has light to share." Next, one at a time, you can light your candles.

Afterward, it may feel right to share a favorite holiday drink such as apple cider or hot cocoa. Or you might sit in the dark and enjoy simply watching the flickering candles through a window or across the room. Times of birth, like the Sun Child at the Winter Solstice, are often times of intermittent celebration and stillness, so let this activity bring both into your evening.

Week four:

At the Bedside

At The Bedside activities engage the theme through storytelling. This takes place during the dreamy, almost otherworldly hour or so before children or youth drift off to sleep. Through stories and the questions and realizations that they prompt, we come to understand the nature of and our own place in the cosmos. But also, these selections invite you to remember, shape, and share stories from your own past, using thoughtful narratives to help your child weave the tale of who they are and whose they are.

A Whiff of Stillness: "Eight Winds and a Fart"

That is maybe my favorite title I've ever written for us here in the At the Bedside section! This Zen story's main characters are real historical figures from 11th century China, but the veracity of the tale

itself is hard to know. You can [read a version of the story](#) on UU Kat Liu's site, Wizduum.net. It's also included in Gary Zukav's 2000 story collection, Soul Stories.

"Eight Winds and a Fart" is about how easily we let ourselves be knocked out of stillness and into indignance, frustration, resentment, and ire. It's so easy to make us angry, and to drive us into rash reactions!

On Wizduum.net, the story is written as if one friend is telling another friend the story, very colloquial in tone. So, you might want to read it a time or two so you can put it in your own words. Do you have a whoopee cushion? Or [flarp](#)? Or can you make a fart sound with your clasped hands, or armpit? Those might be fun for sound effects.

Also, ahead of time, think of a time that you reacted swiftly and unwisely, in the grip of strong emotion, and another time that you waited, letting strong emotions and urges pass, before acting. Be ready to share those stories with your child.

Here's the story: <http://wizduum.net/story/eight-winds-and-fart>

And here are some questions to ponder together after your reading:

In the poem, Su Dongpo boasts about being able to stay still and peaceful no matter what. But then he gets all bent out of shape by his teacher's silly comment! Tell about a time that you wanted to stay calm, but you lost your cool. (*Parents, here's a good spot to share your stories!*)

What could Sun Dongpo have done instead of storming over to his teacher's house to get mad at him?

Sometimes, it feels good to get all worked up inside! That's a way we can feel big feelings and release big energy. What does stillness feel like inside? Is one better, and one worse--stillness or worked up? Or do we maybe need both? What is a way to get all worked up but NOT hurt other people, and NOT do something we'll later regret?

Note: If you have a teen who is on Instagram, and this idea of harnessing big energy sparks some interest, you might tag them on this post from trainer Lauren Leavell:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CA5YETkjlPq/> to see if you can continue the conversation!

Blessing of Stillness

Stillness is a grace, coming not because we earned or deserve it, but simply as a gift, a pregnant pause, a blessed openness, a beckoning expanse. Whatever stillness grows in you, may it bless you with joy. Whatever stillness unlocks for you, may it bless you with wisdom. Wherever stillness takes you, may it lead to peace. In the stillness of this season, may we all gather what we will need for the struggles ahead, knowing that we wait together, we work together, and when the time comes, we celebrate together. Blessings of stillness to you, to yours, to all of us.

Closing Song