

Hack Your Life
The Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson
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I've been reading self-help books, and thinking about such things, recently.

People who are at ease, people whose work is fine, whose marriage is dandy, who are happy and well-adjusted, don't read self-help books. They don't need them.

But for the rest of us: we have a problem in our life, and we might turn to our friends, we might turn to our family, we might turn to the internet - risky, look out, quality not assured (though that's true with friends and family, too, isn't it?) and, if we happen to be a person who likes to learn about things, who likes to research and read and find stuff out, if we happen to be this kind of person, well, then we might go to the library, or to the Kindle store, and start reading self-help books. Unitarian Universalists, generally speaking, like to read. We like to find things out. We like to improve our lives and the world. We seek the truth in freedom. We seek self-discovery.

Unitarian Universalist ministers are this, on steroids. Like I said, I've been reading a lot of self-help books recently. And god, it's depressing.

If only I had known that about myself I could have avoided so much trouble, I think.
Now I see why I keep repeating that pattern.
You read the section about that particular personality type,
and you recognize every single word as true of yourself,
and realize: I'm not that special.
Of course, there's sometimes good news:
Tips and advice to move forward.
Wisdom about self-understanding that can help you avoid repeating the same old habits.
We see that to move forward in our life we have to do that thing,
whatever that thing is,
that we've known we had to do, but we didn't want to.

Five pieces of candy? Do I have to?
If you want dessert, you have to eat your candy.
You don't get the spinach if you don't eat your candy.
Got to build healthy habits.

Self-help is a different field than it used to be.
Clichés and old advice is mostly out.
Data and scientifically grounded research is in.
Personal anecdotes are passé.
Neurobiology is the rage.

Like the 11 resolutions for a better you,
the advice is always footnoted with this study and that study:
I took out a lot of the references when I read it,
but if you look up those 11 you'll find the citations to this university study and that one.
Of course, you can find a study to find proof of almost anything you want to claim,
but if you find good sources,

you'll find them referencing meta-studies, peer-reviewed journals,
longitudinal analyses.

And this is the promise of the new sciences,
understanding the human brain,
that as we know more and more about ourselves,
we will be able to make our life better, to be happier, to
overcome bad habits,
to become the kind of person we want to be by shaping
our brains;
in short, we will be able to hack our life.

In some cases, the new science teaches us things we
didn't know before.
But often - and I love this - it confirms old religious and
philosophical wisdom,
things we've known and taught for thousands of years,
but we forget, on accident or on purpose.
Both ancient religious teaching and modern neurobiology
and psychology
have helpful things to say about how we can in fact live
the life we want to live,
how we can create and sustain habits that will give us
more meaning and joy,
and when those ancient teachings and modern
understandings overlap,
well, it seems to me there's something worth paying
attention too.
So I'm not going to give you 11 resolutions, you've
already got them.
But I want to spend a moment talking about how to hack
your life,
things I've learned though my own experience and my
reading of sources old and new;

something about body, something about mind, and something about spirit.

So three things:

Move your body.

Know Thyself.

Rest in the grace of the world.

Let me say though that in this tri-part division, I don't want to give the impression

that body, mind, and spirit are separate.

Indeed, this is what the ancient and modern authorities agree on more than anything:

that all the parts of ourselves are connected;

that your mind and spirit includes your body, that your body practice feeds your soul,

that habits of renewal in the religious life produce stronger minds and healthier bodies —

that all these are deeply connected.

So keep that in mind.

Body. Move your body.

Here's rule one.

Don't exercise to get thin.

Don't do it.

It won't work, at least not over the long term.

When I started running 18 months ago, I didn't do it to lose weight.

I've dropped 50 pounds since then, but I didn't do it for that.

I did it to save my soul and calm my mind.

To get out of the chair and off the couch and breathe the air,

and have 30 minutes to clear my head.

The ancient spiritual teaching is that the body is a gift,

something holy and lovely; this is the ancient understanding:

the body is a gift.

The ancients moved, they walked, they played, they worked.

Chop wood. Tend the garden. Dance the circle.

Some spiritual traditions, unfortunately, have distorted this, said the body is unworthy, sinful and to be feared.

But we stand in a tradition that celebrates the body as a gift,

all bodies, young and old, all shapes and with every opportunity and every limitation.

And bodies are meant to move, to enjoy the world, to dance and play and move.

Don't move your body because it's going to get you somewhere,

move it because bodies love to move.

Yes, even yours.

Sometimes we forget, but that's what they're for.

The modern understanding of science is the same: exercise produces chemicals and hormones that make you happier, calmer, more connected to yourself and the world, that reduce stress and produce joy.

Maybe not on day one.

The first time I tried to run, I just about collapsed.

But about week three, I got my first runner's high.

And wow. I've never looked back since then, even though I don't get that every time.

You have to find the type of movement that works for you.

Everyone's body is different, and wants to move in different ways.

Stick with it. It should, it will, when you get to the right place,

make you feel more alive, more at peace, more joyful.

Do it for yourself, and not for someone else;
do it because your body is a gift - not a burden -
do it because it'll work.

Mind. Know Thyself.

Those were the words over the entrance to the temple of
Delphi,

in ancient Greece;

it's the sum of the wisdom of Buddhist and Taoism, too:
to know your own nature, to know your own mind.

