

HOLDING IT ALL TOGETHER – MAPS AND JOURNEYS

If we want to nurture the mind, we add things. If we want to nurture the spirit, we subtract.

1. SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION

What is the difference between Spirituality and Religion? Are they separate, as some people think? Or are they bonded and a part of each other?

Life experience teaches us that they are different and yet connected, one nurturing the other. The word “spiritual” describes our natural state. We are not human beings in a spiritual journey but spiritual beings on a human journey, and our challenge is to fully develop our human potential. What we call our “spirituality” comes from our awareness of the sacred in our lives. What we call “religion” has come out of this awareness. Spiritual awareness is usually contained in some kind of context. For some people that context is a set of religious beliefs that give us a code of conduct that will help us identify and develop our spirituality. For others, the context may be an affinity with nature, with animals, with large bodies of water like seas or lakes that often provide a metaphor for our spirituality. For others it is working with people, listening to music, being with children. Sometimes the context is all of these.

Whatever brings you to a state of spiritual awareness, will be something that takes you beyond your ego state, to a wider and deeper place.

My journey is influenced significantly by religion. My favourite metaphor is that religion is the map and spirituality is the journey. When we are young, our religious tradition gives us a map for our faith journey. The map is crisp, new and it carries clear instruction. But as I journey, I start making my own notes on this map. Maybe there is a well here that has dried up; but over there I’ve found a spring of fresh water that isn’t on the map. Perhaps too, I’ve found a short cut through a rather thorny area. On the map there is a path going around a mountain but I prefer to go

over the mountain. That might be hard work but there are magnificent views that I would not get otherwise. Eventually, I have personal notes written all over my map, and it is now uniquely my own. The important thing is that we do make the map our own as we journey, because we are all different. And it would be error to think that the map is the journey, This is what we could call fundamentalism, when we sit on the road, worshipping the map.

Jesuit retreat director Monty Williams says that theology comes out of life experience, and not the other way around. We could call that a self-evident truth. Theology must all come from human understanding of the sacred in our lives. It is in the context of human experience that we unwrap the sacred in ourselves, and our awareness changes, deepens, as we get older. There is a parallel here - as our knowledge of ourselves deepens, so does our spiritual awareness. We tend to move about on the surface of life when we are young. We are like flies walking on the surface of the stream. In maturity, we realize that there is much more going on than we once thought. We realize that we are a part of a great system of connections – like threads in a tapestry. Separation is an illusion. We ask a question. The answer pops up. We have a need. It is met. We experience remarkable coincidence in our lives, to the extent that we want to call it “God-incidence” and all the time we are being called to a larger place. At this stage we also see the deeper truths of religious teachings. Awareness of the Sacred comes out of life experience and like life experience, it has many levels of understanding, many layers of meaning.

In mature faith, we realize that Jesus’ teachings are not just pious exhortations. In the Gospels he is telling us how the universe actually works. “Give and it shall be given unto you.” That is a natural law. Dr Deepak Chopra says that when we give to others, we create a vacuum and more will flow into that space. We do not make ourselves poor by giving to others. We make ourselves poor by not giving. Likewise, let us consider all Jesus’ teachings about dying to self. “He who loves his life will lose it.” “Take up your cross and follow me.” “Except a grain of wheat die it will remain a single grain.” When we are young, we see those sayings as messages of doom and gloom. But those teachings are not for the young who need to be

developing a healthy ego. Jesus is talking about the mature stage of faith where we need to break out of the small prison of self and move into a larger place. This is well described by an anonymous 15th C monk who wrote: Find thyself; tis half the path to God, and then lose thyself and the rest of the way is trod.

We can all look back on our lives and see times when we were very aware of the Sacred in us and around us. There were special grace-filled moments, some big, some small, when we knew we were held by a loving Presence.

Spirituality is not a static state. It's about movement. We can use the metaphors of growth or journey or talk about unwrapping the truth in our lives. It is a slow but constant process of transformation and it is what we are born for.

The movement is one of love.

The word 'love' can be seen as a bit of a cliché even in a religious context, but believe me, it is the stuff of spiritual journey. Love is the impetus for journey. Fear is the inhibitor. Love – Fear. How do those operate in my life? I'm made a list of the effects that I recognize in my life.

Love always calls us to a larger place.

Fear always tries to draw us back to a narrow place.

Love has a quiet soft voice.

Fear has a loud strident voice.

Love is compassionate.

Fear is judgemental.

Love is unitive.

Fear is divisive.

Love is a slow feeling, a movement of the heart.

Fear comes quickly as strident thought.

Love opens me up like a flower.

Fear closes me down.

Love is my spiritual truth.

Fear belongs to my animal instinct for survival.

