

Lever, Wheel & Axle, Pulley, Screw, Wedge, Inclined Plane....These are the six simple machines and they were labelled as such at the time of the Renaissance.

Ok...time for physics class....A simple machine is a mechanical device that changes the direction or magnitude of a force. Machines do work. The amount of work done by a machine is defined as the product of the force that machine applies to an object multiplied by the distance through which that force is applied.

As an example, our bodies are machines of sorts. I could exert a force on this pulpit and slide it across the floor to a spot over there somewhere. The work done by my body on the pulpit is equal to the force I applied by my arms multiplied by the distance I moved the pulpit. That is work: force x distance. (Neglecting friction!)

The work done by a machine...the force applied by the machine multiplied by the distance the machine had to move...must equal the work done on the object being moved...force applied to the object multiplied by the distance the object moved.

Take a simple lever, when I put the pivot in the middle and push down with a certain force through a certain distance, the object, whose weight is equal to the force I apply, moves up by that same distance. The distances are the same and the force I exert is equal to the weight of the object. Work done by me equals work done on the object.

But anyone who has been on a playground seesaw knows that the farther you go away from the pivot, the less force you need to apply to an object to get it to move. The tradeoff is that you must apply that force through a greater distance to get the object to move even a little bit. Even in this case however, the work done by you and the work done on the object are equal.

...ok...physics class is over.

So let's talk about each of the simple machines and their uses with the intention of uncovering its spiritual equivalent. So after today you'll have the six spiritual machines that can be used to change the direction or magnitude of your spirit force.

Think about a bicycle that has several gears. A bicycle actually has a lot of things going on in it regarding simple machines. Taken together it is a compound machine; but let's just think about those gears on the rear axle of the bike. There are usually five gears of differing diameters on the rear axle. When the chain is on the largest gear, it is easiest to pedal but for all that pedaling you don't go too fast. When the chain is on the smallest gear, it can be difficult to pedal but you can go far and fast. Also, have you noticed that when the wheels are not turning, it's impossible to maintain your balance on the bicycle, and after going through a low-speed wobbly phase, you eventually reach a comfortable harmonious balance at steady state.

For this reason, I equate the wheel & axle with the spiritual machines of balance, harmony and equanimity. Equanimity is even-temperedness even when faced with difficulties. For example, we've all seen great athletes who seem to be unphased by high pressure situations. They remain cool as chaos swirls around them. They say that in the height of the confusion, they relax and the game actually slows down for them. This is equanimity. They are harmonious with their surroundings – balanced.

At times, does your life ever feel as if it is a swirling chaotic storm? Everybody experiences it. We have jobs, we're raising children, we're experiencing a pandemic, we're in a chaotic political climate, etc. We often say that we're juggling many things. I try not to look at it that way. Instead of juggling all these things, I try to balance one thing – my life. All these disparate things are incorporated into this singular thing called my life that I just hold, not juggle. (And what I can't hold I put down.) And I try to hold it with balance, harmony and equanimity.

This is not easy and I fail at this often. This is my goal however – to hold my life with balance, harmony and equanimity.

Let's look at the inclined plane. Instead of trying to climb a 10-foot wall, simply stroll along a series of inclined planes – switchbacks. It might take longer to get to the top, but usually you can get there safely without pulling a muscle or overexerting yourself.

I am a runner and although I don't think of running as being too meditative, I've noticed something. On the biggest hills that have switchbacks, I find it easiest to focus on the

path...get into a zone...back and forth... back and forth...back and forth...back and forth...and before I know it....I'm at the top.

Because I've noticed this repeatedly, I believe that the switchbacks...nothing more than a series of inclined planes, are conducive to mindfulness and concentration...running them is a form of meditation. All I think about is my next step, all I really hear is my own breathing. It's a bit analogous to walking a labyrinth with all the turning. So, another one of my six spiritual machines could be labeled mindfulness – being at one with the moment. There is no grand “aha” moment with mindfulness and it can be a difficult machine to grasp at times, but when you do, all the anxiety, worry and problems of the day seem to peel away and seem irrelevant.

