

APPENDIX 7

Presentation Notes on The Spiritual Journey

The Spiritual Journey

by EILEEN O'HEA

I am going to begin with a poem by Rumi¹ that addresses the cry of the heart:

One night a man was crying,
'Allah! Allah!'
His lips grew sweet with the praising,
until a cynic said,
'So! I have heard you
calling out, but have you ever
gotten any response?'

The man had no answer to that.
He quit praying and fell into a confused sleep.
He dreamed he saw Khidr, the guide of souls,
in a thick, green foliage.
'Why did you stop praising?'
'Because I've never heard anything back.'
'This longing you express is the return message.'

The grief you cry out from
draws you toward union.
Your pure sadness
that wants help
is the secret cup.

Listen to the moan of a dog for its master.
That whining is the connection.

There are love dogs
no one knows the names of.

Give your life
to be one of them.'

There is within the human heart an outrageous hunger, an unslakeable thirst, a longing as deep and as wide as all the oceans and the universe itself. This hunger is for oneness in and with divine love and because it is there, it can be found, it can be experienced. We are meant to experience it. The 'it' that I am referring to is the experience of divine intimacy. It is an experience that takes us beyond the rational mind, beyond our ego consciousness, and situates us in the experience of love. This experience of being one in divine love is an experience that is beyond words, so all my words can only point to or hint at what can only be realised and known in the depths of the human heart.

A way to understand what is called this contemplative consciousness that I'm talking about today, is to look at the fundamental question asked by seekers of all the great major religious traditions. And that fundamental question is 'Who am I?'

So when we begin to look at that question, what we know as Christians is that we can say there are certain things that we know about my person and those things are:

- that I am a child of God;
- that I am made IN God's image; I am IN the image;
- that the same Spirit that was in Jesus, leading Jesus through his life, death and resurrection is in each of us

- leading us through our life, death and resurrection;
- and that I am unconditionally, unsurpassably loved.

Those are the facts of our life. When we touch into that reality, what is it that we experience? We experience peace, joy, love, and that becomes our experience when we are in touch with this reality which is the ground of our being.

However, what we know is that, even though this is the truth and this is my true self, this peace, love and joy is not what I always experience, is it? No. What is it that we experience at other times during the day? What are we usually experiencing? We're experiencing fear, guilt, anxiety, a sense of something's wrong or 'I'm wrong' or 'I'm bad', resentment. And these experiences also come out of a certain set of beliefs about ourselves don't they? When I am in touch with this experience, this belief about myself, when I'm experiencing fear, guilt, anxiety, a sense of 'something is wrong', then I know that there are certain mindsets or certain beliefs that my ego has attached to. And those mindsets or belief systems have been ingested by me through culture, conditioning, parents, and so on, and I have taken them in and now they are embedded in me in a mindset that keeps me locked into my ego. Some of these mindsets or some of those statements about myself that can be conscious or unconscious are:

- I'm not good,
- I'm not whole,
- I'm not as good as someone else somebody else, or
- I'm bad.

And each of these is a flicker of what is in each of us to some extent – some form of self-hatred.

So what we know then is that we are separated from the truth of ourselves. And the spiritual journey is about reconnecting with this truth about ourselves. And that's a lifetime process.

So what the journey is about really is shifting where we locate our identity. It's a shift in consciousness. We want to locate our identity in the truth about ourselves or in the true self. And the ego is attached to belief systems and patterns of thinking and believing that keep us locked into another type of consciousness.

Now because we're trying to undo this consciousness, some of us try to look outside of ourselves and attach to things that will give us meaning or purpose or value or identify us in some ways either for good or for ill. So we get our sense of worth or our sense of value from what we do or descriptions about ourself: 'I'm a doctor', 'I'm a teacher', 'I'm a mother of five children'. It could be we're attached to descriptions that don't work to our benefit – 'I'm an ex-offender', whatever that is. And this secular consciousness knows itself by descriptions.

So the discovery of our true identity requires a shift in where we are going to locate our consciousness and opens us to a whole other experience of consciousness. It opens us to the experience of becoming one with and in divine love. And to the experience of union. That is what all of life's journey is about: discovering the truth of who I am. And in discovering the truth of who I am, I discover that I am one with the divine.

So the longing that is part of our human longing has a name: it is not just me seeking the divine. It is the divine seeking, searching, drawing us, like a mother – drawing the

child through the birth canal into the truth and into this reality of the truth about itself.

So when we talk about a shift in consciousness and this union or communion with the divine – communion consciousness, contemplative consciousness, mystical consciousness – what we can say about contemplative consciousness is that contemplative consciousness is intensely absorbed by that which has no contrast. It can be pointed to, but not fully described. It is an experience in which devotion and commitment are at their absolute peak, unsupported by contrast consciousness. So that's why we say that in our prayer the contemplative moment is a moment of *unknowing*. You don't know that you are knowing because there is nothing to put it against. So this brings us into experience beyond the rational mind.

