

Your Net Worth

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Everyone matters. You matter. I matter. That is the hardest thing in theology to believe.
—G. K. Chesterton

Invitation to worship: (“The Place Where We Are Right,” by Yehuda Amichai)

From the place we are right flowers will never grow in the Spring.
The place where we are right is hard and trampled like a yard.
But doubts and loves dig up the world like a mole, a plough.
And a whisper will be heard in the place where the ruined house once stood.

Ancient Witness: Matthew 12:9-14

I often say to you that I try to balance the way I approach sermons between the internal and the external perspective—contemplation and action, mysticism and resistance, spirituality and social justice, the journey inward and the journey outward. So today I’m focusing on the internal.

I want to talk about what we think of ourselves, how we value ourselves. There might be times in our lives, times of distress, when we might question our own worth. There might be times of crisis when we are led into temptation, into a time of trial, when we view ourselves as worthless, our lives as worthless.

I was talking with a financial advisor one day, evaluating my life from the perspective of money. And we inevitably got to the part about Life Insurance. So the question arises, “How much money would your spouse or loved ones need if you were to die?” And so one’s life is about earnings power.

This is often how courts decide compensation for wrongful death: what is the lost earning power? Perhaps this is why the loss of a job, the loss of earning power, in these economically tough times, has such a devastating emotional and spiritual toll. One suddenly has no worth, at least by certain popular measurements.

Because from the moment we are old enough to grasp and hold on, we are given these yardsticks, these units by which we measure ourselves. How good of a provider are you? How attractive are you? How successful are you? What kind of house do you have? How many friends do you have?

Although they are meant to help us, we are given these yardsticks with which we inflict suffering and anguish upon ourselves—our physical appearance, our achievements, social status, moral purity, and signs of success. *And the spiritual life is about this: learning to let go of these yardsticks we’ve been given.*

Now, there is the occasional person who has lived the enchanted life, who has always managed to live up to the measures she or he was given. Having hit all their marks, they might say, “What’s the big deal?” And they never inflict suffering on themselves or need to let go the their yardsticks. Too bad for them, though.

For such as these, Jesus said, “it’s easier for a camel to enter the eye of the needle than for them to enter the Kingdom.” The Kingdom is that place, that state of being, where we experience the joy of our full and true worth.

Like that proverbial camel, it’s not possible for the satisfied person to enter. And it almost always starts with dissatisfaction. *We do not usually drop our yardsticks willingly.* In fact, it is a very, very difficult thing to do. Usually it accompanies some kind of crisis, defeat or big loss, and it’s facilitated by the anguish of a dark night of the soul. For me, it has been only after my own utter failure did I begin to experience my own true worth. As Pearl Buck wrote, “All birth is unwilling.” And it is quite never a linear process. We think we have dropped these measuring sticks, but wait, here it is in my hand again. How did that happen? And sometimes we simply exchange one kind of measurement for another.

Many of us who are parents may come to realize that we’ve been complicit in this whole thing when it comes to our children. Perhaps unavoidably so. We’ve helped pass the baton through our own good intentions. We want our children to succeed, to do well, and it’s hard to encourage this and to challenge the lying yardsticks at the same time. We want our children to be happy and to know their worth that is totally independent of any measurement whatsoever. But this is very, very difficult to do as a parent. Especially if we don’t really believe it for ourselves.

Maybe this is why the most valuable thing a parent could ever do is to become a more spiritually mature and evolved person.

So, how much is a human life worth? Several years ago, the standard that most health insurance plans used to determine whether to cover a medical procedure was \$50,000 per year. So how many years would someone be estimated to live? Multiply by \$50,000 and that’s how much the rest of their life is worth. So a ten year life expectancy would be \$500,000. A Stanford economist set this amount at \$129,000 per year. Society has its different ways of figuring this out, its own measurements. Several years ago a law was passed that set the maximum fine for mine operators for violations that would easily result in human death at \$220,000 per human life. So there’s that. The death benefit for a U.S. soldier used to be \$12,420, and I think this was raised to \$100,000. So there’s that.

I recently came across a comment by Vandana Shiva, an Indian philosopher and activist. She said,

I remember Zuckerberg s talk at Harvard. He said 99% of people will be useless. In your world perhaps Mr Zuckerberg...When the one percent says 99% of you are useless, it s time for the 99% to say, Actually, your ideas are quite useless for us.

