

February 1, 2009

Reaching In – Deepening Our Connection to Ourselves

Connecting with ourselves – that’s the part of our Mission Statement that is a bit hard to talk about from a Christian perspective. It’s hard not to abandon theological reflection for self-help jargon. It’s not that the self-help movement isn’t valuable in helping people build self-awareness, but the danger is that we can begin to see ourselves as an endless do-it-yourself project. If you think home renos are exhausting, try self-renovation!

Some of us are really prone to a “do-it-yourselfer”’s view of self. We are achievers, perfectionists: we are all about becoming more or better than we are now. This can be both a healthy and an unhealthy impulse. It can be the impulse that drives a fit and healthy lifestyle, or the obsession of an anorexic who is starving herself to death to achieve a distorted view of what is beautiful. It can be the interest that causes a person to take a new class or try out a new experience, or it can be the nagging voice that tells someone he’ll never be clever, skilled or smart enough. *There is a huge difference between the impulse to grow as a human being, and the need to conform to some kind of external measure* – to be worthy of whatever the psychological or spiritual equivalent is of “Better Homes and Gardens”. None of us are ever going to be able to make ourselves “showcase” worthy – but, boy, do we spend a lot of time trying!

Ancient culture was not nearly so concerned with the self. It was far more concerned with relationship, family, the wider society. Read through Scripture, and you will discover that most of it is about how we live together in human community.

Psalms 139 is unusual in Hebrew Literature because it does speak about the self – that elusive, ill-defined thing that makes us, us. A lot of the teaching of past decades has reflected a Western philosophical tradition that separates body from spirit or soul or mind or emotion: the inner self from the outer self. The outer self is just a shell; it’s the inner self that counts. Contemporary trends that emphasise a more holistic view of the self are right in line with Hebrew teaching - the tradition from which Jesus and Paul and all the apostles sprang. The ancient Jewish tradition does not make any such clear separation between body and soul or spirit. The self is inseparable from the body. In fact, the body imagery in this Psalm is powerful indeed: we hear of tongues, wombs, hands, palms, even kidneys – that’s the little translation of “my inward parts” – my kidneys! The Psalm speaks of standing and sitting, staying and fleeing, thinking and action. The self that God knows and loves is the whole self – right down to the kidneys! This whole self is in relationship to God. The state of our bodies, our minds, our souls, our spirits, matters to God.

This is one of the primary messages of the Incarnation – one we often miss because we are still so influenced by Greek philosophy. We are not selves or souls in bodies: we are embodied selves. In choosing to come to us in Jesus, a real, historical human being with hands and feet and kidneys and the works, God was saying once again what our tradition tells us in the Genesis creation story: God made human beings in God’s own image, and behold, they were good!

The reading from 2nd Corinthians tells us that the ultimate purpose of the embodied self is to be the dwelling place of God. The fact that God is a part of fleshy, earthy lives, has both spiritual and ethical implications. It means that what we do with our minds and bodies cannot be detached from the life of the spirit. If we fill our minds with violent or highly sexualised images, that’s going to affect our spiritual health. If we abuse our bodies with substances that hurt us: too much sugar, or alcohol, or nicotine, or whatever, that is going to hurt our spiritual selves. If we engage in activities that break relationship: in illicit affairs, in lying or cheating, in subversion or

sabotage, that will affect our spiritual health. Paul is quite clear in his letters that ethics and spirituality cannot be separated: that our spiritual life and moral life are the same thing.

One of the critiques of much contemporary spirituality is that it places an emphasis on self-realization or self-actualization, without the recognition that it's not all about us – that it's about all of us together. Because we live in human community, we have to live moral lives. When we don't, community breaks down.

The other critique is that many contemporary spiritualities are somewhat unrealistic in their assessment of human nature. They teach that the self is perfectable – that if we just keep working on that self-renovation, eventually, we will all attain that “Better Homes and Gardens” status – the “showcase self”. Our tradition says that just isn't so. We cannot perfect ourselves – we human beings are too frail and too fallible.

I don't want to get too much into the theological issue of sin and grace today, but suffice it to say that, without God, all the self-improvement projects in the world, will come to naught. This is simply because even our best intentions can go astray. Take for example, the young man I saw on TV a month or so ago, who started out as a PhysEd instructor teaching healthy lifestyles to his student, and ended up dangerously underweight, because he'd taken his own advice to an unhealthy extreme.

According to Scripture, it is good to want to improve ourselves, to grow. It is good, especially, to want to deepen and mature in the faith. The apostle Paul and the writers of the Pastoral epistles often refer to the need to move into the light, to live more fully as disciples of Christ. The New Testament speaks in many places about the possibility for growth in Christian virtue. We can grow in

- Faith: "Your faith is *greatly enlarged*" (2 Thes. 1:3). "As your faith *grows*" (2 Cor. 10:15)
- Love for other Christians: "As to the love of the brethren... *excel still more*" (1 Thes. 4:9-10). "The love of each one of you toward one another *grows ever greater*" (2 Thes. 1:3)
- Love for all people: "*Increase and abound* in love for one another, and for all men" (1 Thes. 3:12)
- Knowledge of God: "*Increasing* in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:10)
- Christlikeness: "*Grow up* in all aspects into Him" (Eph. 4:15). "Christ is *formed* in you" (Gal. 4:19)
- Knowledge and Discernment: "Your love may *abound still more and more* in real knowledge and all discernment" (Phil. 1:9)
- Obedience: "You ought to walk and please God... *excel still more*" (1 Thes. 4:1)
- Salvation: "*Grow* in respect to salvation" (1 Pet. 2:2)
- Grace: "*Grow* in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:17-18)

One blogger I read this week said this: “The Christian journey allows for no standing still. If you are not growing in the Christian life, you are dying. There is no middle ground.” © Richard J. Vincent, 2004

What do we mean by spiritual growth? There are various theories and models. The same blogger presented a model from Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich. Stage one is the discovery and recognition of God, often as a child, through imagination and story, and sometimes later in life, through an experience of conversion; the second is a time of learning and belonging, called “the life of discipleship”, in which being a part of a faith community formed by common teachings is very important; the third is “the productive life” and involves discerning and using one's spiritual

gifts to serve God. This is where many people stop. But there are three more stages we can move through, according to this particular model.