Of the six simple machines, the wedge is the one associated with the most negative connotations. It is associated with dividing...usually in a negative way.... “He inserted a wedge into the group.” “It's a wedge issue”....need I mention the childhood prank of “getting a wedgie”....The wedge is a tool we generally use to either hold things in place (as in a common doorstep), raise things or split things apart. A wedge transfers a force from its short edge to its side edges. It is perhaps best exemplified in the destructive case of splitting wood....you bring an ax, a wedge, down into the middle of a piece of wood and the wood splits – sometimes with smaller pieces of wood flying about spectacularly.

When I was thinking about the spiritual translation of the wedge, and its potentially destructive capabilities, the first thing that popped into my head was the Hindu god Shiva...known as the destroyer. In Hinduism, Shiva is known as one of the three principal gods of the Trimurti with the other two gods being Brahma and Vishnu. Although those foreign to Hinduism often regard Shiva with negative connotations when compared with Brahma, the creator, and Vishnu, the preserver, those within Hinduism do not see it this way. Shiva's destructiveness sets the stage for new creation, new growth to follow. Shiva is also known as the transformer.

Sticking with Hinduism, I associate the wedge with spiritual ideas around rebirth and re-creation through decisive action. This way of action in Hinduism is called Karma Yoga. Yet it is decisive action in such a way that you aren't attached to the fruits of your actions. Again, this is easier said than done but you should try not to let fear of failure get in the way. You don't tie your self-worth to the outcome of the act. You simply act when action is necessary. It's doing your best.

A screw converts a rotational force to a linear force. It is essentially an inclined plane wrapped around a cylinder. Although it can be used in a variety of ways, it is most commonly used as a fastener that joins and binds different things together.

Because of this, the screw reminds me of interconnectedness and community...but most strongly it reminds me of commitment...that we can be stronger when we are bound and committed to each other no matter what. Commitment doesn't just happen however, it can take hard work to join things together and to keep things together. Often several screws are needed to secure the community, to prevent it from falling all apart. One screw can be our 7 UU principals; another can be our mission and vision; another can be our covenants that we make with each other.

Somebody very clever must have invented the pulley. And because I was continually confounded by the complex pulley systems that could be rigged up in physics class, I was continually reminded of my lack of perception and intellectual ability.

For this reason, for me, the pulley spiritually points to perception and wisdom. In a way, perception and wisdom can be thought of as the same thing. The best definition I've heard of wisdom is "seeing things as they are" as opposed to ignorance which is "not seeing things as they are" or simply "not seeing" at all." I believe true wisdom, the highest form of wisdom, comes with the realization that your perception, your way of seeing, and hence your wisdom, is only partial. At any given time, you see things only from a particular point of view. True wisdom comes with the rejoinders "I may not be correct" ... "am I sure?" ... "is what I see true for all observers?" True wisdom is bound up in humility.

Last but not least is the lever. A lever is a bar that is used to lift weights about a pivot point...like a common playground seesaw. The lever generally connotes strength. Although we could use it in a negative way, as in the case of blackmail or extortion, we often say we want to leverage our strength, in a positive way, to get something else that we want or don't yet possess.

I associate the lever with the spiritual discipline of prayer. Many UUs might think of prayer in a negative way; think of it as a shopping list that we give to God. "God, could you pick me up a little more x,y and z please?"

Most people with active prayer lives don't think of it that way at all. I think of prayer in terms of leverage, focus and intention. How can I leverage and extend my strength, my force, my gifts into the world? How can I best do that? Today, may I truly see my

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inherent worth and dignity and may I begin to truly see the inherent worth and dignity in others as well. May I leverage my sense of discipline and resolve to develop in me characteristics and qualities I fail to possess yet seek to develop. May all who are suffering find comfort and may I leverage my strength and soul force to actively relieve suffering, in some small way, and help create the world I can only envision.

To me, that is prayer: Focus, intention, leverage.

These are my six spiritual machines...and they can be difficult to use at times. Although I typically apply their usefulness with mixed results, maybe someday, with continued practice, I'll learn how to use them well.

I would encourage you to reflect on what works in your life. What would be your six spiritual machines? I would love to hear how they shape you, how they inform your being and what they call upon you to do in your life.