

8

Spirituality and Healing

In communion with God ... Memory is transformed into Hope; Understanding is transformed into Faith; Will is transformed into Love.

— *St. John of the Cross*

The promise of God means the promise of every person and every situation. The world is promising because God has promised to be there. The faithfulness of God is ... loving attention and responsiveness to the world he has made.... Contemplation leads us to the reality of God, whose being is in self-communicating.

— *A Ray of Darkness*, Rowan Williams,
Archbishop of Canterbury

A friend recently wrote me the following reflection:

I experienced a beautiful metaphor a few days ago. The city was overshadowed by storm clouds in an arc over the sky, and as I watched across the harbour, the sun spread from the horizon, reflected on the underside of the dark clouds. This created a mirage effect, bringing the outline of the Niagara coast up clear, brightly lit and much closer than usual. We need to believe that the Darkness can give opportunity for the Light to shine brighter and clearer than usual.

How often in families we are challenged by storm clouds, and need to hold to the promise and receive the vision that the light of God's love shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot put it out.

Commenting on such moments of awareness in her own life, Renita Weems writes,

Such rare and unforeseeable moments find me tripping toward a purpose, stumbling upon an insight, backing up into God. When I recognize this Presence, it leaves me incapable of speech, embarrassed by my ignorance, and wanting to take my shoes off — for I know I am on holy ground [*The Other Side*, Philadelphia, 1999].

The word *spirituality* comes from the same root as the word for breath. It literally means “that which gives us breath” or “breathes through us.” Our spirituality is that which moves us, which motivates us, inspires us, directs us. It is not external to us but is part of who we are. “It is a cliché that spirituality today is just another commodity, an aspect of consumer choice with its own designer range.... [Ultimately] it will be shaped and formed by that toward which we reach out, for which we yearn” [Kathy Galloway, *The Other Side*, 2004].

I have been moved by the spiritual essence and the yearnings of people I've met over the past few years, while researching stories about healing and hope in preparation for a book entitled *Who Can Heal Us?* [Eleutheria Publishing, 2004]. The book was created by Kathryn Eve and Naureen Shah (a Christian and a Muslim) and myself. We have photographed and collected stories of more than seventy remarkable people living in the city of Toronto. Many of the people we have met are refugees from very different parts of the world. They and their families have come to Canada

in the wake of political or economic wars, religious persecution, or natural disasters such as earthquakes, famine, or flood.

Most of those whose stories are told in the book have experienced profound suffering and loss. All are people of religious faith, or with spiritual practices that may not be codified into a set of religious beliefs. Whether Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, agnostic or searcher, these people have taken the raw material of their lives and found meaning and purpose not only in living, but also in starting again. Some have lost family members, jobs, or professions; others, their health and strength. Many have been diagnosed as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They are people who have channeled their suffering into art, music, dance, theatre; into writing, political action, justice-seeking, healing.

As a Christian, I have found interviewing these people to be a spiritual encounter, just as I have also found working with clients for thirty years in my profession. The stories of people's lives and journeys have brought into focus for me the question, How do we as human beings make meaning in our lives? What are the symbols that we use to organize into purposeful living our need for community and connection, for being and belonging, as well as for doing?

As a therapist, and as one who trains marriage and family therapists, I am intrigued by the variety of ways in which people search for and experience intimacy — intimacy with self, with others, with God. The word *intimacy* is derived from the Latin *intima*, meaning "inner or innermost." So the sense of touching our innermost core is the essence of intimacy. This is part of what I define as a spiritual quest, and it is heightened today in our society as we witness a renewed hunger for the sacred permeating all areas of post-modern life.

Several factors seem to be fueling an awakening to the importance of taking seriously the spiritual reality of life, among them social isolation, lack of community, long working hours, lack of ability to cope with increased technological advances, an awareness of the ecological crisis, and the desire to reconnect with nature. Books, television programs, tapes and CDs, as well as film and theatre, music and art, are reflecting this societal search for the sacred. Increasingly, sales of books on religion, spirituality, and inspiration are now outpacing other categories.

Counselling and spirituality

There is an increasing demand from church people and clients that not only clergy, but also psychotherapists (including marriage and family therapists) take seriously the spiritual dimension of human experience. Paralleling this is psychotherapy's own evolution toward a bio-psycho-social model of treatment.