The journey inward, Stage four, is often precipitated by some kind of shock to previously held beliefs – a kind of crisis of faith that raises questions, doubts and uncertainty. Many people leave their faith communities at this point, because they feel their doubts and questions cannot be accommodated there. Yet this “Dark Night of the Soul” has been recognized for centuries as a necessary part of spiritual growth. It is where we wrestle with God and with ourselves; we face our demons and surrender to the mystery of God. “Through our doubts and difficulties we come to know God better.” One can understand why few people are anxious to move through this stage of spiritual development. And unfortunately, many people who get there, stay there – separated from any community that might help them through their searching and struggle. Those who make this journey find in the end that we are able again to move outward, because we have learned that we don’t know it all, we are not perfect, we are wounded people – and God loves us just as we are.

Stage 5 might be called “the Wounded Healer”, who is open to the world and to life in a way that he or she was unable to be before. This moves us into stage 6, in which “we reach far beyond our own capacity and love our fellow human beings with deep compassion, because we know that all come from and are loved by God” – regardless of creed or colour, culture or creed, gender or orientation. We give and serve selflessly, rather than out of a need to be needed, appreciated or loved. This is a Christ-shaped life – one that we aspire to as the fullness of being human.

While these kinds of categories can be really helpful in understanding where people’s spirituality springs from, we should be cautious when we talk about stages and levels of spiritual growth; they can be used to judge and label others. While this is not the intention of most of these models, I, personally, prefer spiritual models that focus more on both the strength and the shadow side of an individual’s spirituality – systems like the *Enneagram* for instance, a spiritual typology that comes out of Sufi wisdom. It recognizes that different types of personalities walk different spiritual paths, and have different personal strengths and challenges.

There’s also Victoria’s own Nancy Reeves , who recently wrote a book called *Spirituality for Extroverts (and those who love them)*. Most people in spiritual leadership in the church are introverts, whose energy is directed more to the inner life than the outer world. We introverts can begin to believe that our ways of relating to God are the only true ways. And then Nancy comes along and reminds us that Extroverts are spiritual too, and they practice their spirituality in different ways. Nancy uses the differences between Rabbit and Tigger in the Winnie the Pooh books to illustrate what she means. You can’t turn Tigger into Rabbit, and you can’t turn Rabbit into Tigger – and you shouldn’t even try! As long as we are reaching toward God – as long as we are growing in those spiritual virtues talked about in the New Testament – we are walking an authentic spiritual path.

We are all in different places on our spiritual journey, and we should be cautious about judging the spiritual path that others walk. Even those who may feel unusually close to God, can find themselves caught in negative patterns. Look at the Psalmist, who feels surrounded, hemmed in, even pursued by God – an experience both wonderful and fearful. God is so close, for him or her – and yet, even in this close relationship to God, the Psalmist still expresses judgement and even hate of those he perceives as God’s enemies! With Jesus’ command to love our enemies ringing in our ears, we know that this is hardly the most exalted expression of spiritual development!

Even in our celebration of relationship with God, we can fall into patterns that are less than what God wills for us. We are imperfect beings – and there is no path that will take us to perfection. We can only find our truest, best selves, in relationship to the one who made us – for it is that One who knows who we might become, with the Holy Spirit working in us.

My reflections today may feel a bit disconnected to you – they do to me! But what I'd like to invite you to take away with you are these thoughts: that our best selves are found in relationship to God; that God holds out a vision for us – a vision of health, wholeness, relatedness, compassion – and whatever spiritual path takes us there is blessed and holy. Whatever spiritual path we are on, God is on it with us.

As we seek, with God, to know ourselves as intimately and in as much depth as God sees us, we may see both our blessedness and our flaws. The Psalmist says that even the deepest night cannot hide us from the gaze of God – for night is as day to the one who made us. That can be a frightening thought to many, but remember this: God looks upon us with compassion and mercy, with huge love and a tremendous depth of understanding. So do not be afraid to explore your own spiritual path; do not be afraid to really know who you are, with all your frailties and with your greatest gifts; do not fear to set a foot wrong on the path of a deepening spirituality, or to wrestle with God as you go. If you are longing for a true and authentic path, you will find it, by the grace and mercy of God. Amen.

Adult Faith Development: Current Thinking

<http://www.hope.edu/academic/psychology/335/webrep/faithdev.htm>

Stages of Faith

http://www.theocentric.com/spirituality/christian_living/stages_of_faith_a_map_for_the.html

The Enneagram Institute

<http://www.enneagraminstitute.com/>

Spirituality for Extroverts (And Tips for Those Who Love Them). Nancy Reeves. Abingdon Press, 2008.

The Wisdom of the Enneagram. Don Richard Riso and Russ Hudson, 1999.

There are numerous books, videos, web-sites, etc on growth in spiritual development.