We know the words from scripture: God is love and those who live in love, live in God and God lives in them. We tend to think: oh yes, but this is pious talk. It's not that simple. Well, actually, it is that simple. We can feel a little cautious about the word "love" because it is so loosely used, but if we think of it as "hesed" the Hebrew word for "loving kindness" we come home to it." God is loving kindness and those who live in loving kindness, live in God and God lives in them." When we give or receive loving kindness we move into a larger place. We feel good about ourselves. Because we come home to who we really are. Loving kindness is our true nature.

2. THE BLESSING IN THE SHADOW.

We've talked about spiritual awareness, the maturing process where our understanding of the sacred grows with our life experience. In this session, we are going to look at the blessing in the shadow.

Almost as soon as we're born, we are socialized, taught the difference between right and wrong. As small children we are made to understand that some actions are good and some actions are bad. This teaching usually comes from our parent's awareness of what is good for society. There are rules that apply to all peoples, and there are rules that are cultural, applying to particular groups of people. But usually there is in the child's thinking, a distinct division between good and evil. Adults reinforce force this. "If you're good you can watch a movie." "Have you been good at school today?" The child quickly learns that it is socially desirable to be good. Evil belongs elsewhere.

At an early stage of faith, we make God in our image. We know that God is “good” so there must be a second power responsible for evil – the devil. This isn’t just in Christian thinking. It’s a part of this stage of development in all religions. And for people who don’t have any religion, the tendency is to see evil out there in other people - nations or political groups or even religions.

Meanwhile, there is something else going on in us. There is a voice of wisdom in us. It is a gentle voice and it has a gentle touch, healing division and bringing us to the truth of wholeness. We become aware that our perception of good and evil is changing slightly. They are not as clear cut as they once were. Bright sunlight is never without shadows. The dark gives way to light. There are times when it seems that darkness exists to serve the light. These thoughts may make us Christians feel uncomfortable, especially when we see them in Scripture.

In the Old Testament we look at the Genesis story of the fall. The knowledge of good and the knowledge of evil are contained not in separate trees or separate fruits but in the one fruit. That is a powerful image. Then in the book of Job, we read about God making a pact with the devil. In the Gospels, we are told that the Holy Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert to be tempted by the Devil. Again, we have darkness serving the light.

At this stage of faith I journey into the deeper understanding of the word repentance which means re thinking. I take a deep breath and try to look clear-sightedly at my shadow. Jung was right. I need to own my shadow, for it serves the light. In my shadow is blessing. It contains the energy of transformation. It holds the seed of new growth.

People of faith sometimes ask the question: Why does God allow evil in the world?

It is a big question, but for me the mystery is held in love. We can probably understand it a little better if we try to imagine the opposite.

Picture a world that is perfect – no evil, no violence, no pain. Superficially the image is a delight until we realise that in perfection, there is no room for growth. Perfection means to make complete. Growth comes out of the tension of opposites.

Life comes out of this tension. It is how cells divide. It is how we are made, how we are born, how we mature. I know that if I had never experienced pain, I would be in a very shallow place, and without the gifts that come from pain – empathy, wisdom, compassion. I also know that anyone who is serious about their journey to a larger place will have to embrace what Christians call “the cross.” There comes a time for all of us when it seems that God grabs us by the ankles, turns us upside down and shakes us empty. Then, when we are empty, God fills us. Jeremiah knew this when he referred to God as the potter. We get reshaped. And the vessel that is emptied is then filled, .

What about our shadow? I refer to the messy part of our life, the part we don't want to own. Do we see it as an area of blessing? Sometimes it is hard to let go of the expectations of childhood. “Have you been a good boy? Have you been a good girl?” But the shadow is our growing space. It is the place where we meet our newness.

This recognition brings us back to the beauty of Lent, a time of repentance, or “rethinking” what we carry from childhood, and moving with it to a deeper place.

As part of this celebration, it would be appropriate to spend some time in gratitude for imperfection. If we reflect on something in ourselves that we consider to be a weakness, we will discover that it is also connected to a strength. Or to go back to those old Genesis images, the good and the bad are contained in the same fruit. They are on the same continuum. I can see my judgmental attitudes as evil. They cause me pain and frustration. But they are attached to a gift for discernment. I have strong maternal instincts. I think I'm naturally that way, and it is also part of my conditioning. But it means that I can be bossy and try to organize people. I have to live with these faults. If I could get rid of the shadow, I would also be rid of the light.

Look at your shadow. Do you have a quick temper? Congratulations. You are probably a high energy person with gifts of leadership. Do you consider yourself lazy? Then no doubt you are a very peaceful person with healing gifts. People like to be near you.

