

## Spiritual Practice (Part Two)

### *“My eyes stay open through the watches of the night”*

Reflection 44 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

The composer of Psalm 119 is delighted by God’s law. He knows that God’s instructions, God’s teachings, wherever they come from – from a scroll, from the oral teachings of a prophet or priest, from his own meditation on the nighttime sky, from his own God-intoxicated dreams – liberate him. They set his heart free, so that he walks about in freedom. They’re worth getting up at midnight to give thanks for. They’re worth praising God seven times a day for. They’ll keep his eyes open through the watches of the night.

So what does he know that I don’t know? A whole lot it turns out –

First, he knows God. From 119:64, “The earth is filled with your love, O Lord; teach me your decrees.” Or verse 90, “Your faithfulness continues through all generations.” The Psalmist has acquired the natural grace, the natural ease, of one who knows that the universe is a friendly place. No one has yet told him that God is a capricious tyrant with a hair-trigger temper.

If we could only know what the Psalmist knew – that the earth is filled with your love, O Lord. If we could know that as deep soul knowledge – the unshakeable truth. If we could only climb back out from under what the Church Fathers, the Latin church, the New England Puritans, and the countless self-appointed religious tyrants who claim to speak for God, have told us and still tell us about God and his word. And if we could get others to see this. If we could only see that God’s word, properly understood, liberates us, sets our hearts free so that we walk about in freedom. If we could only see that this is true of all torah, all God’s instructions wherever they come from. When they are properly understood, they do liberate us. They do set our hearts free so that we walk about in freedom.

So we hear that God is love and that we must let nothing separate us from this truth. This is the torah, the instruction of God.

We hear that the truth is one but the wise speak of it in many ways. This too is the torah, the liberating instruction of God.

We hear that creation is sacred, that all of life is open to the Spirit of God. This is the torah, the instruction of God.

We are told to be still and let go, to pay attention to the present moment in a way that is gentle, appreciative and nourishing, to let go of those unthinking judgments – those likes and dislikes – that distort our ability to see reality clearly, to feel the simple yet profound joy of Being. All this is the torah, the instruction of God.

We are taught to live simply so that we might give generously to all who are truly needy. This is the torah, the liberating instruction of God.

We hear that all men and women everywhere, whoever they are and whatever they have done, can start over, be reborn, be forgiven, and discover within themselves the Spirit of God. This is the liberating torah of God.

We are told that we can transcend the fearful, little world of “I,” “me” and “mine,” of “us” and “them,” and enter a larger, kinder world open to all. This for sure is the torah, the liberating instruction of God.

These truths, wherever, whenever, and from whomever, they come are the torah, the instruction of God. They liberate us. They set our hearts free, so that we might walk about in freedom. And in knowing these things and acting on them, we encounter the presence of God, and now we can rise at midnight; seven times a day we can praise God; and our eyes can stay open through the watches of the night meditating on the promises of God.

And all of this happens because now in reading Scripture we are not storing up proof texts, we are not reading in flat-footed literalistic ways, and we are not trying to re-enact the world of 2000 years ago. Instead we are factoring in the living context. We are allowing for the humanity of the writer. We are rising above the point and counterpoint of Scripture to the truths that are transcendent. We are finding in Scripture the sacred. We are penetrating the deep mysteries at the heart of the universe and we are encountering the presence of the living God.

And so it is with all spiritual practice. May we begin to see all the things we might call ritual, morning prayer, evening song, communion -- the bread, the cup, sacred music, sacred reading, church on Sunday, class at mid-week, giving money, giving time, even baptism, especially baptism, whatever we must exert ourselves to be part of, whatever we must exert ourselves to do, whatever we might suppose just to be ritual is never just ritual. It's what shakes us free of our inner rigidity, of that part of our self that limits and circumscribes us, of that part of our self that works so hard to protect our narrow little egos, our narrow little screaming, whining, fearful egos, so that we might see more, so that we might become conscious of more, so that we might become more, so that in thought and deed we might find our way past what we once thought was impossible into the glorious freedom of faith. It's all part of replacing ego with God. And it's a marvelous transaction.

It is this we offer the world today, to all the fearful, busy, sometimes desperate people of our lives, who still recognize that there is – that there must be – an Intelligence that underlies all that is, that makes sense of coincidence and premonition, of our prayers and of our dreams, of that realm of love and inspiration far beyond any scientific explanation where all the things that matter most in our lives happen.

This we offer the thoughtful, caring people all around us who still want somehow to be part of a community, some gathering of people, who live out spiritual practice, who study and think together, who can make confession to one another and find forgiveness, who practice the arts of discernment and spiritual guidance, and of hospitality and service, who even in some way still worship, still acknowledge the Intelligence – the God – we know is all around us. And where this is deeply understood and joyfully lived there will be a new world in the morning.

– Dale Pauls