

The Minister and Process Spirituality

by Rev. Arthur W. Chang

The Outpost of Consciousness

God does not make dull nor limited lives. Human experience of dullness and limitation are not true barometers of the state of our lives; they are disguised calls to life's adventure that go often unnoticed because we are living a life of inattention to the spiritual signs. Dullness and limitation then, are Spirit's cattle prods for nudging us on, and along, our path.

In an expanding universe, each person is an outpost of evolution, a jumping-off point to a place where consciousness has not gone before. In the Arthurian tales, that outpost is symbolized by a knight coming to the edge of the dark forest where there is no path and recognizing that if there were a path, it would not be his, but someone else's.

Each human, as indeed each expression of creation, is a frontier of Spirit and wherever there is such a great unknown, there is the adventure awaiting the spiritual hero who is willing to accept it and readily shrug off dullness and limitation. Paraphrasing Rumi, he says, "I knock on the door, it opens. I have been knocking from the inside," and Howard Thurman says, "Grow and unfold until goodness becomes Godness." For so it is we are knocking from the inside and unfolding into God. And how dull and limited could it be for one who knows that she is unfolding into the Allness of God.

The Minister's Role

How then will a currently unwatchful and insensitive everyday consciousness, which tends to confuse a foxhole with a grave, find his way out of dullness and limitation? How does such a one find his or her true path? This is where the minister who understands process spirituality comes in. For the minister's role is not appropriately one of critic or judge, it is rather one of helping the community to heighten its awareness of spiritual clues and their meanings for finding and staying on the path.

It is the minister's role to assist the community to interpret the clues of ordinary life-like extracting gold nuggets lodged in the common dirt of everyday concerns. Insightfully, Jesus observes that, "Spiritual things are to be spiritually discerned," and further, that "The blind cannot lead the blind because they will fall into a ditch." As an Apache stalks his prey by reading the most subtle changes in the hostile desert environment, so must a minister, an Apache of the Spirit, stalk for traces of God, reading the clues from the harsh

terrain of pairs of opposites when others do not. When others see in part and prophesy in part, ministers must attempt to see the whole, both in terms of understanding the wounded person and in seeing the Wholeness of God in her affairs.

Nor can a minister be content to be a person of mere faith, pulling along the heavy cart of fixed beliefs like a harnessed mule with blinders on. For while faith causes us to initiate our life's journey, it is experience that lets us know "the Truth." It is the experience of Truth that sets us free from limitation and dullness.

In each ordination we read Ernest Holmes' words, "I would rather see a student who can demonstrate one of these principles than one who can quote all the great works of the world." Let us be clear that Holmes, always the student and scholar of the great wisdom traditions of the world, did not intend an anti-intellectual bias, for it was the same Holmes who also said, "We read every man's Bible and we take truth wherever we find it and make it our own to the extent we understand it." Holmes' emphasis here was rather a kind of Gnosticism, direct and personal experience that takes us from mere faith to knowledge.

Ironically, it was Gnosticism that was excluded from the Christian Bible by the early church fathers. In so doing, they chose to make organized religion and conformity to a fixed faith, more important than each person's spiritual experience of God, and so perhaps raised the functionary above the mystic.

Even today we continue to have two traditions of ministers: one that stops at faith, where one's church organization sets the boundaries of truth; and the other that explores what is beyond the known boundaries and, in so doing, arrives at experience of the Great Unknown. I say "Great Unknown," because God is infinite potential and cannot be known, but through evolution is forever being revealed.

Knowing is both gnosis and process, and the following two stories will demonstrate the difference between direct knowledge of (gnosis), versus merely knowing about, something.

My first example is taken from Greek mythology. When Odysseus is confronted with having to kill a priest or a poet, he kills the priest. Why? Odysseus kills the priest because one should not kill a poet who speaks directly with the gods or the muses. The implication is clear. While a priest is a functionary of the gods he worships, the poet, to be successful, must converse directly with the muses, the gods of inspiration. The priest has knowledge about his god, while the poet has direct knowledge of the gods.

Wrestling with the Angel

In the second story we find Jacob wrestling all night with God or an angel. As it dawns, the Being of darkness, signifying the being of the unknowable Mystery, must depart. It must not be captured by the crass and banal forms and boundaries of day, for the light of day reveals the illusion, or Maya of multiplicity, duality or pairs of opposites. God, the Undifferentiated Oneness of the universe, is at once the Divine Dark, and paradoxically, that "light that shines in the darkness and the darkness grasps it not." It is not just the darkness that cannot grasp God, for neither can words grasp God. Thus, Adolph Bastian says, "The best things cannot be told, the second best things are always misunderstood, and the third best things, are what we talk about." This is why God is described as the unknowable Mystery.

