

SPIRITUALITY FOR THE POST-MIDLIFE YEARS

JOSE PARAPPULLY SDB, PhD
sumedhacentre@gmail.com

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Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre for Psychospiritual Wellbeing at Jeolikote, Uttarakhand (sumedhacentre@gmail.com) with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

In this edition I present some salient features of a spirituality for the post-midlife years.

Let me begin with a true story. Thomas grew up in a devout catholic family. He was quite fond of his religion. He liked to go to Mass and serve as an altar boy. One of his brothers became a priest and a sister a religious nun.

However, after his college studies he became a staunch Marxist, distanced himself from his religious roots and began to disparage all forms of religious practices as foolish superstition. He even participated in anti-church rallies, denouncing the clergy. Years passed that way.

Now in his sixties he has gone through a re-conversion. He is again a devout catholic, joining in family prayers, a daily church goer and an active participant in parish activities. He loves especially the Benediction, with the ritualistic ambience of incense and candles. His erstwhile Marxist friends are flabbergasted and even make fun of him. But he does not care.

RE-EXPERIENCING THE SACRED

Re-conversion experience, like that of Thomas, is quite common in the post midlife years.

Often during the journey through adolescence and young adulthood the sense of the sacred recedes and sometimes disappears from conscious awareness and expression. However, as life slows down and one moves toward the sunset years, the sense of the sacred reemerges.

Post-midlifery begin to ask some ultimate questions: What is the meaning of life? What happens after death?... A longing for the earlier connectedness with the Divine surfaces along with desire to enhance and deepen it.

The sense of the sacred is manifest in the sense of gratitude for the ways their life has evolved through ups and downs, the many ways their life has been blessed, in the sense of awe and wonder they

experience in the nostalgic reminiscence of a long life and in the new openness to and enjoyment of sacred rituals and ceremonies.

Further, post-midlifery become more patient and forgiving, more accepting of vulnerabilities, theirs and those of others, more acknowledging of mistakes and failures.

They begin to see life's hurdles as spiritual lessons, opportunities for growth and understanding. They discover in the mystical/spiritual realm a new kind of help and solutions for life's problems and challenges.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS

Our spirituality is the way we live the existential realities of everyday life, with an attention to and reverence for the transcendental—that which is beyond us and the phenomenal world. It is not just one aspect of our life. It involves and embraces the whole of our life in the context of everyday living.

Our way of life and consequently our spirituality is conditioned by our life situation and environment in which we live. The post midlife years call for a spirituality keeping with the personal realities of those years: retirement, diminishing physical and mental capacities, emotional awareness of mortality. Below are some characteristics of a spirituality relevant for the post midlife years.

1. Spirituality of Diminishment

As we grow older many things are taken away from us -- energy, vision, hearing, mobility, memory, mental sharpness. As we diminish in body, mind and spirit, our influence and involvement in the world around us are also lessened. We experience loss of power, status, influence that we once enjoyed.

We are called to find God in these painful losses and limitations. We are called to trust. We are called to engage in the prayer of "acceptance and letting go." We pray, "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

We are challenged to learn to receive. In our more active days we were proud of our capacity to give, to contribute. Now we are called to receive than give. We are called to humbly recognise our limitations and dependency on others. We acknowledge and gracefully accept our dependency needs.

2. Spirituality of Slowing Down

The Spirituality of Diminishment is a “*Spirituality of Slowing Down*” – adapting our way of being in the world in keeping with our diminishment.

We are invited to free ourselves from all that is unessential and unimportant at this time of our life; to focus less on achievements and accomplishments and to enjoy the process of living; to assess our self-worth less in terms of what we do, what we are able to accomplish, and more in terms of who we are, the persons we have become.

We were used to measuring our worth in terms of our capacity to accomplish things. Activity filled our lives. But now we can't do much. Our limited energy is now spent in trying to get from one day to another. Our lives slow down and in that slowing down we are more able to be present to the here-and-now, to all that is happening in and around us. In that slowing down we have the opportunity to become more of a contemplative -- to take time to reminisce, to marvel at the daily miracles around us, to stand in awe and wonder.

