



"Reflections on Contemporary Spirituality"

James Schmeiser

When the term "spirituality" is used, the primary understanding is that of being an inspired person, a person that lives with a fullness of enthusiasm (which literally means to be in the state of God). The text from Acts 2: 17-18 gives us an example of being inspired:

This is what I will do in the last days, God says:
 I will pour out my Spirit on everyone.
 Your sons and daughters will proclaim my message;
 your young men will see visions, and your old men will have dreams.
 Yes, even on my servants, both men and women,
 I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will proclaim my message.

A spiritual person is one who lives with a fullness of life, who is in touch with their passions, capable of being moved by all that surrounds them, who is aware of their longings which come forth from the depths of their being, who is able to bask in the presence of God, to delight in the goodness of God (as a friend of mine says, "to bask in the bosom of God") and all of God's creation, who has learned to be quiet and to listen to their yearnings, the yearnings of others, and the yearnings of the universe, who searches for relationships and celebrates a sense of belonging, who searches for meaning in the ordinariness of life, in crises, in pain, and in brokenness, who lives a unified life in the midst of so much that divides and separates us.

However, the spiritual life is also a journey, a journey that we embark on, step by step. Spirituality has to do with living in the here and now, and one possible starting point, the one on which I will focus tonight, lies in the recognition of and living with our brokenness, our experience of dividedness. We often experience our incompleteness, our state of being unfinished. Yet we yearn for completion, for certainty, for unity, for meaning. We crave wholeness and yet our yearnings remain unsatisfied "for perfection, completion, certainty, and wholeness are impossible precisely because we are imperfectly human - or better, because we are perfectly human, which is to say, humanly imperfect." (Ernest Kurtz & Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, 1994)

Our first step of true spirituality, then, is to recognize who we are, to see ourselves as we are: mixed up, paradoxical, incomplete, imperfect. To quote the words of St. Paul: "I do not understand what I do; for I don't do what I would like to do, but instead do what I hate." (Rom. 7:18). This is also reflected in a Hasidic tale:

Rabbi Elimelech Lizensker said: "I am sure of my share in the world-to-come. When I stand to plead before the bar of the Heavenly Tribunal, I will be asked: 'Did you learn, as in duty bound?' To this I will make answer: 'No.' Again, I will be asked: 'Did you pray, as in duty bound?' Again my answer will be: 'No.' The third question will be: 'Did you do good, as in duty bound?' And for the third time, I will answer: 'No.' Then judgment will be awarded in my favor, for I will have spoken the truth."

As a result, in our spiritual practice, our first prayer is a cry for help, taken from Psalm 70: "O God come to my assistance, O Lord, make haste to help me," which has been the prayer at the beginning of each monastic hour in the Benedictine tradition for over 1500 years. During the reformation, John Calvin and others renewed this emphasis on the insight that humans could do nothing without God's help. And at the beginning of the modern age, the 19th century nun, St. Therese of Lisieux, in a state of great darkness, cried out, "J'ai soif," "I thirst."

We seek help for what we cannot face or accomplish alone; we accept and admit our limitations. And in that acceptance and admission, that we are not in control, spirituality is born. The experience of suffering, the experience of those realities in life over which we do not have control (as the Buddhists tell us, the experience of suffering, old age, and death), leads us to an emptying out of our illusions of powerfulness and control. There is a process of letting go, of surrender, of releasing the illusions to which we so frequently cling. We recognize that we are not God, we are not in ultimate control. This is the focus of the ancient Hebrew prayer, the Shema: "Hear, O Israel, I am the Lord, your God."

This spirituality is a realistic spirituality because it is based on the acceptance of our lived experience of brokenness. God seems to enter through our wounds. The account in Luke (18: 9-14) is an expression of this truth: "Jesus also told this parable to people who were sure of their own goodness and despised everybody else. 'Once there were two men who went up to the Temple to pray: one was a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood apart by himself and prayed, "I thank you, God, that I am not greedy, dishonest, or an adulterer, like everybody else. I thank you that I am not like that tax collector over there. I fast two days a week, and I give you one tenth of all my income." But the tax collector stood at a distance and would not even raise his face to heaven, but beat on his breast and said, "God, have pity on me, a sinner." I tell you, said Jesus, the tax collector, and not the Pharisee, was in the right with God when he went home. For everyone who makes himself great will be humbled, and everyone who humbles himself will be made great.'"

