

Encouraging Spiritual Growth

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Even though I have years of training in religious studies, and love to use my intellect to reflect theologically about the meaning of life, I haven't often thought of myself as particularly "spiritual". I have never had much of a prayer life. I don't often engage in any special, disciplined kind of spiritual practice, other than taking long walks in the woods, or admiring natural beauty, or taking long naps full of dreams.

Perhaps, like many of you, spirituality for me is either very casual, or only comes into play during times of intense transition. How many of us say we aren't "spiritual", but quickly become so when there's a crisis and we don't know what else to do!

I was in the middle of a time of intense transition some nine years ago, when I realized my life had become very superficial. I was doing something intentional to change my vocational path, but I wasn't doing very much to grow my spirituality.

Ironically, I was in a program to learn how to be a chaplain. One day, I was asked to visit with the wife of a man who in an intensive care unit. I was often uncomfortable and scared in that program. I was especially anxious when I found that the woman that I was asked to visit was a very conservative, Pentecostal. I assumed she wanted me to perform a miracle and "raise" her husband from "the dead", so he could walk out of that hospital.

When I got to the room, she told me that what she wanted was for the hospital staff to know that she and her husband were ready for the life support measures to be stopped. They were confident that he was ready to go to heaven.

I was relieved. I could easily relay that message!

The staff withdrew the life support measures. Her husband quietly and peacefully slipped into unconscious. But it took hours before he actually died. This woman was alone without any other family members. I felt compelled to stay with her, even though I really wanted to get out of there. Her exuberant Pentecostalism made me

anxious. I stayed with her while she told me her life story. It was mostly about her long and intense relationship with the Holy Ghost.

I was self-conscious, afraid that she would find out that I was little more than a manager; good at communicating family wishes to the hospital staff, but afraid that others would find out that my spiritual life was not adequate for the role I had put myself in.

At some point, in the middle of a sentence, she looked at me and said; "you need to claim a blessing". Feeling more transparent than ever, I asked her to explain what she meant.

She said that it was obvious that I was letting fear get in the way of allowing the spirit work in and through me. She said I needed to believe and stand in the belief that I was made exactly the way I was to be a blessing. I needed to claim that blessing. I needed to let go of fear, and trust what was already there, that I just needed to own, to stand in, to rely on.

Wow!

There was no hiding from her ability to see me. She didn't hold back saying exactly what I needed to hear!

My experience with her, and with many others, taught me, continues to teach me something that all my intellectual and practical training doesn't teach. Opening my self to spiritual growth is about being radically accepted and hearing the truth spoken in love...

I am so thankful that our third principle is worded the way it is.

We affirm and promote; "the acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations".

The word "encourage" literally means to put courage into another. That woman saw my fear. But, she didn't let my anxiety stop her from giving me a blessing! Accepting me, she gave me the courage to let my spirit just breathe.

Spirit in religious writings is often described as the "breath" of life. Beyond intellect, beyond personality, it is the essence of what makes us alive...

It takes boldness to encourage another person to grow in spirit, to just breathe in their own fullness.

To grow in spirit is to be more open to a deeper appreciation, a deeper familiarity with the essence of who we are.

Some of you practice specific spiritual "disciplines", ways that settle you into a "posture" for deepened enlightenment.

My hope is that in our congregational life together we will find those postures that will allow us all to grow in spirit.

One way we could do that is to practice expressing frequent appreciation for each other. ...Saying thank you to another just because they exist.

"Namaste." "The spirit in me, honors the spirit in you."

Another way, is to be intentional in the practice of "putting courage in each other"; ...learning when and how to speak the truth in love.

We are so timid with each other when it comes to encouraging spiritual growth. We miss opportunities to speak the truth...

Many of us don't have any trouble "re-acting" to each other, getting in a tangle of "personalities" and "issues". But that way of being is fear based, we "re-act" when we are afraid. Motivated by the spirit of love, we can inspire each other, build up each other...

There is so much isolation and wounding and the nursing of wounds in this world. We are called to be different from that. We are called to bring out what is good in each other, to see each other more fully...

Nurturing each other's spiritual growth requires intentionality and practice. Speaking the truth in love, requires a commitment to loving behavior, a commitment to putting courage into each other...

Too often we think of our spirituality as a private matter, something to keep hidden and safe.

In congregational life, the very best we can do is give each other sanctuary...see each other as a blessing, can claim our obligation to nurture each other's spirit. Our job as a congregation is to repair the fractured whole and make it one again.

May we find a new commitment this advent season to look for each other's spirit. May we have the courage to look for each other's light, to be bold in calling the spirit forth.

This is a season of transformation. Let our engagements with each other go beyond the superficial. Let it be inspired. May we be bold enough to raise the dead to life...