

With arms stretched out towards You

“In the spiritual life”, writes Henri Nouwen, “the word ‘discipline’ means ‘the effort to create some space in which God can act’.” He goes on to say, “Discipline means that somewhere you’re not occupied, and certainly not preoccupied ... to create that space in which something can happen that you hadn’t planned or counted on.” The discipline that Nouwen is describing here is certainly at the heart of an authentic spiritual life and precisely because it invites us into that place of the unplanned and the unexpected, where the initiative is God’s, it can be challenging and even avoided. We human beings don’t take kindly to relinquishing control!

In contrast to what Nouwen refers to, there is a kind of discipline in the spiritual life which is to be avoided and which is more properly ‘drivenness’ or ‘willfulness’, an undertaking of the ego. One of the definitions of drivenness is ‘being under compulsion’. Words such as ‘must’, ‘should’, ‘have to’, even ‘obsessive’ and ‘scrupulous’, come to mind. To speak of someone as being driven can be at first glance a good thing, a virtuous quality. We think of goals and dedication and commitment, a strong work ethic. But as we probe further we begin to find some less positive aspects to it: a fervent thrust towards an iron-clad goal which leaves little, if any, room for flexibility; a dwindling ability to read the signs both within and around us which may point to the need to re-think that goal and that process. With this comes a weakening of wisdom which is replaced by dogged determination and a narrowness of vision. As this happens we can become increasingly willful and self-focused, even irrational, and the ego begins to take centre stage. All this takes us slowly but surely off the path of authentic spiritual growth. In our spiritual journey drivenness just gets in the way. What is needed is that we cultivate something much less ego-centred and that is what we call drawnness. Goals, dedication, commitment, determination, are all good traits, but they must be lived in the context of drawnness, and be at the service of our willingness.

To grow into spiritual maturity we are asked to surrender rather than hold onto. We are invited into transformation of our self under the influence and moulding of the Spirit. It is a much gentler, more gracious space that we are invited into. It is a more difficult space to get to in many ways, yet one which will bring greater peace and one which will have greater life-giving power in our lives. As Nouwen says, an authentic spiritual path means that somewhere we are not occupied and that we create a space for what we had not planned. Creating this space can be one of the most difficult things human beings are called upon to do, and that is so because it means relinquishing control, letting go and abandonment of self to the Divine initiative. As the Psalmist of ancient Israel says: “I (God) will instruct you and teach you the way you should go” (Psalm 32). But we certainly have strong drives in the other direction.

The space where drawnness and willingness on the one hand, and drivenness or willfulness on the other hand, meet and cross can be a rather murky one, and we need to be wise and discerning to recognize just which of these is having its way with us. There is a story of a young Jewish man Jesus encountered. He was drawn to a life of holiness, a life God invited him into. He told Jesus that he had faithfully kept all the commandments since his youth. He was a good man and he was on the right path and he wanted to know what more he could do. Jesus invited him to sell everything he had, give the money to the poor and follow him. This was the one thing he lacked, Jesus told him. There is a great depth of psychological insight in Jesus' response! He was inviting that young man to surrender his control, to relinquish the familiar and well-trodden path he was on and enter into a place where he would be led. He was inviting him to be free of his possessions. Follow me. Allow *me* to lead you, Jesus is saying. This is the next step, can you do it? Well, he was a rich young man we are told, and at that point, he couldn't do it, and he walked away sad. I wonder if his sadness was because at some level he knew that what Jesus was saying was indeed the way to go but it asked too much of him.

The stages of spiritual development we see in this story of the young man are reflected in the thinking of the philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard identified three stages of religious or spiritual growth: the first stage is the aesthetic, the second is the moral and the third is the religious stage. In authentic spiritual growth we will progress through the first two and come to the third, the highest stage. We see stage two in our young man: he faithfully followed the teaching, the Law. But he seemed to sense that there was something more in this journey and that prompted his question. The religious stage, as identified by Kierkegaard, is the utter surrender of the self to God. It is a desiring and a willingness to let go and be led. It is no longer simply about faithfulness and obedience to a set of religious teachings, an institution or a moral code, but obedience to the Spirit, wherever that may lead. The religious stage is characterized by profound communion with God, a relationship that is nothing less than the relinquishing of the self with all its various demands. This is what Jesus called him to. But he had many possessions and he did not want to lose them. So can it be for us too. And one of those possessions we have is our own proposing and controlling, our desire to direct things ourselves. It is easier to remain in stage two, the moral stage, obedient to a familiar code than to risk the unknown, the disruption, the utter surrender asked of us if we are to let God be God in our lives.