More practitioners are now properly recognizing the inextricable interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit; they understand that reducing human beings to mere biological processes or behavioural programming is misguided. As eminent family therapist William Doherty has pointed out, psychotherapies have often failed in the past to help their clients deal with moral issues. Doherty postulates that "interpersonal morality," the consequences of one's behaviour on the welfare of other people, has been lost in the psychotherapeutic paradigm [*Soul Searching: Why Psychotherapy Must Promote Moral Responsibility*, 1995].

Clergy, therapists, doctors, social workers, and other helping professionals are challenged to be compassionate and hospitable as people come to us and invite us into the sacred space of their

life journey of becoming more fully human. Dr. Hugh Drouin, an Anglican who was director of Family Services Ontario, wrote in *Family Times* [Toronto, Winter 2001]:

People are suffering because they do not feel loved and appreciated and this neglect is eating away at their souls.... As healers, it is our responsibility to keep the doors of our lives and our places of work open to expressions of love and support. If we are compassionate and sensitive to the needs and inner struggling of others, we will never miss an opportunity to express to them our gratitude and appreciation for the people they are.

And Christian ethicist and therapist James Olthius emphasizes that “the art of counselling is not something we do to others, but something we do together.” He sees any helping relationship, and the process of therapy itself, as being “an emotional-spiritual process in which we journey together in the hope of healing” [*The Beautiful Risk*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001].

In working with families, I am challenged and intrigued by the answers I hear when searching to discover how family members (children included) find meaning. Questions such as *What nurtures your spirit? What gives you a sense of rootedness? What gives you joy?* evoke diverse responses such as art and music, prayer and worship, reading and cooking, laughter and the theatre, my cultural identity, growing things, being with friends, walking in nature, having a family meal, playing with my children, celebrating special events with friends and family.

But one doesn't have to be a professional to be a counsellor to, or within, families. Wise elders, friends, and even the youngest among us can give help and inspire hope at times of darkness, despair, and grief within a family's journey. We all need to be reminded at such times to draw on our deepest reservoirs of

faith, courage, and hope, and to know that we are held in the light of God's love.

Families may be the source of one's darkness and pain, but they may also be the centre from which we draw new life. In the words of Thomas Merton, "As long as we are on earth, the love that unites us will bring us suffering by our very contact with one another. Because of this, love is the resetting of a body of broken bones." Often, this is what we do in our families — reset emotional and spiritual "bones" broken by life's hurts and losses.

Life passages

Family life is full of passages from birth to death, from joy to sorrow. It encompasses a wide range of human experiences. Some bring fulfillment, others bring a sense of failure. Children and adults experience various stages of growth — from the dependency of infants, through the search for independence in adolescence, through young adult and mid-life maturity, and into another dependency of old age. Throughout these life cycles, there are times of mourning and rejoicing. In the words of the writer of Ecclesiastes, there is a time for every season. This applies to all stages of life, but is especially pertinent when we consider family life.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

a time to kill and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace
[Ecclesiastes 3:1–8].

Perhaps the greatest gift that parents and grandparents can give their children to meet the challenges of life, is the call to seek the wisdom that comes from God.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.
Hear, my child, your father's instruction,
and do not reject your mother's teaching;
for they are a fair garland for your head,
and pendants for your neck
[Proverbs 1:7–9].

Words hold great power in children's hearts and minds. Do we ourselves speak wisdom, or do we give children stones instead of the bread of life to nourish their spirits? The Bible encourages us to teach children to love God and to follow God's way of loving one's neighbour as one's self. If they walk in this path, children will receive God's wisdom.

My child, if you accept my words
and treasure up my commandments within you,
making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;

if you indeed cry out for insight,
and raise your voice for understanding;
if you seek it like silver,
and search for it as for hidden treasures —
then you will understand the fear of the Lord
and find the knowledge of God.
For the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding
[Proverbs 2:1–6].

How we make sense of, and find meaning in, our own lives is reflected in the stories we tell about ourselves. But when a person loses touch with his or her own story, then they become profoundly lost. This is the experience described by many who become addicts, cut off from their spiritual centre. Alcoholics Anonymous and other Twelve Step programs help people to explore and rediscover their own stories, and to find the confidence to tell others in a safe environment. Letting oneself be known in such a context is a profoundly spiritual experience, and has given renewed life and restored health to thousands who have walked this path of healing.

