

Spirituality for These Times
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Readings

From the Tao Te Ching, chapter 15 (translated by Stephen Mitchell)

The ancient masters were profound and subtle.
Their wisdom was unfathomable.
There is no way to describe it;
all we can describe is their appearance.

They were careful
as someone crossing an iced-over stream.
Alert as a warrior in enemy territory.
Courteous as a guest.
Fluid as melting ice.
Shapable as a block of wood.
Receptive as a valley.
Clear as a glass of water.

Do you have the patience to wait
till your mud settles and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving
till the right action arises by itself?

The master doesn't seek fulfillment.
Not seeking, not expecting,
she is present, and can welcome all things.

from a recent post by Fr. Richard Rohr
director of the Center for Action and Contemplation

I recommend for your spiritual practice for the next four months that you impose a moratorium on exactly how much news you are subject to—hopefully not more than an hour a day of television, social media, internet news, magazine and newspaper commentary, and/or political discussions. It will only tear you apart and pull you into the dualistic world of opinion and counter-opinion, not Divine Truth, which is always found in a bigger place.

Instead, I suggest that you use this time for some form of public service, volunteerism, mystical reading from the masters, prayer—or, preferably, all of the above.

You have much to gain now and nothing to lose. Nothing at all.
And the world—with you as a stable center—has nothing to lose.
And everything to gain.

Sermon

“Spirituality for These Times” – a time of urgent social issues, of a contentious and critically important and potentially contested election, of the ongoing climate crisis, of the pandemic.

Yet is spirituality for these times different than how it would be or should be or has been at other times?

And what does this elusive, slippery word mean anyway? Spirituality.

So I’ll start there. As some of you may recall, I often return to the Latin: *spiritus*. The root meaning is simply “breath.” And it was the Latin word used to translate the Hebrew word *ruah* – the breath that God breathed into Adam to give him life.

So for me, spirituality has to do with whatever it is that gives us life. Not biological life, but life abundant, the feeling of being alive and of experiencing that we are connected to all other life – not only other human beings, but all life, in fact all of creation.

This means I’m not talking about just a rush of adrenalin or endorphins, temporarily making us feel good (most times nothing wrong with that); I’m talking about something more enduring.

Which indeed means that there is no such thing as spirituality for *these* times as opposed to any other time.

What’s the point, then, of my message this morning?

Well, on one level I suppose I just want to remind you – and myself – of the importance of the spiritual dimension of our lives, perhaps more important at some times – when we might be feeling unmoored – than other times. (And if you are allergic to the word “spiritual,” use whatever word you like to signify the “whatever it is” that grounds you and centers you.)

Okay, that reminder is out of the way.

So what I want to spend more time on is exploring a few of the ways that we get access to the so-called spiritual dimension of life, the ways we can re-connect when we feel disconnected, when we don’t feel spiritually alive and awake.

The Unitarian Universalist poet and minstrel Ric Masten a long time ago wrote a poem titled “Burnout – a Misnomer.” His poem is a good introduction to what I’m talking about here. In the poem, he uses as a metaphor for our personal times of burnout the TV whose tube (remember tubes?) has burned out. Hence the last lines of his poem:

a case of burnout demands a second opinion
and this is mine
find an outlet
and if the cord doesn’t reach
move the set

In other words, plug ourselves back into whatever it is that gives us access to fuller life and to connection to all life.

For me? Here are five of the ways (and there are others – I won’t, for example, be mentioning the banjo...), in no particular order, that I plug back in, re-connect to the source. But these are just examples; the point is for each of us to find our own ways to re-connect.

First, for me: Running of course – particularly along the shore or in the woods, the woods where I quite literally am sharing breath, in and out, with the trees. Waking up to life more fully. For others it might be walking, or simply being outside in your backyard for awhile, present and experiencing our place in the family of things (to borrow Mary Oliver’s phrase).

Then, second, by contrast, there is sitting still... in meditation. What might happen when you sit still? Well, one of the lines we heard earlier from the *Tao Te Ching* gives us a clue:

Do you have the patience to wait
Till your mud settles and the water is clear?

Which means no longer quite so attached to the incessant flow of thoughts, which may so easily include worries and fears – the mud. Instead, if only for a moment or two during the twenty minutes... just sitting, mud clearing. For me, maybe then a little more able, when I stand up and re-enter my day, to be like the “master” in the text: careful, alert, courteous. Why? Because in those moments of stillness I have dis-connected a bit from small self, the ego with all its worries, and re-connected a bit with the larger Self, cosmos, divine reality... of which I’ve always been part... but too often fail to notice.

Third, reading ancient religious texts or philosophy or poetry can wake me up, evoke an “ahhh... so that’s how it is.”

Fourth, a phrase you’ve heard me utter many times:

Conversations about things that matter. I mean deeply matter. The sort of conversations – whether about the meaning of a poem or ancient text or the meaning of life, or the urgency of an issue of justice – that wake me up not because we come to an earth-shattering, transformative or even agreed upon conclusion, but because the engaged conversation itself wakes me up. Philosopher Jacob Needleman suggests that thinking together awakens not only the mind, but the soul, the larger Self. And of the moral or ethical dimension of such conversations he writes that “Thinking together is a preparation for living together.”

And fifth, but by no means least, even when it takes extra effort (because at the moment I may not be feeling plugged in...), acts of kindness and service or activism wake me up in the ways I’ve been describing today. A brief story from a long time ago. I was maybe twenty or so years old. Feeling for whatever reason down as I drove somewhere on some errand. I saw someone on the side of the road struggling to change a tire. I stopped. I helped. And I felt more alive, more connected, not just to the person I’d helped, but to life – less ego, more Life. Simple, right? Yet, again, so easy to forget.

Finally, for this morning, please notice that none of these five ways of awakening to life, connecting to spirit, have anything whatsoever to do with watching the news, reading the newspaper, or scrolling through social media. The way I put it for myself, though I don’t always follow my own advice (because the so-called news is that addictive) is that I should pay attention to only enough news to enable me to be a good citizen.

The virtues of limiting your time with the news? Paraphrasing Richard Rohr from the second reading, it will mean that we have more time for all of the practices that keep us connected... and that enable us to be a more effective and kind human being – truly alive, truly awake.

So, to put this all quite simply, in the form of an invitation: May we each seek ways to reduce the poisons in our lives and to increase the nourishment for our lives... so that we become a little more fully engaged, effective, kind, awake and alive... the sort of human beings that our families and friends, that our communities, our nation, and the world need now.

So may it be. Now and always.