

The religious quality to everyday life:

Last week I wrote about how we are all influenced in our everyday behaviour not by logic or reason but by our unique private mythology or religion that, outside of our awareness, influences what we do and feel in life. We like to think that we are guided by reason when we are, in fact, guided more by an invisible emotional belief system that helps us to manage, control, and interpret our world. These unconscious attitudes and dispositions are more mythological than they are psychological. I would go as far as to say that every person has their own private quasi-religion, with its own set of idiosyncratic rituals and beliefs, that enable that person to deal with the challenges of life.

Just look at your spouse or partner. Notice how he has his own peculiarities and rituals. The things he needs to have happen in order to feel secure and safe in his world. Notice how he can become very upset by some small irregularity. In these ways, he, and all of us, learn to cling to obsessive little rituals or codes because they become symbols of security. “I may feel insecure and powerless in my life, but at least I have all my DIY tools neatly stacked away and I know exactly where each one is”, might be the hidden life-soothing belief. We all find symbols of our significance and security that actually serve spiritual functions for each of us. For a housewife, she might stand back from a spotless kitchen and experience delight in her achievement and feel in herself, “Yes, I am somebody”.

The truth is that despite our cultural rejection of religion we are privately influenced by the same concerns of all world religions down the ages – what we do with pain and suffering, how we cope with our mortal helplessness, and how we establish a sense of significance in a world that seems not to guarantee it. This is the stuff that we are ultimately concerned with. We think we are concerned with money, mortgages, success, or social status but they are all just the means by which we think we can overcome these deeper concerns. (It is often only when we come close to death that this truth is revealed with dramatic intensity.)

All of the squabbles and difficulties of everyday domestic life are ultimately about these things. Every person in your family has the ability to remind you of your helplessness, insignificance, and even mortality just by rejecting your opinion or ignoring you in some way.

At the heart of many human problems is our difficulty in coming to terms with our inherent powerlessness over our fate. Mothers know this in their heart. When you worry about your children, do your best for them, try to teach them about life, lie awake at night worrying about them, you feel a deep ache in your heart. And this pain emerges from the fact that you are ultimately powerless to control the life and fate that awaits your children.

This is a spiritual truth that must be understood at the deepest level if, as a mother, you are to find relief. It means giving of your best but respecting the fact that you are powerless to determine their life. This requires the serenity and ability to know when to ‘let go’.

Our mortality constantly reminds us that we cannot control life. We inhabit a life that is not your own. Our children do also. In time they too will die. At times it seems too much to bear, but the ability to embrace these truths is the essence of deep spirituality and the path to inner peace. To truly respect that our children are separate from us and are only temporarily in our care is our challenge and opportunity.

Healthy psychological living means being able to admit that you are powerless over many things and then being able to inhabit that reality with a lightness of heart and a confidence of body.

Your personal mythology about life become a necessity because of how frequently you encounter your fragile vulnerability in life. In fact there is no one on the face of the earth who can expose you to the fragility of life and the terror of death than your intimate partner. This is why when you are caught up in intense conflict or break-up you sometimes react to your partner *as if your very life was at stake*.

Family relationships are difficult because we sometimes use them to try to escape from life – to find some relief. We want family life to always be a place where we are made to feel good about ourselves, to always be a place where we are free, to always feel we belong. We need some place of refuge from our vulnerability. The truth is family life must be both - a place of refuge at times but also a place where we safely encounter our vulnerability and inadequacy.

At the end of the day we are all searching for experiences of competence in the world. Make sure that today the gift you give your children, or your partner, is an affirmation of that fact. To say that “In my eyes, you are a success”. The smallest child as much as the aging adult need this in equal doses. And so do you.