Sometimes it's rather ambiguous what society's value of human life is. If it is really so high, perhaps we'd feel differently about the five to six million children dying from malnutrition a year.

Here's the spiritual task: *to acknowledge the presence of that which has supreme worth, to look at oneself in our weakest, most vulnerable moments and see infinite value.* It's to look at those whom the world counts as worthless and see the divine image, an incredible value. It's to come to the realization that our worth has nothing to do with external measurement. As the poet Rumi wrote, "All words and images deceive our glory."

In our story from the New Testament today, Jesus asked the Pharisees to imagine someone who had a sheep that fell into a pit, and in spite of the Sabbath laws, any person would rescue it. And he then said, "How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep!" Then he heals the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath. For Jesus, human value transcends rules and measurement. We have an intrinsic, inherent worth that can never, never be taken away!

Like many other great spiritual teachers of other traditions, Jesus desperately wants people to realize this and therefore be released from the suffering they are in and to experience the full joy of life.

But telling people that they are precious is a dangerous and revolutionary thing! That they deserve fair treatment and dignity—healing and healthcare—food and shelter—fair wages. If the 99% start realizing their own inherent worth then the 1% better watch out! So, it's not surprising that when Jesus affirmed their innate human value, the Pharisees conspired to kill him.

Richard Rohr talks about how the first half of life is our "survival dance." We learn how to take care of ourselves, our external needs, and this is good. But the problem is that we get stuck and we don't move on to the "sacred dance" in the second part of our life. "Most of us never get beyond our survival dance to ask the deep concerns of the soul," he says. The problem is an arrested development of spirituality that is overly concerned about survival and security and living forever and being blameless, perfect and moral. Rohr writes that "moralism is always the cheap substitute for mysticism (or mature religion)."

"Early-stage religion is largely driven by ego needs: the need to be right, the need to feel morally superior, the need to be safe, and the need to protect a positive image to others," he continues. Immature religion creates highly defended people, and this is very much the way of the world, a way that is based upon achievement, accomplishment, and measurement of worthiness and merit. Rohr says, "We might call it 'spiritual capitalism.'" It's the mistaken idea that we are lovable or acceptable when we achieve or perform, that our worth is based on that.

We are here—in this community—to help each move beyond this. Rohr continues,

The authentic religious life is a matter of becoming who we already are and all that we truly are! ...Most saints thus describe the path as much more unlearning than learning. There are so many illusions and lies that we must all unlearn.

It is more about subtraction than addition, more about letting go of the false self than trying to create the True Self. It's not about making ourselves more holy or more worthy. We already *are* and just don't know it! You can't create what you already are. It's simply about becoming aware of something that is already there—the mystics of all religious traditions seem to say this.

And so, as a spiritual community, this is our primary task. And we practice not doing; we practice not striving. We practice, instead, resting—resting in God. We practice realizing our own inherent worth and the immense value of others.

One of my favorite quotes from Thomas Merton was about a mystical experience that he had while he was watching people walk by at a coffee shop in Louisville, Kentucky:

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time, there would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed... I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.

There's a saying that originated in Eastern Christianity:

Walking before every human being there are 10,000 angels shouting, "Here comes the image of God!"

Friends, this is much easier to say to believe, to fully realize. But in fleeting moments, if you listen, you can hear them, if only for an instant.

Amen.

“Deceive Our Glory,” Rumi

*Something inside said I was a mineral, and I was so glad to just be,
I replied, “I’ll take that job; it sounds like fun.”*

*But after eons, roots appeared on my soul that wanted to nurse
from a warm body, and the wonder of her love, the tenderness
of the earth lifted me into the air and I beheld*

*light, and praised it from
the fields.*

*Time sculpted my senses and another song I heard,
“You are more than plant, you are like those
extraordinary beasts,”*

*so I believed that and roamed and roamed, but then I
started thinking: What is my real
truth?*

*I became the wings on falcons and angels.
I flirted with God in the sky.*

*And I believed that He, once in a while kissing me,
would be as close to love as I would get,
but now I know:*

*All words and images deceive
our glory.*