

Guidelines for Living in a More Spiritual Way

Philip Sheppard, March 22nd 2007

I've been pondering the phrase "Living in a more spiritual way" and it struck me that life and death are a wonderful paradox. Life and death go hand in hand; you can't have one without the other. A friend of mine was crying after his mother had died. His six year old niece looked up at him with a beaming smile and said: "Don't cry Uncle Ralph, old people have to die to make room for us." I predict a brilliant future for that little girl. Life on earth is evolving. Evolution is a process in which old life dies to make room for new life. Death is necessary for life to evolve. Without death there would be eternal stagnation. Death is the transition from one life to another. Life after death is another life. Without death the same life repeats endlessly. Death heightens the joy of life. Without death there would be no new life to delight the heart. Death urges us to live. Without the prospect of death there would be nothing to urge us to live life to the full before it is too late.

Now I am old I see life as a stream of blessings. Every moment of life is a blessing. Conception is the original blessing and death is the final blessing. But that is not what I was taught as a child. I was not taught about blessings; I was taught about sin. I was taught about original sin and final judgement. Life in between was a continuous temptation to sin. But that was a fear motivated religion. That religion was motivated by the fear of death. That religion dealt with the fear of death in this life by proposing a life after death. But that only postponed the fear and made it worse. It replaced the fear of death in this life by a far bigger fear; the fear of eternal punishment in the next. Looking back from old age I see my childhood religion as a cruel hoax. But as a child I took it seriously.

My childhood religion was handed down to me. It did not fit too well. In addition, being Roman Catholic, it was written in infallible ink. Any religion written in infallible ink is a dead religion. It cannot grow. I slowly outgrew my childhood religion. I looked at other hand-me-down religions but could not find a better alternative. Eventually I made up my own. I keep what works from any religion and discard the rest. And this is an ongoing process. My new religion is a living religion; it grows with me. It fits because it is tailored to my life, but it would not fit anyone else. It is always changing so it cannot be written down. I can write fragments from time to time. This is one. When I start writing about life I stop living. When I start living again I stop writing. In this way there is always some new life to write about. Living in a more spiritual way is having a living religion. It is accepting the paradoxical nature of Christianity; that it has to die to make room for the kingdom to come.

Last July I visited a Viking burial ground. The guide told us that the Vikings buried artefacts with their dead because they believed in life after death. As we stood at the burial site it occurred to me that the intuition of the Vikings was correct. Here we were, living proof of life after death for the Vikings. Then it occurred to me that Jesus had to die to make room for us. We are life after death for Jesus. The spirit of Christ that lived in Jesus now lives in us. There are many generations but only one spirit. Each generation has to die to make room for the spirit to pass to the next. Living in a more spiritual way is being more willing for my generation to die so that the spirit of Christ can live in the next; so that life on earth can evolve.

Life on earth is evolving. Evolution is a process in which one life is differentiating into many interdependent forms. This one life is the life of Christ. Human life is one form of life among many. And human life is differentiating. The variety of human life is increasing. Living in a more spiritual way is delighting more in

the variety of human life. It is being less afraid of difference. It is delighting more in the rich variety of all life on earth; seeing Christ in all things.

The evolution of life on earth is a natural process. When we are evolving we are doing what comes naturally. We are following the natural law. The natural law is a living law. It can be lived but it can never be written down. If anyone did try to write it down they would never stop writing because it is always changing. It evolves as human nature evolves. It is written in the living human heart. Living in a more spiritual way is doing more of what comes naturally. It is being more spontaneous and less controlled by external law. It is following our deepest natural instinct; the instinct to evolve.

Last year I went on a Christian Buddhist retreat. We spent most of the weekend in silence contemplating the beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs." **Matt: 5:3**. It was on that retreat I first saw clearly that God and I are one. The first insight came on the first evening as we sat in a circle introducing ourselves. When it was my turn to speak I did not know what to say. As I was sitting there not knowing what to say about myself, I was surprised to hear myself speak. I heard myself speak of the call of Christ and the presence of Christ in my life. The call is a call to be one and the presence is the source of that oneness. Then something odd happened. Time seemed to flow backwards and suddenly disappear. Then time reappeared and everything returned to normal. I seemed to have stumbled across a gap in time. Time ended, then there was no time at all, then time began again. In the gap nothing existed but God. Even I did not exist. I had disappeared into God. It was as if I passed through God and came out the other side, but when I was in God I did not exist. I experienced a moment of non-existence. In the non-existence I met the God who is closer to me than I am to myself. When time disappeared the whole universe seemed to collapse into a tiny point of nothingness and then explode out the other side. And the tiny point of nothingness was God. Spiritual poverty is being small enough to pass through the tiny point of nothingness. Then I have nothing to lose because I have already lost everything, including myself. Therefore I have nothing to fear. When I let go of fear, love arises spontaneously. Fear has to die to make room for love. Living in a more spiritual way is being poor in spirit; letting go of fear to make room for the love who is God to be here now.

The tiny point of nothingness at the centre of myself is the gateway through which heaven enters the world. Spiritual poverty is the key to the gateway. When I am small enough to pass through the gateway I have nothing to fear. When fear subsides love arises spontaneously. And love opens the gateway. Fear closes the gateway and traps us in hell. Hell is a world in which all are motivated by the fear of death. All live in a hostile environment. All live in a climate of mutual suspicion and fear. All compete for the survival of the fittest. All follow the dark rule; the rule of the pre-emptive strike: Treat others as you fear they will treat you. War is hell on earth. Peace is heaven on earth. The gate of heaven is open. Heaven is a world in which all are motivated by the love of life. All live in a friendly environment. All live in a climate of mutual trust and love. All collaborate for the growth and life of the whole. All follow the golden rule; the rule of unconditional forgiveness: Treat others as you want them to treat you. Living in a more spiritual way is living in a way that opens the gate of heaven; that makes life on earth more like heaven and less like hell.

In summary, for me living in a more spiritual way is:

- delighting more in the evolution of life on earth. Accepting the need of death.
- having a living religion. It is accepting the paradoxical nature of Christianity; that it has to die to make room for the kingdom to come.

- being more willing for my generation to die so that the spirit of Christ can live in the next; so that life on earth can evolve
- delighting more in the variety of human life; being less afraid of difference. It is delighting more in the rich variety of all life on earth; seeing Christ in all things.
- doing more of what comes naturally. It is being more spontaneous and less controlled by external law. It is following our deepest natural instinct; the instinct to evolve.
- being poor in spirit; letting go of fear to make room for the love who is God to be here now.
- living in a way that opens the gate of heaven; that makes life on earth more like heaven and less like hell.

As I grow Older

By Philip Sheppard

As I grow older,
I notice that religion
becomes less and less relevant to my life.

Or, to say the same thing differently,
as I grow older,
and my mind becomes more and more simple,
the Good News becomes more and more easy
to understand.

And it is now so simple,
that even the simple mind of a small child
can understand it.

And I wonder if it might be even simpler,
that it might be so simple,
that even the simple mind of the cat
purring on my lap
can understand it.

And I wonder if it might be even simpler,
that it might be so simple,
that even the simple mind of the yew tree
growing in my garden
can understand it.

And I wonder if it might be even simpler,
that it might be so simple,
that even the simple mind of the stones
lying in the ground
can understand it,

And I wonder if it might be even simpler,
that it might be so simple,
that no mind can understand it.