And this experience of contemplative consciousness brings us into communion. So long as God, or the neighbour, is considered the 'other', either dominating me or being dominated by me, then I have not plummed the full depth of this mystery. When we hear the phrase 'Love your neighbour as yourself (Mk12:31)' that phrase doesn't mean 'as much as you love yourself' or 'as if your neighbour is yourself', but that we **are** in this communion.

So since we are already in this place of union in divine love, it's not something that's awaiting us after death. Nor is it something that we can't experience. We are meant to experience this.

And as I say this, I'm very aware that some people will immediately discount this as a possibility for them. Why? Because we are locked into a mindset connected to our ego consciousness that makes us feel spiritually inferior. But

what I am talking about here is that this experience is the truth of who we are. We are already in union with God. Are all of us in union with God? Are some people more in union with God than others? No! What happens is that some people might experience it or be more aware of it than others. But this is the truth that all of us share.

So that experience of spiritual inferiority – that ‘I’m not as worthy of religious experience’ or ‘I’m not as spiritually endowed as others’ – that is a comparison isn’t it? And we have just said that contemplative consciousness has no contrasts and no comparisons, which brings us into communion with all that is, doesn’t it? With ourselves, with God, with the earth, with the universe. So when we talk about contemplative consciousness, we’re talking about the reality in which there is no contrast, no higher, no lower, no better, no worse, no more religious experience, or less religious experience. It is in and available to each of us because we are all intimately knitted into this union with the divine.

One way of looking at this journey into the centre of ourselves is to look at the pictures taken from the classic in Zen literature, *In Search of the Missing Ox*.

*[Hand out the Ox Herder Pictures
(Appendix 8, p. 176)]*

1ST PICTURE

In the first picture what you will see is someone searching for the ox. The ox represents the true self so the man is



trying to discover his true self. So this is the journey we are on: trying to leave our ego and enter into our true self. So the ox, in this Zen literature, represents that search, represents my true nature. And in that picture as it relates to us, the ox is not really missing but one has the

feeling that it is because somehow we have lost contact with it. So we begin our search on the spiritual journey.

2ND PICTURE

The searcher in the picture finds a footprint, which means he gets some sign of being on the right path. So he grows a



little more confident and he feels that what he has set out to do seems right. And a lot of us on our spiritual journey or as we have come to contemplative prayer and Christian meditation, we have that same sense. You might have picked up a book or talked to someone and you

have a sense that this is might be what you have been looking for – something feels right.

3RD PICTURE

In the third picture, he finally sees a glimpse of the ox, but only the tail and the heels, and this again entices and encourages him to go on with his search and his journey. And sometimes for us there have been moments on the spiritual journey when we sensed or have known some sweet experience or what is called on the spiritual journey some 'consolation', or some light or some religious experience breaks through and we get a sense, a very real taste, that what we are looking for is indeed real. And so our search is confirmed.



4TH PICTURE

In picture four he finally catches the ox. So now he has it; what he has been looking for he has found. In the Zen teaching, this experience is realised in the words: 'Heaven and earth and I are the same root; all things that are, are at the same source.' But although he has found the treasure or his true self, at least he knows that he *thinks* he has found it. He has almost all of it he thinks, but he simultaneously knows that he is still connected to his passions and his desires. Or in our language, he realises that he is still very identified with his ego. And he can't come to terms with why he is still hating or judging others,



why he is still lusting, or why he is still exerting power and control over others.

What we see on the spiritual journey as we move towards the centre, that ground of our being, what we meet there are some of the blocks or hurts or wounds that are embedded deep in our subconscious or our unconscious that make, and keep us connected to our ego. Maybe that was some trauma that happened to us in our early childhood – a trauma that so situated us in the mindset that 'I am not good, not good enough, I'm bad', that it becomes this huge block to the discovery of the true self.

These are blocks or wounds on the spiritual journey. When we begin our contemplative prayer, what happens is that we open ourselves to a deeper discovering of the self which loosens the soil where some of these hurts and some of these wounds have been hidden. So sometimes you find with yourself, as I have found with myself, that the more deeply you go into the spiritual life the more you start seeing the ego acting up. And instead of becoming, as some of the spiritual books of the past suggest, purer and purer and holier and holier, all of a sudden you start seeing all these things in yourself that you never saw before. And that is a real indication of going deeper in the spiritual journey, because the closer we come to divine love the more we will realise that we are not all that loving. Isn't that true?

So we meet these blocks and these wounds on the journey.

5TH PICTURE

If we look at the fifth picture, we see he has tamed the ox. He has got his ego under control and he is no longer controlled by it. In our language, we finally feel we have come to terms with ourself, perhaps through counselling or through spiritual direction. We will always have an ego, but now it is not dominating us the way it used to. So in this picture, the ox herder feels now he has things pretty well balanced in his life.



