

The Soul Station: Maintenance and Repairs

Paying Attention: Coming to our Senses

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Here's what I wanted to tell you today: Get a life. A real life, not a manic pursuit of the next promotion, the bigger paycheck, the larger house...Get a life in which you notice the smell of salt water pushing itself on a breeze over Seaside Heights, a life in which you stop and watch how a red tailed hawk circles over the water or the way a baby scowls with concentration when she tries to pick up a cheerio with her thumb and forefinger...Have a look at the lilies of the field.'

~Anna Quindlen, in a commencement speech given at Villanova University.

"Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet our heavenly God feeds them...Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these." ~Matthew 6:26, 28.

For those who say that women are the ones who are able to multi-task, I beg to differ. I amazed my wife last week with a multi-tasking feat. I was lying on the couch, reading this week's episode of *The Week* magazine with the White Sox game on television, while listening to my current favorite Lee Morgan record on the stereo. Three things at once, my friends.

Unfortunately, when my wife Tracy pointed out to me just what was going on, I realized that I was suffering from a serious case of Flat Screen iPodicusness, and almost immediately I felt completely ashamed of myself.

Have I become THIS? Not a month and a half ago I was rooted in a life of absolutely no television, limited Internet access, no cell phone reception, where I actually could hear the wind blow, feel the shift in temperatures, and hear the loons calling; and now I have succumbed to THIS?

As soon as the realization was made that I have become a glutton once again for my flat screen reality, I felt horribly ashamed, and of course, immediately declared a 24 hour television fast, took the dog for a walk, and tried to breathe in and out, breathing in the beauty that surrounds us, breathing out the mega pixels, gigabytes and digital sound waves.

This is a problem with our modern world. And it is not just a problem that I wrestle with. Many of you have claimed similar symptoms. How many of us have recently figured out how to text message? How many parents have installed the gps location device, better known as a cell phone, into the hands of your young teens? How addicted are you to the google news feed, or the Gallup poll numbers on the internet, updated hourly. Do you have a TiVo device installed on your cable box? I do—and I love it. How many of us don't even bother getting off the couch to go to the video store anymore, and instead just

queue it up on netflix? In a time when we are more connected than ever—through our cell phones, emails, Internet access, I'm afraid we've become almost completely disconnected with life itself. And our disconnect breeds discontent with our hopes and our dreams, and the spirit of life that at one time surrounded us.

One could argue that as a culture we are losing touch with reality. We are losing our sense of mystery, and we are confining our understandings of God and of spirit to a one hour a week time frame when we come here. (Which I really appreciate, by the way)

Our disconnect with life has brought about cultural and societal implications that seem to be turning away from what the blessings of this life really has to offer.

Instead of creating more sacred communities, with greater connections and wider spans of understanding, we are witnessing a culture of staunch individualism; where once people would gather together to discuss and share ideas and thoughts, we are drawing firm lines in the sand and declaring our alliances without, sometimes, even bothering to listen to what other people have to say.

We are creating identities and entire worlds where our reality is virtual, our computer screen is our lens through which we view and understand and communicate with the world, and it becomes a filter for any words or thoughts that might challenge our beliefs or our understandings.

We are witnessing an environmental crisis that is in no small part a result of our greed induced desire to buy bigger, own larger, live fuller, go farther than any of the previous generations.

And, again, we are sheltering ourselves from true and real dialogue. I'm not sure which is worse in this maddening political climate. The tit for tat 3rd grade, he said this, no she said that no you're a dummy, no you are' childishness, OR the frightening way the pundits, the pawns and the general public are lining up behind the barricades and screaming at each other, not even capable of engaging in a real dialogue. It's downright frightening, isn't it?

Well let's take a step back for a minute. Let's remove our shields and our breastplates for a while. Let's take a few deep breaths, and let's take just a moment to consider...to consider...the lilies of the fields. Or, better yet, the lilies of the valley.

The lilies of the valley have to be one of my favorite flowers of all time. Have you seen them? They are small, white bells, dangling from wispy green stalks, not 6 inches off the ground. They tend to cluster, like a big blanket on the floors of the forests, or on the hillsides of lakes and streams. They might be easy to miss, because they lie so low to the ground, and the big, leafy fronds on their stalks almost shield them from view. But if the breeze picks up, and blows and shifts and circles around you, the scent, rich and sweet, like honey dipped cotton, has the power to transport me to another place. And immediately, I am at ease, I am not worrying about the nagging annoyances of the virtual world, instead I am once again embraced by the breath of the unpredictable wind, and I am reminded that this world is the one worth living in.

