

*Spiritual Life Preservers: How do we deepen our faith? What is a spiritual practice and do we even want one?* By Lone Jensen

And if you are a visitor here you might wonder why is it even a question? Why indeed is it so hard for some of us to use words like prayer or spirit or soul? There are many reasons for this reluctance but let me begin with the absent kneelers. You see before we moved in there used to be padded low benches for kneeling in prayer underneath each row of seats. They disappeared magically before our very first service and now reside in a big pile on the floor in our storage room. And though I joked that I would have us all kneel once in gratitude for having got here I understand the need to get them out. After all the very idea of this congregation filled with independent, vocal, free thinking folks agreeing to kneel even once was so well funny, paradoxical and absurd that it made me smile.

But then I thought: why is that? Ok, humility is not our strength, but why is this idea of surrender to anything, even just to a moment of gratitude so unthinkable? What is the problem really with kneeling in church? What do we think we are saying if we do so? A Unitarian Universalist minister wrote of his experience while visiting a monastery. He saw the monks process, heard them sing and chant in prayer and then kneel in a long row. And he was

gripped by longing. He wanted to kneel, he wanted to surrender to the silence and the peace but he could not. Because to kneel would be: to mean it. And he could not do that. To kneel and mean it was both frightening and impossible for him.

It might have been so for me too. Because like with the kneelers, we have discarded, sometimes in haste, sometimes after a long inner struggle, so much old theological baggage and dogma that to kneel would seem to undo all that work. It would seem false and yet it is that surrender that is needed for much real spiritual practice. And we do find other ways. Buddhism for example in the West often carries little emotional baggage and for some surrender becomes easier if we call it enlightenment. To find a spiritual practice, to even begin a conversation about it requires that we first reclaim the words. Take God, a word I use more often than some of you would like and less often than others of you would prefer. (As long as I hear from both sides I figure I am in balance.) But when I say God I see different images than you might. God to me is all-encompassing, a mystery beyond our knowing, stars and swirling cosmic clouds as the Hubble telescope has shown us on the one hand and on the other hand God is utterly accessible, here and now, earthly and present. Take a baby's smile, a bird in flight, a dancer, a singer or something as ordinary and beautiful as a human hand, old and wrinkled, worn with care

and time. But you may say such a God is everything and I would say, yes but more like the spark that holds it all together, creating and birthing all there is. Poetry to me can be a spiritual practice.

As in Robert Frost's poem: *What is God?*

*We have heard that God is all the goodness.*

*All the sweetness and light. And joy in the morning.*

*But God is the cries we do not hear. The depth of hell the other suffers. The darkness and confusion.*

*Of the permanent night.*

*God may be the chaos -Missed in our neatness and order - Who shuns the glistening temple To walk in the gray repositories. Of twisted and divided souls.*

*God is the one who cries, "Know Me!" Through the mouths of those. We choose not to know.*

*We have heard that God is love. But God is the demand to love A demand unheeded. Thus a God undiscovered.*

*Press through the grown-over path. To another's aloneness And there, with him, The pain and the bearer of pain, is God.*

This I think is true. We can be spiritual life preservers for each other. When we do press on despite our own pain, as in the article yesterday in the Tribune about a woman chaplain, working with the bereaved, who had lost her own daughter.

But she still pressed on to help others. No a spiritual practice

is not all goodness and light or simply a stress relief, though it can be that too. And it most certainly is not a parlor game or a hobby. You can't have joy and not the pain, and you cannot really do it risk free. Soul work is hard work and you do not always know where the path may take you. As in this poem by Robert Hamma:

*What is this desert road I travel*

*And how did I come to be on it? It wasn't a desert way when I first set out and*

*I do not know when it changed, but now it has become one.*

*I never left the path but I seem to have lost my way and forgotten why I set out. I've come too far to return. I do not know any other way to go. At this point of utmost isolation*

*I call to you. Open my eyes to see again to the vision that first impelled me.*

*Simplify my heart to rediscover the magnetism of your call.*

*As I begin again let me practice simplicity. As I continue on this path, renew my sense of purpose. Then I will be captured anew by the simple beauty of this desert. I will be drawn willingly*

*Into its deepest dimensions.*

Let us say you begin tomorrow a practice that seems to suit your soul. Sitting in Zen, doing Thai Chi or Yoga or writing in a journal or praying or dancing, or drumming, or singing or walking in the desert or marching for peace or studying or pondering the meaning of it all or feeding the hungry, all and more can be spiritual practice.