As Socrates so famously said, this, and only this, is
wisdom.

To know thyself.

So much of the self-help literature, like so much of
religious thought,

is about trying to make you someone different -

this is the way to live, this is the way to be in the world;
and all the other ways are to be avoided.

This, they say, is what health looks like.

But that's nonsense.

There's no one model of health, no one way to be happy,
no one best life, best marriage, best job, best parent.

Everyone is different.

The best of the modern self-help literature is about
something else:

about understanding yourself.

Your type.

Perhaps it is the anagram, a typology of nine different
ways of being in the world,
each with it's own variations.

You figure out which type is most you - and only you can
type yourself -

and it gives you some clues about how to move towards
a more healthy version of you -

not a version of someone else; of yourself.

Same goes for the Myers-Briggs typology, which is a similar kind of thing.

Even more scientifically grounded than these, two, though, are approaches like attachment theory - grounded in neurobiology and how the human infant brain adapts to its environment.

I've found attachment theory a profound way of thinking some of us have learned to attach to others with relative security,

while others of us have learned to be anxious about our attachments - to want always to be closer - and others have learned to be avoidant - we want space, don't get too close.

And so there isn't one piece of advice for all people - you figure out your attachment style, and your partner's, if you have one,

and then you can get some clues -

but the work isn't squeezing yourself into template, it's putting tools in your toolbox, it's coming to know yourself better and better,

to anticipate your reactions, to be clear about your needs, to be most authentically yourself,

and to chart your own journey to more health and happiness,

because not only is everyone's journey their own, so is everyone's destination.

When you know yourself, you will know your path, and have the wisdom to take it

as you become, more and more, the person that you were most meant to be.

This is not easy. Can I be clear: this is not easy.

But the journey to know yourself is the most powerful and fruitful journey you'll ever make.

Spirit. Rest in the grace of the world.

I began this month by quoting those words of Wendell Berry;
which the choir sang today. Beautiful.
When despair for the world grows in me
I go a lie down in the grass
feel the day-blind stars above me,
and rest in the grace of the world.
And we are renewed.
Renewed not by doing something -
not by moving our body, or knowing ourselves,
or any of the thousands of other tips and resolutions and
pieces of advice.
Renewed by the grace of the world,
something larger than ourselves,
something we are part of but do not in the least control
or create.
Breathe in peace. Breathe out love.
Just breathe.
Just breathe and rest in the grace of the world.
"See how beautiful
the world is
with its only wish
that you belong."

Body. Mind. Spirit.
They are connected.
When you move your body in the way that your body
wants to move,
and you remember that your body is a gift,
then you will feel more and more connected to yourself
and the world.
When you know yourself, who you are, you travel your
own journey,
get in touch with your own story,
and you know yourself as a child of the universe, as star
dust animated by the spirit love,

which is what each of us is, but all in our own way;
when you rest in the grace of the world,
you have a chance, a chance to remember
that life is not a project, it is a gift.
Your body, your mind, your spirit.

What neuroscience teaches, the ancient prophets have
always known:

those who see life as a gift, who practice the habits of
gratitude,
who say, each morning, thank you, each night, thank
you, each bite, thank you,
each breath, thank you,
those who live with thanksgiving are happier, healthier,
more resilient,
they can renew their lives,
for they see all that is beautiful, and all that is possible.
The ironic and powerful truth of the new self-help,
the self-help based on science,
is that it isn't about self-help at all,
it isn't really about hacking your life;
it's about self-awareness.
It's about living your life.

Yours.

Fully, with gratitude for all that is our life,
all of it,
with knowledge of ourselves and the way we enter in the
world,
our own needs, fears, passions, and pathways,
with joy in our own body, finding our own ways to feel
good and alive.

We're not dough, we don't need cookie cutters.
Your journey of renewal - to come alive to your body,
your mind, your spirit -
is your own journey.

And this is good news. But it's harder, too.
When you want to figure out how to live your best life,
you can't look to someone else -
you have to look into your own heart.
There are no easy answers, because the answers are
yours.
There are some tips, some ideas, that folks who are like
you have discovered,
we are not without guides, mentors, and wisdom to learn
from.
But you need to seek out that wisdom that resonates for
you,
that speaks to you most clearly. Know yourself and trust
your deepest heart and clearest mind.
And know that you, no matter what, have a place in the
universe,
in the grace of the world.

I invite you thus to the life of renewal.
Come to this life from a place of gratefulness, for all that
is.
Your body is a gift, live in it with joy.
Your mind is a gift, come to know it with wisdom.
And the world, and the spirit of love and life, is given
freely to each and all,
to you,
so breathe, and rest in this grace, and be free.
You don't need another self-help book — and neither do
I.
You are loved as you are.
As you are.
Your journey is beloved, and you can make the journey.
Your life, all life is a gift, freely offered.
and we are called, with this gift, to live our own best life,
our own,
and you are loved as you are,

and when you know that, feel that, sing that,
then your journey begins again.
From there we turn to build the common good,
which is part of our journey too, for we are not for
ourselves alone,
but for each other.
Begin in gratitude, journey in love, live in joy, end in
grace, and let us sing.
For all that is our life, we sing our praise, and our thanks.
Let us sing.