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Contemplative-Curious: What Happens on an 8-Day Meditation Retreat?

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Carrie Newcomer is a Quaker singer-songwriter. And there is a line from one of her songs that has lingered with me since I first heard it a few years ago. She laments—or maybe she *confesses*—that we’ve “**Been traveling faster than our souls can go.**” Can you relate? In our globalized, always-connected, Internet Age, I suspect that at some point most of us have found ourselves “traveling faster than our souls can go.”

Don’t get me wrong. I like to move fast, be efficient, and get things done. But maintaining a rapid pace without regular breaks for rest, renewal, and reconnection risks burnout. On one level, we know that. But there are many competing forces in our culture constantly trying to convince us that we must work hard, to buy ever more stuff, and always have the latest, newest version of everything. Combined with our human inclination to seek instant gratification, we can end up with a recipe—despite our best intentions—for “traveling faster than our souls can go.”

In contrast, when I consider what it might feel like to travel, so to speak, at “speed of soul,” I’m reminded of one of the main tenets of the three-year Spiritual Director training program I completed almost a decade ago. They used to say, “**We’re going to start slowly so that later we can slow down.**” This counter-cultural approach requires giving ourselves permission to experience the value in contemplation, spiritual practices, and reconnecting to who we really are.

This past week, I had the opportunity to experiment with slowing down on an 8-day Meditation Retreat in North Carolina. I attended a similar 8-day retreat with the same group in summer 2016. There's a lot to say about the experience, but don't worry, I'm not going to bore you with minutiae of my inner life. And some of you may already be quite clear that spending a week meditating is *not* on your bucket list. But **for those of you who are even a little bit, what I like to call, “contemplative-curious” it may be helpful to lift the veil about what is required to survive and thrive on a meditation retreat.**

By far the most common question I have received over the years in regard to long retreats is, **“Do you really just sit on a meditation cushion all day?!”** The answer is: *not quite*. For the data-driven among us, there were four hours of formal sitting practice each day, three hours of moving meditation, and three hours of other related activities—such as guided meditation, social meditation, and teaching sessions. In total, that is ten hours of structured contemplative activity, but that leaves another fourteen hours in the day, including at least an hourlong break after each meal, and more than enough time for eight or more hours of sleep.

That schedule may sound like *heaven* to some of you—and to others it may sound like a *contemplative hellscape*. Either way, I'll let you in on the “open secret” about a meditation retreat schedule. I can't speak for all retreats, but the fairly widespread practice is that **no single sitting meditation session is lasts longer than 45 minutes**. Now, that may still seem like way too long to some of you—and if so, fair enough.

But here's the good news for those of you who are potentially interested in going deeper in your meditation practice: **if you have built up the capacity to meditate for 45 minutes, then you already have the primary building block used in constructing the schedule of a long retreat**—whether it is one day, three days, three weeks, or longer. For example, on the retreat I just returned from, the four hours of formal sitting practice is divided into 30-45 minute chunks—interspersed with 30-45 minutes of moving meditation and longer breaks for meals. Along these lines, I was glad to hear that on Wednesday nine of you attended our new Wednesday midday meditation group, which includes 45 minutes of silent meditation. (I love talking about Buddhism. It's important to study and discuss the tradition; indeed that's what I'm doing right now. But to make progress, *practicing* meditation is also vital.)

All that being said, I wouldn't recommend jumping straight from a 45 minutes/day practice to an 8-day retreat. Work your way up by adding a second 45 minute session at the end of the day—or attend one of the monthly, three-hour mini-retreats that Irene Glasse and I co-lead here at UUCF, or sign-up for a daylong retreat or weekend retreat. If you need some basic meditation instructions on how to get started, I recommend the resources on the Buddhist page of our website, frederickuu.org/Buddhism.

To widen our focus, I invite you to consider that **training *spiritually* for an experience like a meditation retreat isn't so “out there,” esoteric, and foreign as some might imagine. Rather, it is quite similar in many ways to training *physically* for a competition, or training *mentally* to complete a degree.** If you work your way up incrementally, you can often build a surprisingly high capacity over a relatively short period of time.

There are a lot of related stories I could tell you about my own successes and failures in this regard, and I encourage you to think of parallels in your own life. *Physically*, I could tell you about how I have *successfully* followed incremental training programs to complete both a half-marathon and a Sprint Triathlon. From the other direction, I could tell you about my repeated *failures* to complete a similar training program for an Olympic-distance Triathlon. Both times, approximately halfway through the four-month regimen, the training became too much of a time commitment for that time in my life.

Or *intellectually*, I could tell you about the major ah-ha moment I had in *successfully* completing my doctoral dissertation. One day I **realized that I didn't have to approach this requirement as the (at least to me) imposing task of writing a 200-page paper.** Instead, I could think of it as writing five thematically linked 30-page chapters, then adding an introduction and conclusion. That bite-sized approach made all the difference for me. But, again, from the other direction I could tell you about how I have, to date, *failed* to carve out the time to publish my dissertation as a book.