Each passage of life has its own season of weeping and laughter, mourning and dancing, seeking and losing, breaking down and building up. The infant learning to walk, falling down, getting up again — until the exuberance and joy of mastering each step comes to fruition. The four-year-old child, leaving home for the first time to begin school — tentative at first, afraid of losing the security of the familiar, then learning to laugh and sing with classmates. The primary student making the first faltering attempts at learning to read, until attaining the joyous sense of accomplishment at understanding words and sentences.

The adolescent, seeking independence, finding her first job, and receiving her first paycheque. The young adult, falling in and out of love, being heartbroken, then experiencing the ecstasy

of connecting with someone who can become a soul mate. Or perhaps not, and then learning the rich rewards of singleness. The mid-life adult, caught between adolescent children and aging parents, stressed at work and at home, but then finding the renewal of joy that comes with new beginnings. The elderly person, lamenting failing health and lost independence, and grieving the loss of lifelong partners and friends, and learning an acceptance of aging and the generosity of sharing wisdom with younger generations.

God has so beautifully created us that we can experience the diversity of life's passages and never stop growing, learning, rejoicing. This is the essence of our spirituality, of our createdness, of our calling — to know God and enjoy the abundance of God's creation, the dance of life. But the brokenness of the world and our own personal griefs and burdens rob us and defeat us, and we forget the steps of the dance. We gradually lose our sense of wonder and gratitude, and find ourselves vulnerable to anxiety, discouragement, estrangement, and a deep sadness. At such times, when we have forgotten who we are, we need the community of church and the embrace of friends or family to hold us up, and to remind us that we are loved.

Jesus and hospitality

The gift of hospitality is spoken of frequently in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. We are called to welcome the stranger, to share our possessions with others, to “bear one another’s burdens.” Jesus himself modelled for us compassion and openness to the outsider, ministering healing and comfort to the marginalized and outcast, to those wounded in body, mind, and spirit. He shared his life with his friends and disciples, and the women and men who followed him were characterized by a common life.

When Jesus saw his disciples turning away any who came to him, he rebuked them. He welcomed the lepers, the tax collectors, and the mothers and children who pushed to see him. He noticed and praised the tithing of a poor widow, and his stories told of a generous father welcoming home a wayward son, of a woman finding a lost coin, and a shepherd searching for a stranded lamb. The gospels reveal that at times of loss and grief, Jesus comforts; at times of resistance and ignorance, Jesus confronts; at times of awareness of brokenness and sin, Jesus forgives; at times of celebration and awakening, Jesus rejoices.

As his followers, we are called to do no less. In our own simple everyday acts, we too can do what Jesus did. When we touch others physically or emotionally or psychologically, when we encourage others and treat them as brothers or sisters within the beloved community, then we are part of the healing dance that Christ came to establish among his followers. When we bring our griefs to the foot of the cross, we are called by Christ to be agents of reconciliation. And within the community of the family, with our partners, our children, our families and friends, we are moved to comfort, confront, forgive, and rejoice.

Beginnings and endings

Life in families challenges us with beginnings, with transitions, and with endings. There is a time for connecting, and a time for establishing boundaries. There is a time for changing, and a time to consolidate those changes. There is a time for moving, and a time for staying rooted. The Christian life, lived in family, is a journey from birth to death, the path weaving at times through rocky terrain, through barren wastelands, and through lush and verdant pastures. But there is always God's sustaining promise:

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil ...
Your rod and your staff shall comfort me
[Psalm 23].

When a child or spouse rejects us, when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death of a loved one or of a broken relationship or promise, when our hearts feel smashed into a thousand pieces, then God the Comforter comes to guide our path and to sustain in us a glimmer of hope, to feed and nurture us at the banqueting table, to restore our souls.

“Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,” says Jesus. This, too, applies to life in families. Rest, when we are stretched to the limit; rest, when we are so busy there is no time to relax; rest, when we are discouraged and downhearted; rest, when we are grief-stricken. Whether we are parent, child, sibling, grandparent, aunt, uncle, cousin — we all find ourselves somewhere in a family circle. Is it a welcoming circle? Or does it banish members or erect barricades against life?

Ultimately, our families are sacred circles, created to be places where we learn to face the challenges of life and hear the music of forgiveness. And though at times the music is faint and we stumble and fall, families help us to learn and live the complex steps of the dance that is called Love.

God, kindle thou in my heart within
A flame of love to my neighbour,
To my foe, to my friend, to my kindred all,
To the brave, to the knave, to the thrall,
From the lowliest thing that livest,
To the name that is highest of all
— Celtic Prayer [*God Under My Roof*, Esther de Waal].