

A woman wearing a white, sleeveless dress with a scalloped neckline and a wide-brimmed straw hat with a lace-like pattern. She is holding several stalks of wheat or grain in her hands, looking down at them. The background is a bright, sunny field of tall grasses under a clear sky.

GROWTH in Spirit

by BARBARA LYGHTEL ROHRER

Growth is a recognized goal of our human existence, and much has been written about how we can grow as individuals. Often, the focus is on personal growth, emotional growth or growing in maturity. At the core of these types of growth is our own spiritual growth. While functioning better in our relationships or more easily resolving our problems are certainly byproducts, those concerns are not the purpose of spiritual growth. The purpose of spiritual growth is coming to understand who we truly are, where we came from, and how each and everyone of us simply and deeply belong to that loving mystery that we call God.

“Spiritual growth is nothing more than turning, slowly but surely, into who we really are as children of God,” says Bishop Thomas Breidenthal of the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Ohio.

In other words, spiritual growth is integral to who we are as human beings. Stifling our growth would be like binding our limbs so they will not grow.

Yet, what does spiritual growth mean in a practical sense? *What does it look like?*

Sub-Dean Manoj Mathew Zacharia of Cincinnati’s Christ Church Cathedral sees reconciliation as intrinsic to spiritual growth—*reconciliation* with God, with others, with ourselves. “Reconciliation changes our perspective,” he says.

In other words, authentic loving relationships, along with true reconciliation through recognition of the Christ within all, perhaps more than any other concepts, embody the true meaning of spiritual growth.

And what steps can we take to promote our own spiritual growth?

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Established spiritual practices certainly can lead to spiritual growth and are an important part of a spiritual discipline. However, it is important to remember that while spiritual practices can be universal, spiritual growth is uniquely ours.

Who We Are

“God already knows who we are, and loves us for that. But we have to catch up, because the ways others have hurt us and the ways we have hurt others get in the way of our own true gifts and capacities. Chiefly, we need to learn how to love others—even the people that we have a grudge against or despise or who bore us. That’s why going to church regularly is so important: It forces us to practice patience and forgiveness,” says Bishop Breidenthal.

The bishop speaks truth. Our best teachers are often, whether we like it or not, those who most irritate us. Just as our most difficult struggles and our most crushing heartbreaks can lead us to our deepest insights, spiritual growth is more likely than not to be found in the challenges of every day.

“Spiritual growth is the path by which we come to live ... more and more authentically over our lifetimes,” says Bishop Coadjutor Peter Eaton of the Episcopal Diocese of Southeast Florida. “Christians are made, not born, and the human heart is forged on the anvil of real life. Our spiritual growth is measured in our ability to understand this.”

Modeling Jesus

As Diana Butler Bass points out in *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, Jesus is not a road map that will lead us to heaven, is not a way to be saved. “Jesus is not the way we get somewhere. *Jesus is the Christian journey itself*, a pilgrimage that culminates in the wayfarer’s arrival in God.” That is why Jesus’ earliest followers understood him as “the Way.”

That means that the story of Jesus can open the door to how we are to live our own lives. Indeed, within the story of Jesus, we find our own story, and within the life of Jesus we find a model of how God calls us to live. Spiritual

growth then becomes an honest personal assessment: How am I currently living? Is it in keeping with the way I feel called to live? When have I felt that I hit the mark in terms of my own spiritual growth? When have I fallen short? What is the tenor of my day-to-day relationships? How do I treat others? What thoughts occupy my mind? What is my part in the creation of the community in which I live?

Answering these questions can be an exercise in humility. Our answers can also gently nudge us forward or even back onto a true path from which we may have strayed.

So much of finding our lives in the life of Jesus is finding the Christ within that frees us to see the Christ in others, indeed, all creation. That is the glory. As St. Paul writes to the Colossians, he wants “... to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:25-27).

In Community

“We can’t be Christians by ourselves,” says Dean Gail Greenwell, also of Cincinnati’s Christ Church Cathedral. “God’s mission is for us to grow in spirit within community with others. This growth comes through the ancient and time-honored disciplines of prayer, worship, fasting, and giving of one’s time and treasure to the other. In other words, we consistently place ourselves before God so that God may transform us.”

The practice of *kenosis*, the self-emptying of our will for God’s will, the pouring of ourselves out for the life of the world, is a practice that can lead to the greatest transformation. Jesus’ life exemplified *kenosis*.

Yet self-emptying can be particularly difficult in this society, where we are conditioned when we think of growing to think *more*. As Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest, teacher and author, notes, our “spiritual consumerism” has us

focusing on “learning more spiritual ideas, earning merit badges from God, trying to attain enlightenment, and the will power of heroic moral behavior.” It is counter-intuitive, but the journey of Jesus is not about “getting, attaining, achieving, performing, or succeeding.” It is about “letting go of what we do not need.” It’s about uncovering what we do need.

And what is at the heart of what we do need?

We need to live in tandem with God and to acknowledge God’s continual presence in the world, says Kathy Mank, member of the national board of the Episcopal Church Women and president of the Southern Ohio diocesan ECW. “Spiritual growth is achieved through a heightened awareness of our connection with others and with the natural world,” she says. “It is a surrendering of self ... It is a realization of how little you control, which gives you confidence to step outside your comfort zone. It is a continual process of becoming who you were created to be.”

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Discovering what we are to be is the journey of each of us and is at the heart of spiritual growth. It is a pilgrimage that lasts a lifetime. Reportedly, St. Francis of Assisi upon his death said to his brothers there with him, “I have done what was mine to do, now you must do what is yours to do.”

Committed to spiritual growth, rooted in community and open to transformation, we can begin to see clearly how we are to live and what truly is ours to do. And always, to Calvary and beyond, our God is there. 🌿



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SPIRITUAL PRACTICES: A SHORT GUIDE

1. Take time daily for prayer, reflection, or meditation.
2. Read scripture and other spiritual works regularly.
3. Practice your faith as part of a worship community.
4. Be generous with your financial resources.
5. Commit acts of service.
6. Make reconciliation a continual work in your life.
7. Share your faith journey with others.
8. Practice good self-care.
9. Be grateful for the blessings of your life.
10. Recognize the sacredness of all.

SOURCES AND RESOURCES

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