6TH PICTURE

As we move deeper into the spiritual journey, in the sixth picture, we see him riding the ox home. The ox now is so tame and so obedient that he can let go of the bridle and the ox walks homeward and he sits peacefully on its back. And for some of us on this spiritual journey it is equated with the experience of: 'I have arrived. Now I know the truth, now I just have to keep doing what I am doing.'



But the hallmark of the spiritual journey opens us to hearing divine wisdom say to us 'Go deeper yet.' There is no place of arrival because we are dealing with divine mystery, and usually in the spiritual journey, we might level off for a while but there are highs and there are lows as we travel along this path.

Bede Griffiths, who died when he was 82, said in an interview in his 82nd year, that he never grew as much as he grew in the last two years of his life. So it is not dependent on age, it is dependent on our openness to the divine. And this experience of divine love constantly calling us through this birth canal, also involves death.

Anytime we let go, anytime we detach from our ego, there will always be some form of death involved. And each of them is a preparation for our final death and what we discover on the spiritual journey is, as we will see when we move on, is that anytime we enter into death, in faith, we will always experience new life. So an example of that – if someone knows that they have some compulsion or addiction and they finally say ‘I know I am addicted. I have a drinking problem, maybe I should do something with it’ – there’s the grace, that was the moment and now there is a choice. They can either die to the ego and get the help they need and detach from their ego’s attachment, which is a death, and in doing that, anyone who has met someone who really works the steps of any form of AA, sees the new life in those people. So there is constantly, on our journey, we are constantly being called into new life, but new life is always preceded by some form of detaching from or letting go of something that is death-dealing in our life, whether it is a behaviour, or a relationship, or an addiction or whatever it is.

7TH PICTURE

The seventh picture is the picture that all is forgotten. Ox lost, man remaining. Even Zen itself is forgotten. And what

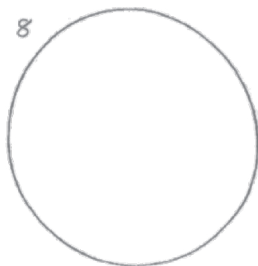


this reminds us of on our spiritual path is that all religion is meant to bring us beyond form into eternal mystery. 'The one who sees me sees the One who sent me.' (Jn 12:45) So we are led beyond form, beyond anything we can know or imagine.

This means sometimes for each of us some death to some types of religious practices or images of God that we might have been clinging to, and letting go of those so that we might enter into the new life which goes beyond form and brings us into eternal mystery

8TH PICTURE

The eighth picture, the picture that is usually most disconcerting for us, is the picture of emptiness. Not only is



the ox gone, but the man is gone, everything is gone. And this is the great symbol of the void or emptiness, of not having anything to cling to or identify with. And this point on the spiritual journey can be like the 'dark night of the soul' when the images of God or the

things that we have clung to so dearly, even those disappear for a while. It might be likened to the experience of freefalling in a dream. There is nothing to hold on to. As

we die to our ego, we sense a great loss, a great emptiness, because we have known ourselves through our egos so there has to be a certain grief, a certain sadness, when we let go of what was known for what is unknown. So detachment from the ego, from the sense of myself and all forms that we once knew, both spiritually, psychologically, and emotionally; or from belief systems and even practices – all must go through this experience of death or detachment.

The great mystics will tell us that the experience of God is not God. It is the experience of God. And we also see in this picture this emptiness, this void. We can see here and connect it with the moment in Jesus' life too when he voices on the cross for us: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mt 27:46) It was a detachment from everything and the experience of death and of loss.

9TH PICTURE

We then come to the ninth picture, of returning to the source. And what we see here, if you look closely, is that the



world around him is the same – the conditions that I find myself in are the same. But what happens is that every time I go through a death-like experience of detaching, I am changed and you see that too in Jesus's words on the cross a few minutes after 'My God, my God,

why have you forsaken me?' we hear: 'Into your hands I commend my spirit.' (Lk 23:46) In our lives too, everything in our lives looks the same but we experience it differently

because we are transformed. There is no transformation without some form of death. In the Christian tradition we express this truth, this reality, by saying: 'Anytime, anytime, death is entered into in faith we will find new life. Anytime, death is entered into in faith we will find new life.'

So the ox herder (or ourselves) experiences the world differently because he is seeing it from a level of profundity unknown to him before. So as our prayer deepens and we go through this death/resurrection cycle on our spiritual journey, we are changed – we become awake, more aware, more conscious of ourselves and of the world around us. We begin to see differently. Now how this may show up is that I might begin to see my own behaviours that are not as appropriate or as loving – they don't match what I know. I might see my righteousness, or my arrogance, or my domination. Or I also might see myself growing in compassion, becoming more loving.