In this sharing time, look at your shadow and trace your weakness to its strength. You may wish to make a note of the strengths that are rooted in your

shadow.

The blessing of the shadow is well expressed in This Hindu concept:

The beautiful, fragrant lotus flower blooms in the light because it is firmly rooted in dark mud. If the roots were to be pulled out of the mud, the plant would die.

Or in the words of poet Leonard Cohen:

Ring the bells that still can ring.

Forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything.

That's how the light gets in.

Sharing. Discuss strength and shadow as two aspects of the one gift.

3. FEEDING THE HEART

We may be serious about our spiritual journey but we have busy lives. Our time is taken up by a thousand tasks, a thousand demanding voices. Where do we find the space to nurture ourselves?

I've called this session "Feeding the Heart" or "Feeding the Soul" to make some distinction between it and information-based learning. The world is full of information. We are battered by it every day and while that is not bad in itself, it does get in the way of reflective self-knowledge. It is difficult to nurture ourselves without time spent in regular reflection. By reflective self-knowledge I don't mean "religious" or pious activity. Often that is not about reflection at all, but about adherence to law and outer forms of religion. Reflective self-knowledge is about taking time out to know ourselves and listen to the voice of guidance within us. It's what Jesus did when he left the crowds and went into the mountains to pray.

Prayer is what feeds the sacred space within us. But how do we define prayer?

Prayer is not about formulae. It's not even about words although words can be

its expression. It's about the heart, about being in love with life. Prayer is what nourishes our sacred space.

1. What Fills Us?

We can start by identifying what fills us. That depends on who we are. Are you the sort of person who feels nurtured by walks in the bush or on the beach? Do you feel most at home with yourself sitting in the garden with a glass of wine. Do you like listening to music? Do you find nourishment reading poetry? Are you a jogger? Or a swimmer? Do you wake up at night with a stillness and awareness that you don't usually have during the day?

When I ask what fills you, I don't mean entertainment. One woman said she found fulfilment in her grandchildren, but then added that while she enjoyed being with them, she was exhausted afterwards. I'm talking about times when you are essentially alone and feeling comfortable with your aloneness.

What fills me? In my tradition am fed by daily Mass. Terry and I extend this by going three quarters of an hour early to have a time of silent reflection before mass. Our schedule allows us to do that. Other things that fill me up are working in a garden, observing animals and birds, sitting on the sea in a dinghy, fishing. What works for you?

2. Awareness

Awareness happens in the present moment and it is the senses that feed the heart. When we are alone and relaxed, we can be aware of tactile sense, what we are feeling. Our breath is a life gift that we take for granted. Feel the air moving in and out of your lungs and be aware of the miracle of your body. We are told that there are more cells in the human body than stars and planets in the universe. I don't know who did the counting, but that's impressive. Contemplate the universe within you. Focus on your hands and feet and how they are resting. Consciously bless them for all for all that they do for you. From feeling, we can go to sight. See beyond seeing. Look minutely at things you may not usually

notice. At this time of reflection, you can if you like, pretend that you will go blind in ten minutes and you have those ten minutes to remember every detail of your immediate environment. The intensity of your focus will hold you in the present moment. You can try listening beyond your normal range of hearing. Or try to identify the smells that are in the air you breathe. All of these are exercises in awareness.

In Buddhism and Hinduism, there is much emphasis on awareness as the key to spiritual journey. Jesus made the same emphasis, only the word that comes to us from the Aramaic and Greek is “Wakefulness”. How often did he make statement like, “Be awake! The Kingdom is at hand.” Or “Be awake. The bridegroom is coming.” He was telling people to be in the present moment, to be aware of what was happening within them and around them. To unwrap the sacred or “The Kingdom of Heaven.”

3. Listening to Oneself.

When we take time out for awareness, that is, when we use our senses to rest in the present moment, we notice the language of the heart. There is something in us that opens up like a flower when we are in a situation that nurtures us. The same body movement happens in reverse when something is not right for us. Something inside us closes. It is a simple yes or no and it is very finely tuned. This inner movement doesn't pay too much heed to social notions of what is desirable or undesirable. Nor does it necessarily move the same way in every like situation. It will be true for you at the moment, and you will know it's truth because it comes not from fear but from the gentleness of love.

4. Listening to Others.

In the Jewish tradition it has been said that we see and hear what we are meant to see and hear. In this age of noise, I'd prefer to put it this way: we notice what we are meant to notice. That hungry heart, will reach out and grab some truth that it was meant to see and hear, and will be grateful. Often some new

realization comes from someone else at the very moment we hear it. We have the inner response, “Yes! That’s it!” Or sometimes, when we have self doubt, we get affirmation – not just once but several times. Eventually, we get the feeling that we are indeed in Life School and we are being given everything we need for spiritual growth as long as we are able to receive it. (Example of teacher in staff room.) You too will have had experiences like this, and the more you are aware of them, the more they will happen. But we do need to be in that receptive state.