The key is that whatever you do are meant to lead you somewhere and you are mindfully committed to them. That means you do them on a regular basis. And that whatever it is you do feeds your soul. The great freedom of our faith is that we can take all these paths in such good company of fellow searchers. But you may ask what is soul work? For that matter what is soul?

Thomas Moore writes in *Care of the Soul*:

*The great malady of the twentieth century implicated in all of our troubles and affecting us individually and socially, is "loss of soul." When soul is neglected, it doesn't just go away; it appears symptomatically in obsessions, addictions, violence, and loss of meaning. Our temptation is to isolate these symptoms or to try to eradicate them one by one; but the root problem is that we have lost our wisdom about the soul, even our interest in it.*

*It is impossible to define precisely what the soul is. Definition is an intellectual enterprise anyway; the soul prefers to imagine. We know intuitively that soul has to do with genuineness and depth, as when we say certain music has soul or a remarkable person is soulful. When you look closely at the image of soulfulness, you see that it is tied to life in all its particulars, good food, satisfying conversation, genuine friends, and experiences that stay in the*

*memory and touch the heart. Soul is revealed in attachment, love, and compassion.*

*Fulfilling work, rewarding relationships, personal power, and relief from symptoms are all gifts of the soul.*

Yes, Moore has a good point. As a resident holy woman and religious professional you would think I have if not all at least some of the answers. Surely as a minister I should have a well-developed, well-defined spiritual practice? Wrong! I struggle daily with all the temptations of our lives, succumb to materialism now and again, try to buy my way into pleasure and allow my work, which is indeed fulfilling and meaningful to take over all of my life. I too play hide and seek with my soul and try to avoid that inevitable meeting. Which is what a spiritual practice is all about. I do pray now and then, I write in my journal, though not every day, I read spiritual and theological works aplenty and do Thai Chi. I find God in my work, in your faces and yet if I want to feed my soul most reliably I turn to nature to find some balance and to fill the empty well from which I draw inspiration. That glimpse of eager birds at my feeder, the intoxicating scents of orange blossoms late at night, the quarreling quails scurrying around my front yard, all of these and all of nature to me are sacred.

Nature is where I went whenever I lost someone I loved. I searched the starry summer sky for my grandmother's face and listened to the winter wind singing in the treetops to hear my father's voice. Past and present time itself has a different meaning for my soul. Inside I am five or twenty but in the mirror is this older woman looking out at me? Who is she? Wasn't it just yesterday I picked apples in my aunt's garden? Like a sticky string our souls catch every living thing we touch. Be glad of it.

Robert Hamma writes: *I know that these experiences are true: The song of the cardinal at dawn is a word of God spoken to me, and God is in that word. A plunge into the ocean is an exhilarating immersion into life, and God is in the sea. A hug from my daughter Sarah as she throws herself at me with abandon fills me with joy, and God is in her embrace. If we can say these things, can we not also say that God is in the mountain, in the forest, and in the desert?*

*I have arrived at these convictions in a simple way: by spending time in the natural world and by paying attention. As the poet Mary Oliver says, "To pay attention is our endless and proper work." The natural world in*

*which I try to pay attention is simply the world around me. I don't live in the mountains or on the shore. I live at the edge of a small city. If we think only of nature as some wild or idyllic place, we'll spend most of our lives waiting to get there. But the natural world is right here, and as Henry David Thoreau said, "My profession is always to be alert, to find God in nature."*

He is right, the natural world is all around us, and in fact we are part of it too. And no, my friends you do not have to have God with that. Call it whatever fits, the all embracing universe, the creative force for good, the power for good, the spirit of compassion, whatever language your heart responds to. There is no shortage of names and you do not have to use my definition any more than you have to kneel here. Your souls are as different as fingerprints and you are the one who must decide what works for you.

Chet Raymo writes

*All of my life has been a relearning to pray - a letting go of incantational repetition, and vain repetition "Me, me," instead of watching attentively the light that burns at the center of every star, every cell, every living creature and every human heart.*

The question really is: do you want to?

