

frequently stated assumption that humans are superior to the other creatures because we have self-awareness, or consciousness, or intelligence, or whatever you want to call it. We don't know for sure whether this is true or not. But even if it is so, is this "special quality" of human life a blessing or a curse? It is probably both. How wonderful that we can be aware of our lives and life around us, that we can think about things, examine things, make conscious decisions. And yet, we are also, for the same reason, prone to worry, anxiousness, and incessant dissatisfaction. We are always trying to make ourselves or the world better, and seldom are we capable of accepting life as it is, our own lives included. We obsess about material well-being to the point of not enjoying what we do have or to the point of greed and the draining of earth's resources.

Pay attention to the birds and the flowers, says Jesus. Learn from them what it means to live your life from a basic spiritual contentment and trust. If we can learn to do this, then we will be able to give our fullest attention to the things that matter most in life—the kingdom of God, Jesus calls it. Life as the realm of God's love and purposes. Pay greatest attention to God's dream for life and God's righteousness, the ways of living that serve life. Then you will find everything else will not matter so much and you will have the other things you need for life. Is this view of life naïve? I think even a good many Christians believe it is. It seems rare to find those who really practice this way of living. But the deepest joy of Christian life and faith is found when we begin to put this into practice on a daily basis, and discover along the way that these words are actually true. We find that if we really try to live our lives with this kind of trust in God's care as we give our fullest attention to the things that matter most, we have all that we need. We discover that we really don't need all the things we thought we needed, all that our commercial, consumerist culture tells us we need.

I think we discover this when we give ourselves to a particular ministry or mission to which we feel called, something we feel God has given us to do for the sake of the world. When a mission group first forms, lots of concerns and worries arise: Where is the money going to come from? Where will we find the people who have the gifts we need? How in the world will we accomplish this thing we feel God has given us to do? That is why the mission group's inward journey is so crucial; it keeps us rooted in faith, in trust, in openness to God's care and leading. We find that if we remain centered in God and focused on the essence of the vision for mission God has given us, things unfold in surprising ways. It does not happen quickly and sometimes there are periods of severe doubt and struggle. Worry invades our hearts again and again. But if we are faithful and keep with it, calming our hearts and minds, paying attention to all that would teach us trust and faith, we discover the deep truth to which Jesus' words point. This is giving our attention to the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and finding that along the way we will have what we need.

May 25, 2008/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

Calming and Quieting Our Souls

Psalms 131

But I have calmed and quieted my soul....

Matthew 6:24-34 *"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life..."*

Psalms 131 is one of the briefest psalms, AND, to my mind, one of the most significant. At first, it might sound like a nice little devotional piece. A calm and quiet soul. How nice! But we may prefer the psalms that echo our sorrows and struggles. Or the ones that stir us to praise and make our hearts soar. Or the ones that speak of God's justice and arouse our activism. Psalms 131 is about not having lofty thoughts or soaring spiritual experiences or high moral purposes. It is about not letting our minds get lost in high and complex religious thoughts. It is perhaps about having no thoughts at all. It is about getting off the emotional or spiritual roller coaster—soaring to the heights, then plunging to the depths. It is a psalm of contemplation. Contemplation is about simply being present—to ourselves, to God, and to the world around us and in us. Anthony De Mello, the Indian-Jesuit-Christian spiritual teacher, said it is about one thing—awareness. Most of the time we are asleep—preoccupied with guilt, fear, worry, insecurity, hung up in the past or anticipating the future. The spiritual life is about waking up from all of that. When Jesus said repent, the kingdom of God is near, he meant, "Wake up! Live the way God made you to live, here and now." The first step is to become present and still.

I don't think I would have come to love this little psalm so deeply without the insights I have gained from Zen Buddhism. Twelve years ago, Pam Caldwell gave me a copy of Thich Nhat Hanh's PEACE IS EVERY STEP. I began learning about and working with this very simple spiritual practice. Zen Buddhist practice and insight has become a very important partner for my Christian faith. Some are suspicious of this—David has become a Buddhist! That's part of the problem with religion. We become so dualistic. Our religion is right; others are wrong. Someone has to have the truth (us, of course); someone has to be the "pagan," the "nonbeliever," the heretic (them). This rubbish has created religious hostility, extremism, and violence (physical and spiritual), and Christians have been chief contributors to it. You can be a deeply and completely committed follower of Jesus Christ and benefit greatly from what other spiritual practices and traditions have to offer. In fact, my experience has taught me that it is only in dialogue with others that our own faith deepens and comes more alive. If we are not open to this, we diminish our own spiritual life and have fully understood what Jesus was about. I will be saying more about that next Sunday.