Nonetheless, having wrestled with God all night, Jacob, like the Buddha, has arrived at his sacred spot, the World Navel, the jumping-off spot into knowledge of God, and the anteroom for spiritual transformation. Here he intuits that this was no ordinary being with which he wrestles and chooses the precise moment, to move into accord with it, by asking for the blessing. Jacob, hearing that the angel must leave because it was dawning, experienced his own spiritual dawning, and intuitively tells the angel that, "I will not let you go before you bless me."

Such a moment for the minister/mystic, as it was for Jacob, is the fecund womb of spiritual rebirth; it is where time and eternity become one in a mystic marriage. It is where names and categories no longer apply and this is signaled by the angel's seemingly absurd question, "What is your name?" "Jacob" he says.

The word Jacob means, "heel grasper," for it was Jacob, the second of fraternal twins from Rebecca's womb, who came out holding on to the heel of his brother, Esau. Esau means "the red hairy one." But "heel grasper" does not tell the whole story of this smooth-skinned, smooth-talking, mother-adored, con-man. There is more, for Jacob is, in addition, a usurper, one who steals the power of another for himself.

In the final analysis, the angel, a being of transformation, gives Jacob a new name: Israel-that means "he who strives with God"-and consequently a new nature, one that is in accord with God, the Great Wholeness.

As Jacob's local struggles with his brother escalated into a cosmic wrestling match with his God, so it is with the minister who struggles with this teaching of the Science of Mind. The minister must engage the process of his own internal dialogue, he must "live the questions" as Rilke urges us to do, and arrive at an experiential grasp of cosmic principles. Like the poet in the story of Odysseus, or like Jacob in his wrestling with the angel, both symbolizing a realm of higher consciousness, the minister ready for spiritual transformation enters the fecund womb, or as cosmologist Brian Swimme calls it, the "fecund abyss."

The Jacobean wrestling with God is Process Spirituality, named after Process Philosophy as developed by philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. Independent of Whitehead, I had developed a Process Science of Mind as a reaction to what I first encountered at Founder's, where some people merely insisted on my teaching what I call Product Science of Mind. (Rod Carter, a practitioner and Board member here at Founder's, too has independently developed a Process Science of Mind that is more congruent with classical Process Philosophy).

What is Process Spirituality?

What is Process Spirituality? Perhaps a good example is Cervantes' insight, "The road is more important than the inn." In this statement, Cervantes clearly understood that what we pursue and attain is not nearly as important as what we become along the journey. Jacob was at first pursuing worldly riches and achieved it, but who would deny that his true prize was what he became-Israel?

Another similar example is to be found in the story of the Buddha. To say that Buddha gave up earthly riches to be enlightened would be simplistic. Buddha's story demonstrates that the real value of spiritual life is experience, or gnosis, rather than the things collected along the way. It is for this reason that the mystic, Rabbi Abraham Heshel, says, "Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy."

Life is process. And while we all have a stake in its products-the things we achieve and receive-when we become collectors out of control, we may be reasonably cautioned that "we are called human beings, and not human doings." No one says it better than Lao Tzu who does not separate being from doing but unifies them in his characteristically terse way: "The way to do is to be." Further, another wise adage readily bursts upon the mind like a mid-day, desert sun: "Be careful that in throwing out your devils, you do not throw out what is best in you." And so it is that we should be careful that, in emphasizing being, we, the frontier of God's evolution, do not devalue becoming. Was this not precisely why God created the universe, to become all this? "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." Did Ernest Holmes not say, "We can only know what we demonstrate"? But look what happens in our understanding with the smallest change to Holmes' statement: "We can only know what we experience," and this is process. This is where the rubber of time meets the road of eternity and that is at the point of experience-gnosis.

Jesus cautions his listeners "Do not judge by appearances." Yet, we all want to be healthy, rich, happy, and to live forever. Living eternally in each moment comes when we live with spiritual attention. Can we really have it all? Did Jesus not say, "Fear not little flock, it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." It seems that we can, in process. We can become richer, happier and more vital by changing the way we approach life, even to the extent that definite changes on the outer take place. Dr. Holmes seems to take Jesus'

statement further. He says, "The gift is already given," which is to say that everything that is to come to us from God, has already been given.

Because of the minister's emphasis on process, we can live in that province in consciousness where the kingdom of heaven is within and around us, or we can live in the consciousness that defers the moment of happiness, making it contingent on something to get, instead of realizing Spirit here and now. For example we may say, "I will be happy when I win the lotto, have the perfect mate, or become as physically gifted as a Michael Jordan."

The minister/mystic, the teacher of process spirituality will say: live in the fecund womb of heaven now, and give birth to the Originating impulse of the creative Spirit that exclaims, the Father and I are one-now! And life is good-now!

God does not, will not, and cannot make a dull, limited life, and the minister engaged in process spirituality will remind us that our failings will never be because we did not get something we were after, but that we did not become the person for which our search for things was an enticement. "The way to do is to be."

The process minister is an Apache of Spirit, the Alpha and the Omega of our very existence.