I also become aware because I am deepening in prayer and in communion with others. I become aware of the interconnection of all things. I become aware of the pain in the world, the suffering in the world, and it is not like it is happening out there. I suffer because I feel connected to the brothers and sisters throughout the world who are suffering. I am connected to the universe, to the animate and inanimate beings, because I know that their life's energy is connected to divine life's energy and we are all connected. I think one of the ways this shows up, very practically in our life is that sometimes it becomes very difficult to watch TV. A lot of the violence or the mean things on TV, or the people being set up is too difficult to watch. And those are clues of the deepening that's happening and the change that is

happening to us that we might not have realised. This is because of our prayer, because our prayer is deepening.

10TH PICTURE

And then the last picture. Our ox herder returns into the town. And we notice he has grown older and wider. He has a big pot belly. He is carefree, beyond caring about external form; he is not attached to external form. He is barefoot, his chest is showing – all this symbolising his mental nakedness, his detachment from mindsets and non-attachment to the ego.



Now, because of the transformation he has gone through, when he returns he is different. And that is what happens in our prayer. If we touch into love, we change. Prayer is never a narcissistic journey so that 'I' become holy. That is part of it but it's not all of it. When we touch into love and know that union with divine love we are impelled to do what love does. And what does love do? It goes beyond itself in love and service to others. In giving of the self, this experience of true love, just like divine love, we become more truly ourselves. So if you want to see happy people find generous people. You see that in the last picture. He returns to the world with the basket, the bag, to be for others. He returns into the world. The ox is no longer part of his consciousness because he is no longer searching for it. He has become one with his true self. That is why we hear in St Paul: 'Have that mind in you that was in Christ Jesus.' (Phil 2:5)

So it is not 'what would Jesus do in this situation?' that

is part of this stage of our spiritual journey, but we become one with Christ so that we are that body of Christ in this world. With that mind and heart of Christ, we become more truly who we are.

So the spiritual journey and our journey into prayer through Christian meditation – meditation is the metaphor for life – what it does, is we practise detaching from our ego. We are constantly detaching from thoughts, feelings, emotions and so on, and centring ourselves in the truth of who we are so that we will live out of that truth and, through practice, be able to detach from the ego's domination more easily, continuously. When we are centred in the reality of our true self, then what happens is that – the ego is still there, but it is at the service of the true self. It is not dominating us, controlling us – what I want to do I don't do, and what I don't want to do I wind up doing.

That icon that you have is a favourite of mine because it is Christ meeting us here. Reaching in, into the dark places of our life. We say this when we say the creed: 'He descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead.' Hell can happen right inside our heads. The psychological traumas and the deserts of our own experiences that are happening inside of ourselves, that is where we meet, where Christ comes to meet us. You see Christ reaching down into the dark places, the places of death, pulling up Adam and Eve from the darkness of those experiences, pulling us out, meeting us here and drawing us out.

Before I close I want to give one more little scenario of the spiritual journey.

We are all searching. The heart longs to be with one with the divine. That is at the centre of our own being – this yearning for the divine. I have a friend who went on retreat she is a faithful prayer longing for God. She is sitting outside the retreat house – nice day, cool breeze. As my friend Suzanne sat there she had the sense of God's presence moving toward her, the longing of her heart being met. What did she do? She got up and left. We hear that and wonder: Why anyone would do that? We want that so much!

We do and we don't. The deepest fear in the human psyche is its fear of death. If you are being grasped by love, drawn into the experience of complete love, the ego knows it has no room, it has no place. The ego knows that it will die. And so that fear took over. There was no more room for the ego, so fear filled her. The truth is that the deepest fear in the human psyche is its fear of death. Right in tandem with that might be its fear of true love, because that involves the death of the ego.

Just to put a little closure on this, what we know is that we are moving ever deeper into the experience of the truth of ourselves, being drawn there by God who is like a divine mother drawing us into that experience of union. What we do each time we are meditating is that we centre ourselves in this experience of divine love by using the mantra which acts like a laser beam helping us to move through and centre ourselves in that experience of a whole other type of consciousness, contemplative consciousness. Let me end with this quote from Anselm of Canterbury²:

But you too, good Jesus, are you not also a mother?
Are you not a mother who, like a hen, gathers her
chicks beneath her wings?

And you, my soul, dead in yourself,
Run under the wings of Jesus your Mother
And lament your grief under his feathers.
Ask that your wounds may be healed and that
 comforted you may live again.
Christ my Mother
You gather your chickens under your wings
This dead chicken of yours puts herself under those
 wings.
Warm your chicken
Give life to your dead one
Justify your sinner.

¹Jalal Al-Din Rumi, 13th-century Persian poet, jurist, Islamic scholar, theologian, and Sufi mystic.

²Anselm of Canterbury (1033/4–1109) was an Italian Benedictine monk, abbot, philosopher and theologian.