In his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster writes: "When we despair of gaining inner transformation through human powers of will and determination, we are open to a wonderful new realization: inner righteousness is a gift from God to be graciously received. The needed change with us is God's work, not ours. The demand is for an inside job, and only God can work from the inside. We cannot attain or earn the righteousness of the kingdom of God; it is a grace that is given". His words capture it beautifully. An authentic spiritual life is not about achieving

some standard or pre-set goal we set. It is about transformation. It is about the slow and all-permeating work of grace. It is about softened inner spaces upon which the grace of God can act, into which the grace of God can seep. What is the offer of this moment? Turn to it with willingness. Let spaciousness open up and roominess. A person who is drawn rather than driven will have a sense of space about them, a graciousness, an emptiness which allows the Divine to enter. This inner transformation is often brought about by surprising invitations: wisdom from an unlikely source, a transforming encounter with someone we had not expected, a word we had not expected to hear, a path to set out on We must be careful not to miss them. We are all like that rich young man, being invited to where we had hitherto perhaps not considered going, invited to put aside those iron clad goals we have set for ourselves. It is there that God waits for us.

There is another great encounter Jesus had which once again, powerfully and beautifully, tells this story. This one was with Nicodemus, a Jewish teacher of the Law, who wondered just what Jesus was on about when he told him that “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (John 3:4ff). Nicodemus thought this meant another physical birth – can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born? But Jesus was talking about spiritual birth. “What is born of the flesh is flesh”, he said, “and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above’. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit”. To be born of the Spirit, in other words, to be transformed by the Spirit, requires that we give the Spirit room to work, and to do this requires obedience. The word obedience comes from the Latin, *oboedire* which is made up of two words, *ob* which means ‘towards’ and *oedire* ‘to hear’. In the Hebrew Scriptures too, the word for obedience is *shama*, ‘to hear, to listen’. Listening is the heart of a truly religious life. There is a saying that God has given us two ears and one mouth so that we can understand the importance of listening twice as much as we speak! But I think as a species we may have lost sight of that!

There is something profoundly real and authentic to who we are about listening. A baby in the womb responds to its mother’s voice. A newborn soaks up everything around it, looking, listening, taking it all in. But then, as we grow and develop the wondrous gift of speech, we can too easily forget to listen. Yet the need to listen remains. How often do we hear the cry, ‘You are not listening to me’! It is a deep-seated human need to listen and to be listened to. It is no wonder then that silence and listening have always been valued practices in the spiritual journey, and anyone who wishes to progress in this journey must learn to listen. Silencing the clamour within so that we may truly listen, is the beginning of obedience. To fall silent is not simply refraining from speaking. It is letting go of whatever it is that is occupying us, indeed preoccupying us, including that relentless march towards the fulfillment of our goals, that all-

consuming need to be right, that narrow vision which can creep upon us. We need to learn to listen, to train ourselves to listen. As we do this we open up a space within so God may enter.

Real listening is a deep-down soul thing. It is more than just hearing. "To you O Lord I lift up my soul. Make me know your ways, O Lord; Teach me your paths" (Psalm 25). *Make me know your ways, O Lord.* Instead of pushing forward, relentlessly, determinedly, we are invited to the Source. We are invited to let ourselves be drawn there. There is a self-emptying that is needed, and humility and trust. Think of Michelangelo's painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the image of God creating the human: the hands outstretched, the fingers almost touching, reaching out - both God to me and me to God. This is an exquisitely poignant image of drawnness. *To you O Lord I lift up my soul.*



When we are truly drawn to God, when we deeply long for the Life, Love and Wisdom that is God, we will also *desire* to stop, and fall silent, and listen. The goals we set are no longer what matter. We can relinquish those and not feel diminished or afraid or powerless. What matters is the touch of God, the Divine initiative. And nothing else will do. "In God alone my soul finds rest" (Psalm 62). We will be led into a radical honesty which will not let us rest content with an ego driven spirituality. We will become utterly pliable. Like the clay in the potter's hands, as the prophet Jeremiah says, we will be shaped ... and re-shaped ... and re-shaped. "I need to be silent for a while", said Meister Eckhart, "worlds are forming in my heart".

This is something Mary Ward knew well. Mary listened and listened as she sought to find her way. Her plans changed several times. She entered and left various religious orders as she discerned how to best live God's deep dream for her. She never wavered in her listening, in her fidelity to that dream. Her commitment was to God. "Go close to Him", she said. And because

Mary's fidelity was to God and because she remained at the Source, in prayer, listening, and open to the Spirit wherever it might lead her, she created that space for God to enter. To do this she had to live with uncertainty as the details and the how and the where slowly emerged. She had to embrace the darkness of not being in control as she created that space for God and waited upon the One whose will she sought to obey above all else. As Peter said to Jesus when many of those following him turned away, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Drawnness and willingness arise with that insight.

When our spiritual life is characterized by drawnness to God our prayer will be a humble attentiveness. Our choices and actions will be the fruit of that attentiveness. In this space we will pray and worship and respond to God's call. There is no compulsion, no hard-won determination - only delight and joy. This takes a lifetime of trusting, listening, obedience, discipline. But what a journey into peace and fulfillment.

In the weeks ahead as you look around you and enjoy the glorious autumn leaves falling from the trees, you may like to find that silent moment or two, let go, and pray this beautiful prayer of surrender:

To you O Lord I lift up my soul.



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