Overall, each of us always has the opportunity to discern what area(s) we might be called (and able) to focus on in this season of our life. What is possible to do with this mind, body, and spirit that we each have? Along those lines, let me tell you a little more about why I felt drawn to attend a second 8-day meditation retreat last week, why I may attend a two-week retreat this

summer, and why I have been taking the time since June to co-lead the monthly mini-retreats here at UUCF.

For whatever confluence of reasons, I have always been interested in learning about other people's experiences of spiritual growth. One of the books I read this past week that explores just that is Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy by Evan Thompson (Columbia University Press, 2015). But over the years I have not been satisfied to stop with learning *secondhand* about other people's reports about their (alleged) spiritual experiences. I am interested in the ways that **meditation helps me explore what I can confirm in my own *firsthand* experience about some of the "core existential questions" of being human:** "Who am I? What is the self? How is it related to being conscious?" (xiv)

Indeed, one of the most interesting religion scholars alive today, Jeffrey Kripal of Rice University, has traced the ways that the history of religions can be fruitfully viewed as the "history of *consciousness*"—starting with the truly remarkable fact that any of us even finds ourselves here and self-aware at all, on this fragile blue marble we call Earth amidst more than two trillion galaxies and a continually evolving 13.7-billion-year-old universe story. (Secret Body, 409). And as Kripal seek to extrapolate further, based on all that we humans have discovered and experienced both historically and now in the twenty-first century, he invites us to consider that, "**Consciousness as such is the new sacred**" (430).

There's a lot to unpack about what Kripal means, and for now I will share just a little more about what a focus on *consciousness* can yield. As Thompson's book title, *Being, Waking, Dreaming* alludes to, one reason I am grateful that Dani was willing to share earlier during the Spoken Meditation about her experience with her dreams is that **both dreamwork and meditation are two (among many) spiritual practices for exploring the existential questions of self and consciousness.**

Buddhism challenges us to consider the ways that our sense of "self" is more of an "**experiential process that is subject to constant change**" than a "thing or an entity" (xxxix). Two of the traditional terms for this perspective are "impermanence" and "no-self."

To say more about what I mean, I invite you on a brief journey through some of our common human states of consciousness. (Stick with me, and I think you may be interested where

we end up.) If we pay increasingly close attention to the subtleties of our ever-shifting experience, the following are a few of many trends we can begin to notice about our sense of “self”:

- First, when was the last time you were fully engaged with an activity? As we enter into the “*flow*,” we can begin to notice the ways our “bodily sense of self recedes from our experience.”
- Next, think about the last time you were really *bored*. When we are not engaged with an activity, our mind tends to wander, and a “mentally-imagined self of the past or future” becomes predominant.
- Now, think about each time you begin to feel tired and *sleepy*: “the sense of self also slackens. Images float by, and our awareness becomes progressively absorbed in them” (xxxix).
- Here’s one more: if you become *aware that you are dreaming* without waking up—and quite a few of you in this room have likely experienced a lucid dream in which you are no longer simply the “I” of the dream ego (experiencing the dream directly), but are also “*witnessing* the dream state.” (There are scientific sleep studies of lucid dreams; it’s definitely a thing.)

Having traced how our sense of “self” shifts in different ways when we are engaged, daydreaming, sleeping, and lucid dreaming, we can come full circle to meditation, because **an early threshold in practicing meditating is cultivating the capacity to *witness* our waking self**. Instead of being caught up in our experience, we can increasingly *witness* ourselves “thinking,” “feeling,” “breathing,” etc. We can begin to see that we don’t have to always believe our thoughts (xxxii).

And as we begin to take a step back, we can reflect on the ways that our various states of consciousness *overlap* at various points. Witnessing our waking self is not so simple, for example, as being in either one state of consciousness or another—being asleep or awake. The two clearest examples are: (a) If your mind is wandering in a daydream, there is a sense in which you are *dreaming* in the waking state and (b) If you are having a lucid dream, there is a sense in which you are *awake* within the dream state (11). One reason why these distinctions are significant is that according to parts of the classical wisdom traditions, **there are significant parallels between the *physical* experience of waking up from a dream (as we do each day)**

and the *spiritual* experience of being awake and then “waking up” into Enlightenment (which only a small percentage of people experience).

There is, however a lot of confusion around what Enlightenment means. As many of you have heard me say before, “Buddha” is *not* the Buddha’s name. (Just like “Christ” isn’t Jesus’s last name—it’s a title meaning “Anointed One”—but that’s another sermon.) Within Buddhism, the historical founder was Siddhārtha Gautama (c. 480 - c. 400 BCE). Buddha is a *title* given to him meaning “Awakened One.” Relatedly, Enlightenment is *not* the best translation of the Pali word “Bodhi.” A better translation of what the Buddha meant is the word *Awakening*, a spiritual experience that is said to be quite similar to our everyday experience of waking up from a dream—except that we’re “waking up” further from our everyday waking state (vii). If you think back to the old-school SAT analogy questions, the claim being made is that dreaming:waking::waking:Awakening, as in Enlightenment. But at this point, we’re above my pay grade, so I will conclude that if you do feel inclined to explore meditation further, I encourage you to take the leap and explore one of the various paths for going deeper on the journey of spiritual growth.