Stopping and calming our souls, our lives. This is so important and really quite simple. The hard thing is doing it until it becomes for us the gateway into reality—the reality of ourselves, life around us, and God. Psalm 131 is a wonderful portrait of one who practices this kind of prayer. The heart is not “lifted up”. It is neither ecstatic nor sunk into despair or discouragement. The heart is in neutral, you might say. We don’t have to get on the roller coaster of our emotions. We have the capacity to simply acknowledge our emotional life. Oh, I have depression in me. Oh, there comes that old feeling of fear. Or, I have a feeling of excitement and joy this morning. Just acknowledge, don’t identify with them. That is what gets us into trouble. We sink into our feelings instead of being aware of them, looking into them, and learning from them what they teach us about ourselves. We lose the solidity that can give us deep joy and confidence, and also be a source of true help to others.

A basic practice of what we call the inward journey is the daily time we take for calming and quieting. We go to a quiet, familiar place set aside for our inward journey time. We sit comfortably, but straight, not slumping. We let our normal breathing bring us into the present, the here and the now—that is where God is, after all. We can practice not attaching ourselves to all the thoughts and feelings that are always floating or racing around our mind. Not driving them out. Not berating ourselves for having them, even the ones we find repulsive or shameful. Just being aware of them and not clinging to them. It takes practice, but we can do it.

“My eyes are not raised too high.” People meditating, whether Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, often sit with eyes slightly lowered, open but not wide, and letting the sight rest on a few feet from them. It is a way of also putting the sight in neutral. It is looking with “quiet and soft eyes,” as I have heard it said, not the “hard eyes” of anxiousness. This reminds us of the parable Jesus told about the Pharisee and the tax collector going to pray in the temple. The Pharisee looked brazenly to heaven, calling on God to recognize what an important and pious person he was. He is the spiritual achiever. The tax collector, very aware of his status in life, did not dare lift up his eyes. This is a physical way of expressing true humility, an awareness of our place in the grand scope of life.

The psalmist does not occupy himself with things too great and marvelous for him. Prayer is not thinking “real hard” about God. It is not about thinking at all, but awareness, being fully awake in the present moment, where we are. That is how we begin to understand what it means to listen to God and to hear God’s voice and to know where God is calling us. The psalmist knows that life is a tremendous mystery beyond his grasp and comprehension. He is at home with mystery, with not knowing. He is ready to listen, to receive, to be led.

We are so afraid of not knowing. Thinking we know something gives us a sense of control, of self-importance, of being in charge. This arises out of our insecurity. It is a losing battle. The more we feel we have to be in control, the more fearful and defensive

we are, ready to lash out at whoever and whatever feels like a threat. Our or any nation that points to its military might as a sign of strength reveals just the opposite about itself. It is the same with us as individuals or groups or religions—the more we try to pump up our bravado, the less secure we feel. The more we claim to know, the more uneasy we are with questions, with mystery. The heart of life and faith is trusting, not ourselves, but the essential mystery of life—God.

The psalmist then says that his soul is like a weaned child at its mother’s breast. The deepest satisfaction and peace comes from being at rest in our relationship with God. Not trying to achieve something. This is prayer with no other purpose than to know our own lives in God. This kind of inner peace is something that cannot be taken from us. It is the deep reservoir out of which the life of faith is lived and from which all of our service in the world arises and draws its fruitfulness.

That’s where the psalm ends: O Israel, hope in the Lord, now and forever. True hope does not come from predicting the future or spending our energies in anxiousness or worry. It comes from this calming and quieting of our souls, the center of our being, so that we touch our relationship with the very Source and Ground of Life, God.

Psalm 131 is a perfect fit with our reading from the Sermon on the Mount. Do not worry, says Jesus. The word can mean anxiousness or over-concern, or as we might say it today, stressed out. In Jesus’ view, our anxiety comes from trying to secure our own lives, feeling that we must and can control everything around us. We waste our lives in worry and anxiousness. Worrying does nothing to contribute to life; it takes away from life. I come from a family of great worriers. Worry about relatives. Worry about the world. Worry about money, health, and what people think about us. Worrying was deeply ingrained in me. As I have worked with this over the years, one simple practice has helped the most. It comes precisely from this teaching of Jesus. When I feel worry and anxiousness rising up in me, when I begin obsessing about whether this thing or that is going to work out, or about potential problems up ahead, I simply ask myself: How is worrying helping? The answer is, of course, not at all. This is very practical—Worry does not add one thing to life and our meeting of life’s challenges. It only makes things worse. The only solution is letting go, trusting, not clinging to life.

Where do you learn this, Jesus? And Jesus points to the birds. And the flowers blooming briefly in the field. Jesus was very aware of the creation and how benevolently our lives are intertwined with the world around us. If we pay attention, the world has many spiritual lessons to teach us. The birds fly around, seeking their food here and there. The flowers bloom for a brief time and are gone. Do they fret and worry and exhaust themselves about what they will eat or drink or wear? No. They live trustingly. Learn from them what it means to have faith, that is, trust in God’s knowing what you need and providing it. I have become amused in recent years by the