This gives us a context in which we can live our lives as imperfect beings. There is a fascinating story in the book of Genesis where Jacob wrestles with God and refuses to give up until he receives a blessing. He is wounded in the combat and still refuses to let go. Finally, he does receive a blessing from God but the wound remains, one that he carries with him for the rest of his life. There is a certain parallel for us as we go on our spiritual journey. As we struggle with God, or to put it in another way, as our false gods struggle with the reality of the true God, we will come to recognize our wounds, and we will also come to recognize our blessings.

Our lives become a journey on which we slowly learn to let go of our illusions and embrace, with love, our brokenness, as well as the brokenness of others. And in some amazing paradox, it is this embrace that healing and blessing takes place. On this journey, imperfections are recognized and lived with creatively and compassionately. We let go of our demands for absolute assurances of security and illusions of perfection. The impact of this spirituality is not only a recognition and acceptance of our brokenness, it is the foundation of joy for we can see the value of our being in the context of the great love of God, who causes the sun and the rain to fall on honest and dishonest persons alike.

Once again, a Hasidic tale conveys this truth: "Rabbi Bunam said to his disciples: " Everyone must have two pockets, so that he can reach into the one or the other, according to his needs. In his right pocket are to be the words: 'For my sake was the world created,' and in his left: 'I am earth and ashes.'"

One of our great Canadians, Jean Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche Community, has lived and worked with men and women with intellectual disabilities. He often speaks of the human experience of loneliness, a loneliness that is often avoided through busyness and addictive behaviours. But loneliness is a part of being human. It can be a source for good or it can be a source for apathy and depression. The healing can only happen through love, through a sense of belonging. "When we refuse to accept that loneliness and insecurity are part of life, when we refuse to accept that they are the price of change, we close the door on many possibilities for ourselves; our lives lessened, we are less than fully human." (Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 1998) This again involves a letting go of our ways of blocking our sense of loneliness through busyness, through our addictions, through our attempts to have an absolute and fixed community in which everyone has a specific role to play.

Vanier goes on to say that our lives are a mystery of growth from weakness to weakness, from the weakness of the little baby to the weakness of the aged. However, the acceptance of weakness opens our hearts to compassion, where we are concerned for the growth and well-being of the weak. To be human is to accept who we are, this mixture of strength and weakness. In his understanding, Vanier speaks of the importance of being committed to a community, to challenge the priority of individualism and competition in order to help ourselves and others to experience belonging to something or someone greater than ourselves as well as to be accepted for who we

are in our uniqueness, specialness, and vulnerability.

On this journey we will be led to face our fears, especially the fear of change, of difference, of losing our privileged positions, of failure, of loss. If we can slowly embrace our fears, our lives will change, to growth, to the inclusion of all people and all parts of ourselves, to completely new possibilities. However, first of all, we have to let go of our fear and trust that "a bruised reed he will not break and a flickering wick he will not quench." (Is. 42:3). Slowly, we move from a life of fear and compulsions toward a freedom of acceptance of ourselves as well as others, a freedom of risking new ways of being, of openness. We slowly recognize that our life is not limited to our established boundaries and limits but opens up to a mystery that we move into, one step at a time. We become aware of and celebrate the beauty that surrounds us, all of which is a gift to us. And as we journey, we slowly open up, more and more, to that mystery which envelops us and invites us to enter into as we live our ordinary lives. So we slowly learn to cling less and less and to enter into the mystery more and more.

This then becomes a spirituality of trust, of letting go, of surrender, of vulnerability, of releasing; it is a desire to move forward to openness and not let ourselves be controlled by our fears. This week's focus is on "release", "letting go", "surrender". I have referred to the importance of "letting go", of "surrendering". In particular, we are invited to give up our illusions of power and control. Eventually we will have to release all into the hands of our creator and our lives can be a preparation for this embrace that is initiated by God. We are invited to let go of our society's judgment of the uselessness of the weak and vulnerable. We are also invited to accept our own weakness and vulnerability. We are invited to let go of the illusion that we will ever fully understand the meaning of our lives.

Our lives are born in mystery and end in mystery; is it possible that we can learn to embrace this mystery, as we learn to embrace the mystery of ourselves, others, of the universe, of God? Is it possible to let go our urge to prove ourselves worthy of God's love and to celebrate the ongoing experience of God's love and mercy? The abundance of life to which we are called is one that embraces, with love and compassion, God and all of God's creation.

James Schmeiser

1 This article was originally presented as an evening talk at Naramata Centre, August 6, 2001.

2 Jim Schmeiser is Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Western Ontario. He regularly leads programs on spirituality and dreams at Naramata Centre. He recently completed the ancient pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, and will be offering "The Pilgrim Way, July 28th – August 3rd."