

How are your Lenten observances going?

I have something of a track record of getting to about this point in Lent and realizing just how hard it is to steadily maintain a new or re-introduced discipline. Despite how badly I want to do it “right” or do it “well” or be absolutely consistent during Lent – life happens, and when it does old habits invariably slide back in, sometimes because of mindlessness, but most often because many of the habits I’d like to shake off are actually long-practiced responses to stress.

And so, part of what I remember/re-learn every year during Lent, is that the world that shaped me and the world I live in it’s not at all like that world, that new creation that’s promised by God. This world is all about getting it done, it has us relentlessly focus on achievement, mastery, expertise, succeeding. It’s a pattern of life and learning that’s played out from early on in our education system and many of our work environments: you start as a novice, as an amateur, and with time and practice, as well as with talent and privilege, you *might* acquire mastery. It’s those who do become experts, masters in their field that we’re called to respect. It’s hierarchical, like so many other aspects of life in this dominant culture of ours, with a few getting to the top and most at various levels of lesser skill and achievement, down below in the ranking of lesser value and worth. So it’s no wonder I still do battle some disappointment, and feelings of failure, when my Lenten disciplines haven’t gone exactly as I’d hope they would.

*And*, each year I have to remind myself that the spiritual life I’ve chosen and trust is entirely dissimilar to this worldly life with its rigged systems of “success” all held together by an unhealthily biased culture.

From the earliest centuries of the Christian tradition, transformation by the expanding and deepening of the spiritual life, through choice and intentional practice, this has been understood as unfolding over three distinct phases or stages – first comes purification, or purgation. These are church-y words for the stripping away of habits of thought and action that get in the way/separate us from God, it's letting go, it's self-emptying, it's repentance essentially, and it comes from the desire for conversion of life. Lent really is a season of purgation, or purification.

Next is illumination. In this stage of the Christian spiritual way there's an actual awareness, a feeling of closeness to God, a sensed intimacy; the self-emptying of purgation, of repentance, creates a spaciousness into which we can more fully receive the knowledge and love of God, that divine love and wisdom that illumines life in hope and faith.

Understanding deepens, fear lessens, love radiates.

And then there's union, one-ness of consciousness, and one-ness with God ... the delectable and ultimate purpose of human life. Purgation, illumination, union.

Unlike the stages of life and learning we experience out in society, the Christian spiritual way is not direct, and it's not necessarily linear. It's not like climbing a set of steps, or a mountain. One theologian has compared the stages of the Christian spiritual way to the tides of the ocean, there is a cycle or a rhythm, there is repetition, a going out and a return, and there is change ... and there's a little unpredictability in there, too.

And so, *by choice*, and *with intention* we cycle, continually, changing and transforming along the way, in big ways and small ways, yet always returning back to our fundamental need to repent, to choose, again, to turn back to God ... over and over again. This is the 'character' of the Christian spiritual life.

Repent, Jesus says, or you will perish – twice Jesus says in today's Gospel reading, repent or you will perish. It's as if the ongoing work of repentance, of our moving away and our return, is as essential to our life in God as our breath. Repentance, returning always to God, purgation: acknowledging the life-giving necessity of that return ... and consciously and intentionally clearing the way so that the return might be as full, as complete as possible.

So it is, also, with our breath. Ancient wisdom has long known what modern science is slowly beginning to understand, that the way we breathe plays a significant role in the overall health of a human life. Impacting illness aside, we will breathe whether we choose to or not. But when we're not thinking about what we're doing our breath tends to be somewhat quick and somewhat shallow, using only a fraction of the very top of our lung space, and this can hold us in a more highly reactive state, more reactive to all the things going on around us. Our "automatic," non-conscious breathing can hold us unwittingly in a fight or flight state. Stress from 'outside' can become stress in the 'inside' through our shallow, partial breath; short shallow breathing can prompt the release of stress hormones throughout the body, leaving us feeling on edge, our heart rate goes up, we're more likely to feel more anxious, fearful, under threat, we stay 'on the edge.'

This can be a chronic state for so many of us in today's world. Needless to say, long-term, this has a terrible impact on our health – physical, spiritual, and emotional.

By contrast, however, slower, deeper breathing, breathing that's conscious and intentional, breathing that draws air deep into our lungs and uses all the muscles around our ribs and recruits our diaphragm, breathing like this literally has us expand to accommodate an abundance of life-gifting air, and this has an incredibly positive, potent effect on all aspects of human life. In addition to reducing the impact of chronic stress, we can also feel a greater sense of overall well-being, greater positivity, increased hope, we are able to think more clearly, focus more effectively. The way we breath can transform our perception of the world around us and our place in it, have us stop adding to the massive stress burden the world is under. Instead we can, within our own bodies, become a place of transformation.

As breathing is to the body and mind, so repentance is for the spirit. As long as we remain alive, we must continue to breath, no one breath, however deep and satisfying will ever be enough, as long as we remain alive we must continue to breath.

I believe something very similar about the Christian spiritual life ... as long as we are living this physical life we will be faced with much in this physical world – the list is long and varied of all the things that vie for our attention, pressures and stressors mixed with injustices and suffering, ongoing violences mixed with the complexity of our life stories and social locations – all this taken together will have us act, speak, and respond in a wide variety of imperfect ways.

No matter how attentively we repent, how committed we are to our lives as living members of the body of Christ, repentance can never be 'one and done.' It is as rhythmic and continual, as necessary and ongoing a process as our breathing, as effective and as changeable as each breath.

This Christian life is about intention and participation in a world that groans under a great weight of suffering and injustice and unrelenting violence. This Christian life is also about preparation and cultivation, nurture and nourishment of the human person so that our lives, our actions, responses, our speech in this wounded world, so that we might all bear fruit that heals.

And so we return, again and again, our repeated and ongoing return to God, asking for forgiveness, yearning for restoration, longing for fullness of life; tending to ourselves so we might better tend and attend to the world around us. Divine love and wisdom are bound up in this life-giving process.

The Christian spiritual life it is not about achievement or mastery, but trust and faith in the transforming power of continuing on ... and on, and on. ... Amen