

INNER VIEWS

Courting our Soul: Being Aware without Judgments

Student: Do all these methods and meditations you are teaching us help us become enlightened?

Teacher: No more than the crow of a rooster makes the sun rise.

Student: Then why should we spend so much time working on these?

Teacher: So that you will be awake when the sun does rise.

Soul is our personal, intimate and concrete experience (not a belief or abstract hope) of being loved into existence by Trinity. It is the essence of who we are. We don't have to attain soul or develop soul. But as long as we are tuned into our ego we will miss the experienced reality of ourselves as soul.

One way to loosen our ego's monopoly of our consciousness is to tune into the signs that express our deep inner reality. This helps us develop an awareness of and acceptance of our full self. Simply paying attention with acceptance helps us identify with our soulful way of being and living. The method is the medium. The way we approach our self is the way of soulful presence.

Our external world can mirror the struggles of our soul as it tries to bring us the healing that will allow us to let go of our defenses and resistances. As an expression of Trinity's unconditional love becoming us our soul works by helping us be aware of and accepting these struggles. The best strategy we can follow is to let Trinity help us befriend these moments:

- People who attract or repel us; they mirror parts of our self that we are trying to develop or trying to avoid.
- Everyday events.- sometimes involving other people, sometimes not, sometimes pleasant and sometimes difficult – about which we can ask, “Why is this happening to me now?” These are much like dream symbols, they represent inner states trying to bring us to wholeness.
- Changes in our tastes or needs or way of living: clothing friends, hobbies, how we spend our time, things we collect, our choice of entertainment, our enthusiasms, a felt need for therapy or spiritual director. All of these mirror our soul trying to expand us and connect to the transcendence of our life.

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- Words and phrases and images and stories that reach out and touch us especially: from television, scripture readings, favorite songs, movies, newspapers, magazines, books, conversations or qualities of other people.
- Coincidences, those synchronistic events that cannot be explained in terms of “cause and effect.”
- Judgments and expectations we use on others; these are points of view that we’ve learned from our youth and habitually use to control ourselves and others;
- Our reactions when we don’t get what we want; the dialogue created in our head indicates the way we try to control our self, others and life situations to fit our point of view.

Here are signals of our soul at work that arise from within us:

- Moods and feelings, especially the powerful ones that way, “Pay attention!:
- Dreams – those inner states trying to be realized in our external life, as well as spontaneous daydreams and fantasies;
- Memories that surface to recollect a moment or event in our life;
- experiences of transcendence, of God, that lift us up and resonate with our need to be loved and loving;
- Physical changes;
- Unexpected behavior on our part: times when we find ourselves saying “This is not like me at all! Where did this come from?”
- Journal entries or conversations where we find more information that we expected.

When you become aware of these moments in your life the important thing is to avoid self-judgment , criticism or analysis. Instead, follow the lead of your soul, turn to Trinity and ask for the grace to accept these moments as necessary parts of your life. You can ask yourself “Why” these are happening but this type of analysis will not take you very far. It returns you to your ego and its judgments. Simply befriend them, giving them a place in your awareness and trusting Trinity’s love to teach you will help you open to your soul.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. - PATHWAYS / Stillpoint

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Courting our Soul: Prayerful Meditation.

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We have been taught to “save our soul.” Later, as we matured and learned to relate to other people, we shift our focus to saving our soul by loving God – as if we have a clue about how to do either of these. Our mind can only think about facts and theories and opinions. Our emotions emote about joy, grief, anger and fear. Our will reduces us to efforts in pursuit of goals. And our ego settles for pride and shame in reaction to punishments and rewards. But in the depths of our soul is the experience of being Beloved expressions of Trinity’s love. We cannot save our souls, but we can open our souls to Trinity.

Our soul has room for God, as God is, beyond labels, expectations, judgments and dogmas. Our soul is awake to the grand vistas of Trinity’s presence as the source of our self and our living.

The consistently overwhelming experience of the saints and mystics is that God has loved them. God desires us and creates our desire to be loved and to be loving. God is the doer, the Source who seduces us. All we can do is respond with what God gives us. As Meister Elkhart said, “The love by which we love God is the very same love with which God has first loved us.”

The saints and mystics have been ravished, seduced, drown in unconditional love, drawn closer and closer in intimate belonging, filled with an immense and humble gratitude that responds in humble compassion, generosity, and spontaneous love. This is why they are so passionately about God and dedicated to living in God. Their experience brings them to trust and desire so passionately that they cannot help but respond. This love affair is intimately personal, unique and special – to everyone, to all God choose to create.

The church, and even more so its worship, is meant to lift us up into the wonder and awe of this Trinitarian (because we are made in the image of Trinity) relationship with Trinity and all creation. Here are a series of short prayers that can help point your awareness to this deep inner reality of who you are as soul, as intimately held in existence by Trinity.

As spiritual beings we emerge from the heart of God. We do not cause this emergence, but we can participate in it through awareness, desire and disciplined choices. Since God’s love is unconditional we learn to resonate with it by developing unconditional awareness of our self and our experience. Here are some short prayers that express the reality of who we are because of who God is.