5. Relationships that support us.

At any stage of our journey we have fellow pilgrims who share the path. We value these people. We share meaningful conversations with them. We feel at home in their company. Some have been fellow pilgrims for many years; others are with us for just a short time. Whatever, they nourish us and we them. There is a mutual giving that makes us aware that life is made up of connections. The more we appreciate this, the more we realize that we experience God in each other. Let us take a quiet moment to say thank you for the people in the past, who have been important to our growth.

6. Lectio Divina

I’ll say something here about lectio divina, a way of reading Scripture that feeds the heart in a satisfying way. We sit down to a passage of Scripture or an inspirational book, asking for guidance. We then read a passage, thoughtfully, slowly. Chances are that a particular sentence or phrase will speak to us. It will seem to rise off the page to connect with us. We take those words and repeat them, and carry them into our day. They are for us. As Jesus said, “Ask and it shall be given to you.” “Knock and the door shall be opened.”

4. THE PRAYER JOURNEY

Prayer is a long and beautiful road where the scenery changes at every turn, as does the means of travel. Remember when praying was all about our effort? It was largely concerned with personal discipline. We had special times of the day when we made offerings of reverence and praise in ritualistic language. We held requests out towards God in some distant place called Heaven. The kind of words we used, were very important. Was that really prayer? Yes, of course it was. Often we felt a response that we could not name, a sense of peace, the touch of some goodness that came to fill us and bring reassurance.

Yet there was more. As we travelled on the prayer journey, our awareness increased. God seemed much closer. Our Father in Heaven was also the loving companion on the road, with whom we could chat and share our innermost thoughts without concerning ourselves too much with formal language. This was quite a breakthrough for us, although, paradoxically, now that God was much closer, we were less able to describe God. Even Meister Eckhart's word "Isness" seemed too small. But we did try, using a variety of images, and prayer rose spontaneously out of moments in the day. There was a sharing of our experience that is usual in a good friendship, and we felt in that, unconditional acceptance. We were being guided on the journey by the Divine hand. We saw clear evidence of this. The path seemed much easier and lit with love.

Yet there was more. God the companion and guide came even closer so that the boundary between us was lost. We realised that the loving Presence was within us, and the voice of Guidance spoke from the depth of our being. Our first reaction to this could have been fear, perhaps even terror. The discovery of God within oneself may appear to contradict everything we've been taught. We may see it as worse than blasphemy. With that discovery comes the knowledge that we belong totally to God, and the responsibility involved is overwhelming.

But again there is more. Awareness expands and we can laugh at ourselves for putting exclusive interpretation on our discovery. The truth is that God is in everyone and everything and all creation is a manifestation of the Creator. The Love that made us for Itself, has always been a part of us. The great Light of the Universe has placed

in each of us, a small spark of its brightness. That core of Love and Light within us gets buried in the wrappings of incarnation but it so longs for its Source that it creates a hunger and thirst within us, and our response is this pilgrimage of prayer.

It seems to us now, at this stage of the journey, that the experience of prayer is all around us, wherever we have eyes to see or ears to hear. Prayer is not so much about our giving, as our receiving. It's found in listening into silence and stillness and being open to the abundance that is being poured into us. It is about sharing that abundance freely with others. It's about seeing past human error to the beauty of God in every soul. Prayer is something that is constantly happening within us, as St Paul discovered. It is our birthright.

St Paul lists the eight gifts of the Holy Spirit and while we recognize their beauty, we realize that most are gifts that have to be earned through effort – patience, kindness, self-control and so forth. But there is a ninth gift that comes in prayer, a gift that comes unearned and unbidden, that floods our being with delight and awe and sometimes brings tears of wonder. There is no name for this gift but in attempt to describe it, I call it “sweetness”. It is as though the hungry soul has tastebuds made for this gift and this alone. You will know it. It comes in unguarded moments when we encounter God in beauty, music, prayer, liturgy, the Sacraments, the miracles of birth and death. Our open hearts are filled to overflowing with something a psalmist described as “Sweeter than the honey from the honey-comb” and we know the truth of our relationship with the Divine.

The mechanics of day-to-day existence may not get easier. We are still faced with challenge, hardship, pain, difficult decisions, all the exams we expect of life school; but the way we view them changes. We also have a different understanding of the structural prayers of our early journey. Now worship is not something we “do.” We experience liturgy as an open door through which flows food and drink for our journey.

All we need do on the path of prayer, is to enlarge our capacity to receive. The rest is done for us.

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