Consider the late afternoon rain shower. The orange hues of a dipping sunset reflected off the back wall of the living room call me outside to see what it is that is making this amazing splash of color on an otherwise lifeless wall. When I open the back door, and swim through the humid air to step onto the walkway, I look up to see an enormous billowed and bulbous cloud, traced around the edges with an orange aura, and as I look up I feel the first raindrop on my cheek. As the rain becomes to fall, I'm amazed to see that the orange hues still hold, and the world takes on an otherworldly tint. Icy raindrops slice through the humidity to send a slight chill up my arms, and as I step back under the cover of the rooftop overhang, I can almost see the palm fronds reach up their arms in adoration, or hear the St. Augustine breathe a sigh of relief for the blessed sacred rain. And then the air takes on a different flavor. The scent of the watered soil and the soothed trees mingles with the chalky scent of wet concrete, and again, I am transported away from my false, sheltered reality and immersed into the life of the real.

What a glorious day it is, when we can remember each of our senses. The feel of the raindrops on our skin, or the taste of the ocean on our lips. The scent of the juniper pine breeze, or the sight of the full moon, reflected in the water. The sound of the morning birds and their sunrise song; these are reality. These are the gifts of creation; these are the signs of the spirit that live with us and within us every day, if we'd just take time to pay attention to them.

If you are meditation-ally challenged; if you, like me, and like Sandy so wonderfully pointed out last week, find great difficulty in silencing that inner roommate of the mind, who won't shut up when we're trying to get in touch with our inner blessing, I have some good news for you. You can sit softly in the presence of God. And you have probably done it every day, in some way, shape or form. There is no trick, no technique required. All you need to do is hear the voice of my four-year-old daughter, who lately has discovered a wonderful phrase that shocks me into bliss almost every time I hear it. "Well that's something you don't see every day."

How wonderful! How beautiful! How true!

There is a beauty in the world, an 'un-knowableness' that can fill life with mystery once again, and remind us of just how plentiful the blessings of this life are. The shocking experience of what we call God's grace is the experience of the Holy Spirit that is documented in the bible.

Unfortunately for our modern society, it was the theologians from the Middle Ages that took the breath out of the spirit, literally. The word, 'spirit,' from the Latin, 'spiritus' originally signified 'wind' and 'breath.' Look at the origins of the word 'respiration' and we can see that the original crafters of language and communication saw the invisible in and out of our daily existence was something of an experience of the Divine. Spirit was an experience, a mystery, an invisible connection to the God that lives within us and among us. But when the spiritual dimension took on an orderliness and an other-ness, we severed the word spirit from its original intent. The invisible presence became the intangible—incapable of being felt by any of the bodily senses. In an article written by David Abram in the magazine, Parabola, the author says that by pushing the spirit out of the sensuous sphere, civilization has essentially separated the material world of its true depths. We have become observers from on high, surveying the palpable world, defining it in finite terms, and taking what has been indoctrinated into us as our God given right to

manipulate and destroy our planet. And we will destroy this beloved creation, and we will destroy ourselves along with it.

“Unless,” David Abram continues, “we wake ourselves from the long delusion of our detachment from the bodily earth, to find ourselves included, once again, in the breathing body of the world. Unless we begin to engage the land around us as attentive participants in the vastness of life, letting our actions draw guidance from the other participants, the other beings, whose sentience is so richly entangled with ours. Unless we emerge from our technological cocoon, and shake our senses free from their stunned immobility, stretching open our eyes to receive the sun’s glint off the wings of a peregrine soaring above the city buildings, opening our ears past the ceaseless churning of words toward the voices of silence...”¹

There are movements afoot that are shifting the cultural paradigm. Grassrooted, grass-fed movements that are bring awareness to the shifting needs of our cultures and our societies. From Thomas Friedman’s Flat Earth perspective, to Barbara Kingsolver’s, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, there are calls for us to develop a keener sense of global and local awareness, from the goods and services that we buy to the food that we eat. In their brilliant and frightening book, *Cradle to Cradle*, William McDonough and Michael Braungard imagine a world where everything from industrial design to architecture moves away from the cradle to grave single lifespan, straight to the landfill destruction cycle to a cradle to cradle movement, where industry and growth actually work together with nature, and make the world a better place. Why not work to develop a disposable water bottle that not only is biodegradable, but also provides nutrients and minerals for the earth?

While many of these paradigm shifts are slowly taking root with the engaged minorities in our societies, the seismic shifts in our culture and country that are undeniable, from lay-offs to economic meltdowns, are sure to leave many of our hardworking, fellow country people in their wake, clamoring for a hopeful vision of what life and what blessing actually look like again. These are the growing pains and reverberations of a culture that has unwittingly fallen pray to our own devices, and these signs of the times call for a new paradigm on how we live our lives, and what we hold to be sacred. So I encourage you to consider the lilies of the fields. And the birds of the skies. Remember life’s rich blessing.

While worldly problems can seem insurmountable at times, know that the beauty in this creation is a daily reminder of the uncontainable, indefinable majesty and mystery of God’s creation.

So God bless the doers, the movers, and the shakers. Let them have their toil. Let us be observers, and listeners. Let us take our life lessons from the splendor of creation, and as we witness the spirit unfold the mysteries of this existence before our very eyes, let us be wise enough to give thanks, and say, ‘Well that’s something you don’t see everyday.’”

¹ From the article, “The Invisibles” by David Abram. Parabola Magazine, Spring 2006.