You can begin by taking a few deep breaths and reminding yourself that the God who loves us unconditionally is not the goal of our prayer and meditation, but the Source. Every moment of our lives,

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every bit of our experience is immersed in unconditional loving Presence. As you slowly repeat these prayers allow them to express your own reality. You may want to pray some of them two or three times.

I am a spiritual human being...

At this moment I am loved unconditionally for all of who I am...

I exist at this moment because I am being loved into existence...

I am an act of *God's* love...

I emerge form the heart of *God* as an expression of love...

As an act of *God's* love I am enjoying...

As an act of *God's* love I am loving...

As an act of *God's* love I hunger for...

As an act of *God's* love I want to...

As an act of *God's* love I desire because I am desired.

As an act of *God's* love I am the one who is here and now, alive in this moment...

As an act of *God's* love I have a body, but I am more than my body.

As an act of *God's* love I have feelings and emotions, but I am more than my feelings and emotions.

As an act of *God's* love I have thoughts and ideas but I am more than these thoughts and ideas.

As an act of *God's* love I have judgments and expectations and patterns of doing things, but I am more than these judgments, expectations and patterns.

As an act of *God's* love I am reading these words, seeing through these eyes...

As an act of *God's* love I am because you love me Lord...

As an act of your love I am free to love...

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As an act of your love I have always been me, known me because you have chosen me.

As an act of your love I am you loving all that is.

As an act of your love I am...

Integrating this prayerful meditation:

Whatever you are experiencing at this moment is a mixture of your unique personality, your history and your choices in which is God is present, loving you for all of who you are. Asking God to help you be present to this moment with love will help you resonate to God's presence and let God love as you. Who you are at this moment is the fertile soil out of which God is growing you.

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I spent a lot of time in the last two weeks watching the political conventions. I can't say that my opinions about either party have changed much. That's not surprising. It's very clear to me that I start with a point of view and I want that point of view affirmed. And it was affirmed far more by one party than the other. Everything they said made sense to me, while the other party left me cold. And yet when I listened to the commentators they said exactly the opposite. The party they favored made sense while the other party only told lies. We all start with a point of view that creates our perceptions. So how do we arrive at "truth?"

At the same time I was very much aware that my point of view is not "the truth" or "the answer." I carry this paradox around within me: I am stuck on my point of view and I want you to agree with it, but I don't think that my point of view is the answer. It's just the best I can do at this moment. That doesn't make it correct. And still the other point of view makes no sense. I'd love to be open to it and let it balance my point of view, but when it is presented in conflict with my point of

view I respond defensively rather than openly. And so does the person with a contrary point of view.

And here's the thing, I'm very much bothered when people believe that their point of view is "correct" without any doubt. I don't understand how they can be so convinced. Mostly because, the bottom line for me is that there is no simple and correct solution. Life is far too complex to be reduced to "an answer" or "the truth." I believe that life is lived by engaging in it and reflecting on it with other people.

But when people are totally convinced by their point of view then they can't engage in the complexity of living. There is no chance for wisdom. Living is reduced to moralism and their point of view is at best a half truth, but usually not even that. It often demonizes the opposite point of view and judges it with half-truths.

For most of my priesthood I've had the tremendous good fortune to be with groups of people who can share their opinions without imposing them. As a matter of fact I do my best to avoid people who just get angry and insist on their opinion. I know from experience that there will be no real conversation. I end up reacting, getting angry myself and defensive and often take the opposite point of view in defiance. That does me no good and goes absolutely nowhere.

On the other hand I've come to treasure discussions and the people sharing them, when there's a gentleness and acceptance among the group. A humble gentleness and willingness to explore is essential for a conversation. When this happens there is room for the vulnerability needed to give us a creative and inclusive dialogue. At the end of these kinds of encounters I feel graced and engaged. I feel like I'm a better person just from being with these people.

I believe that this kind of conversation is essential for my spiritual development. Traditionally people have gone to gurus or spiritual directors for the help they need in further development. I hope this doesn't just show my arrogance but in my forty years of being a priest I've run into few people who had answers for me. I believe, and it is my experience, that a group of people who are comfortable

enough with themselves and one another to be vulnerable, are my best spiritual advisors. I also believe that this group needs a mix of personalities and the complementarity of female and male participants.

All of this is a complicated introduction to this simple insight; to live in the graced reality of the present moment needs the support and presences of respectful, humble, explorers. To be in the present moment is all about presence, being present openly and honestly with as little guile as possible, without our egos getting in the way and without condemning them when they do show up.

Presence is a basic way of being that allows us to relate to the “truth” of the moment. And it is in the full truth of the moment that we become alert to the reality of our intimacy with God.

Let me return to my opening observations. I believe we have degenerated into a egocentric, radically self-centered and defensive and compulsively aggressive approach that blinds us to the reality of the present moment. This is increasingly clear in our public, political discourse. The calculating mind of the ego reads everything in terms of personal advantage, short-term effort, and “What’s in it for me?” And then, to bolster an advantage, it turns the other half of the truth in terms of “wrong” and “the enemy.” As far as I can see, and I worry that my seeing is just another half-truth, we don’t need different ideas, we need a more spiritual approach to reality. The spiritual mind, built on meditation and prayer, see beyond the ego, to a more inclusive and creatively open ended perspective. It can do this only when it is rooted in the real presence of divinely unconditional love.