

I just spent a couple of days training a group of health practitioners whose desire was to take time off from their work to take care of themselves. The purpose of the two days was to take a little time away from their work to replenish themselves emotionally and spiritually. It was a most encouraging and inspiring experience to realize how most people share the same needs and longings in life and struggle with the same problems. Let me share with you a number of the simple truths that we looked at which affect how we are in the world.

The experience of life and living is one that braids together the two emotions of joy and sorrow. As we move into the second half of life we realize this in ways not possible when we are younger. When we were young our idealism and hope kept us focusing on possibility and self-development. But when we move into the later seasons of life we experience more directly the inherent tragic motif that also flows through life. People close to us grow ill and die, families are touched by tragedy; life does not turn out always as we planned. But side by side with this awareness is a greater sensitivity to the beautiful and wondrous. Because we touched by sorrow we also learn to appreciate beauty with a more vital sensitivity. A life driven by urgent possibility learns to evolve into a life of graceful appreciation. To watch the romantic dance of grandparents and grandchildren reveals this beautifully.

The truth is that we live in two dimensions. We live a horizontal life in which we get wrapped up in the everyday concerns of surviving and coping with our life. We work, parent, partner, plan, organize, worry, and in general obsess endlessly about what appears significant but which is, in the greater scheme of things, is sometimes quite trivial.

We also exist in a vertical dimension where we experience the depth and breath of life and look at the bigger picture. In this realm we engage *with the essentials of life*. The essentials of life have to do with *how* we are living rather than with *what* we are doing. The essentials of life have to do with soul and spirit, with character and virtue, with helplessness and hope. We can only replenish our selves when we are mindful of the more important things in life that give our lives a meaning, a passion, and compassion. This means realizing that our life is part of something much bigger than the concerns of our private ego or our obsessive search for status or security.

We all become excellent micro-managers of our little life. We may not have any meaning in our life or feel we have any control over our deepest emotions but, we convince ourselves, “at least I am in control of my house, my job, and my list of things-to-do”. When we become obsessed with being micro-managers of our little lives we shy away from the challenge of living a courageous life. We begin to reject ourselves and everything that reminds us that we are not-in-control. We reject the parts of ourselves that are the cornerstones of living an abundant life – our vulnerability and paradoxically, our ultimate powerlessness over fate.

All of the great spiritual traditions across cultures begin with an inherent acknowledgement that one does not control life, rather one participates with it. All of the great traditions challenge us to remember that we are not the central controlling force in our lives but part of something much bigger. Our life, in truth, is not about us

but about the life that is living us. The question for each of us is whether we are part of an enchanted universe or are we stuck in our private search for status and meaning.

When we are stripped to our core, and denuded of all our symbols of status and security we re-discover that at the center of our being we pulsate with an uncomplicated joy. But we have this simple joyful impulse encased in layers of self-protection that we forget who we are. As one little four year old put it to his father when looking at pictures of himself as a baby: “Dad, I am beginning to forget who I was”.

WE are all like this. At times of grief and at times of simple joy, we begin to remember who we are but it is so hard to hold those moments. We now know that to live a meaningful life requires discipline and commitment. The distractions and worries of just surviving get in our way. So, for today, see if you can re-discover that the heart that beats inside your chest is the exact same heart that was beating when you skipped with uncomplicated joy as a child. See if you can find a state of deep gratitude and self-compassion. See if you can live for part of your day with a light-heartedness and lifts you. Work at it. Life is too short not to.