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Finding Yourself on the Spiritual Journey

Surrender and the Spiritual Journey

Surrender is the heart of Christian spirituality because it is the path of Christ. For those of us who call ourselves Christ followers it must therefore be our path.

Jesus described himself as “the Way” – that is, the route to God (John 14:6). This became one of the earliest means of referring to Christians who were often described as being “followers of the Way” (Acts 9:2). But what was this way? What is the path that we follow when we follow Jesus?

Christian spirituality is a path of descent, not ascent. Although we sometimes treat it as a spirituality of self improvement through movement up a ladder of successive approximations to holiness, it is a spirituality of following Jesus on a journey of self-emptying. It is a path of dying to everything within us that is false so that we might discover and become the truth of our being-in-Christ. Self-emptying is the core reality underlying every moment of Jesus’ human journey. In the words of Cynthia Bourgeault, “Self emptying is what first brings him into human form, and self emptying is what leads him out, returning him to the realm of dominion and glory. Whether he is moving ‘down’ or ‘up’ the great chain of being, the gesture remains the same.”

As Jesus pointed out, in order to truly find our life we must first lose it (Matthew 16:24-25).

Surrender is the indispensable gateway to life, genuine freedom and the fulfillment of humanity. We will, however, always resist it when we approach it from the perspective of the ego because to the ego, surrender is diminishment. This is precisely why it is so important.

The truth is that we must all surrender to something or someone. To refuse to find our place in relation to that which transcends the ego is to be in bondage to futile attempts to be in control. If we do not become free in relation to the something or someone larger than our self, we become unfree in relation to tyrannizing powers within our self that we have inflated into god-like proportions.

The egoic path of ascent is the way of control, willfulness, grasping and clutching. The spiritual path of descent is the way of surrender, willingness and letting go. Nothing that we fail to release will ever truly be really ours. Only that which has died can be raised from the dead and be truly and fully alive.

—From the epilogue of *Surrender to Love*

Identity and the Spiritual Journey

Our identity is something we take for granted. We may have some memory of how much we struggled to find a way of being in the world as adolescents and assume that once we settled into early adulthood, the issue of our identity was behind us. But this confuses our persona and our identity. Our persona is how we want others to see us. Our identity is how we see and understand our self.

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David G. Benner (PhD, York University) is an internationally known depth psychologist, transformational coach and author whose life passion has been helping people walk the human path in a deeply spiritual way and the spiritual path in a deeply human way. Some of his books include *Presence and Encounter*, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*, *Sacred Companions* and *Soulful Spirituality*.

This continues to develop through life. If it didn't retain some fluidity, transformation of our self would not be possible. However, because human transformation at its core is the transformation of identity, all other changes that are part of the transformational journey flow from this.

But what is our identity at any point in time? Although it could sound like a tautology, our identity is based on the things with which we most identify. For example, if we identify with power, our identity will be based on our sense of our power. Or if we identify with success, our identity will be based on our sense of our success.

To get a sense of your identity, notice how you introduce yourself to others. Perhaps you describe yourself in terms of your work, your accomplishments, your family or your beliefs. Each in turn gives us a snapshot of your identity. Each also, of course, reflects something of your persona (how you want others to see you), but more importantly each provides a good window in on how you see yourself.

Once you get your identity in focus and begin to look more carefully at it, you will also notice how it reflects what psychologists call dis-identifications – that is, people you definitely do not want to be like. Often these start with one or both of your parents, but they need not be limited to one's family or childhood. When noticing a dis-identification you will often be struck by the amount of energy and strength of emotions that are associated with this.

This sort of investment of emotional energy always betrays a strong attachment – whether this is an attachment of identification or dis-identification. Both powerfully shape our sense of self. Observing and reflecting even more deeply on your identity you will often notice that it rests on an even deeper foundation. At its core the default identity for most people in the West is that of a separate self. There are, of course, an infinite number of places where we can draw the line between self and non-self. Extreme separation of self involves a profound existential sense of alienation and aloneness. But this is softened as the boundary is re-drawn to define self in terms that take account of family or those who share my gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, politics, religion, theology or something else.

But the transformation of identity that I am describing when I talk about realizing that my deepest self is Christ-in-me is more than an enlargement of these boundaries. It involves something much more profound. It challenges the distinction between self and non-self that we all tend to live with. And it profoundly challenges the sense of separateness that typically forms the foundation of our identity.

— From the epilogue of *The Gift of Being Yourself*

The Heart of the Spiritual Journey

When I ask Christians what first comes to their mind when I speak the word “heart” many say “evil.” They may be remembering the words of the prophet Jeremiah when he spoke of the heart as being desperately wicked and deceitful (Jeremiah 17:9), or Jesus’ teaching that it is from the heart that all that is evil emerges (Mark 7:21). It’s no wonder they mistrust anything called the heart.

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Western culture also provides a set of associations to the nonphysical heart that seriously distort its essential nature. Under the influence of Valentine's Day and Hallmark cards, perhaps you think of emotions when I speak of the heart. But the spiritual heart I am referring to has very little to do with personal affectivity and absolutely nothing to do with gushing sentimentality or softheadedness. It is, therefore, quite different from the heart as understood by both biblical literalists and popular culture.

"David Benner never disappoints. He is intelligent without being academic, psychologically astute without being trendy, spiritually profound without being pious. He clearly knows the landscape from which he dares to speak."

— **Richard Rohr**, OFM, Center for Action and Contemplation, Albuquerque, New Mexico

I draw my understanding of the heart from the perennial wisdom tradition – the tradition that Cynthia Bourgeault and others have argued shaped Jesus' understanding of the inner life and its transformation. Within the wisdom tradition, the heart is the fullness of the mind. It is not, therefore, something that can be reduced to emotions, and rather than being the source of human evil, it is understood as a way of accessing wisdom.

The mind is much more than reason and thought. It also includes such subtle and generally underdeveloped faculties as intuition, imagination, symbol formation, listening to our bodies and attending to our deep emotions, moods and shifting ego states. All these are not less than rational but more than rational. They are, therefore, transrational. They include reason but transcend and integrate it within other deeper faculties of the heart.

The heart has a bigger perspective than the mind. It can see further than the mind because it draws its data from all levels of reality – including but never limited to the mind. The heart is our spiritual center because it is the seat of imagination and intuition. It is the heart that dreams and through our deepest desires leads us forward. Unlike ego, the heart doesn't perceive by differentiation but by means of its inherent resonance with wholeness, oneness, harmony, proportion and beauty. There should be no surprise therefore that it is the heart that has long been recognized in spiritual teaching as the core of our being.

We see this understanding and emphasis in the teaching of Jesus that the heart determines everything we do, say and think (Matthew 6:21; Luke 2:19), and that it is the pure in heart that would see God (Matthew 5:8). This is why cleansing of the lens of the heart allows us to see and love God. Summarizing this understanding of the heart, St. Augustine tells us that the whole purpose of life is to restore to health the eye of the heart, for it is by this that God may be seen and known to be within.

The core of the transformational journey is aligning our heart and mind. In Eastern Orthodox Christianity this is described as the journey of the mind down into the heart, something understood to lie at the core of the purification of the passions. Like a bird going back to its nest at the close of the day, the spiritual journey involves the mind settling into its home in the heart, thus allowing it to access the deeper sources of wisdom that it contains. This is what is involved in taking on the heart and mind of Christ. This is the heart of what is involved in allowing our hearts and minds to be aligned with the heart and mind of Christ.

— From the epilogue of *Surrender to Love*