3. Spirituality of Contemplation

A spirituality of slowing down leads to a contemplative spirituality. To be a contemplative is to take a “long, loving, lingering look” at everything around us. We become contemplatives when we begin to experience the extraordinary in the ordinary, a deeper meaning in the mundane, when we focus totally on the here-and-now experience.

We are invited to make our prayer more and more contemplative. Contemplative prayer is simply being present to God, living in the awareness of God's presence, saying nothing, doing nothing.

Contemplation is closely linked to a sense of awe and wonder — the ability to be moved by the daily miracles happening around us. Albert Einstein observed that a person “who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe is as good as dead.” In our post-midlife years we have ample time to stand in awe and wonder, especially as we engage in nostalgic reminiscence.

4. Spirituality of Gratitude

A contemplative spirituality in which we are able stand in awe and wonder leads to a spirituality of grateful, appreciative living. As we reminisce over our long journey of life, we find so much to be grateful for. So many wonderful things have happened to us and continue to happen to us, even amidst the fragilities and vulnerabilities of advancing age. We express gratitude for the daily miracles that are part of our lives.

However, gratitude is not just saying “thank you” for the gifts received or for the good things that happen to us. Gratitude, as psychologist Robert Emmons defines it, is “*the capacity to feel the emotion of thankfulness on a regular and consistent basis, across situations and over time.*” We live gratefully even in the midst of pain and inconveniences. Gratitude is an appreciative disposition that we cultivate, an attitude that enables us to see the silver lining even around dark clouds.

Gratitude is a virtue that has been found to have enormous consequences for physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. As such it has also a utilitarian effect in the post-midlife years. Research has shown that grateful people fall less often sick, and even when they fall sick, they recover faster. More importantly, grateful people live significantly longer and happier lives than ungrateful people.

Parappully/psyche & Soul 57: spirituality for the post midlife years.3

5. Spirituality of Atonement

Post midlife years is a time to let go of past hurts and resentments which have such detrimental effect on our physical and mental health. Dr. Herbert Benson, Head of the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Harvard University, refers to the great harm that lack of forgiveness does to us. "There's a physiology of forgiveness," he observes. "When you do not forgive, it will chew you up." That is, it will destroy us from within. We let go of hurts resentments, and we reach out in forgiveness to others, so that we can look forward to death without fear and in peace.

6. Spirituality of Surrender

As we recognize our limitations and lack of control over many aspects of our lives, we learn to surrender in faith and trust to a God who is in control of our lives. We pay heed to what Jesus told the Centurion: "Fear is useless, only trust is needed." We trust that the Lord will take care of us. We do not need to worry. We practice a spirituality of surrender. We make our own the the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Ghetsmeany: "Let your will be done, not mine." Or like Mary of Nazareth, we say in faith and trust "Feat!" "Let it be as you wish.)

Introspection

- Is there anything in this podcast that touches me specially? If yes, what is it and why?
- How am I experiencing the re-emergence of the sacred in my life?
- Which of the post-midlife spiritualities are part of my life today and which do I need to practice a little more at this period of my life?

Prayer

Jesus's assuring last words to us before he returned to his Father are: "*I am with you always!*" In the Old Testament God through his prophets repeatedly tells his people, "*Do not be afraid, for I am with you.*" We could stay a while in the presence of this God who accompanies us with love and care, who understands our inmost thoughts and feelings, desires and longings and talk to God about all that is going on in our lives at this period or what we experience when we look to the years ahead.. Or, we could Isaiah 43, 1-5, where God says: "*Fear not... when you pass through the water I will be with you; in the rivers you will not drown; when you walk though fire , you will not be burned; the flames shall not consume you... Because you are precious in my yes... and because I love you.*" And remain gratefully in the presence of this loving and protective God with whatever this passage evokes in us.

Have a blessed weekend. Stay safe. Stay Happy.
Thank you for listening/reading.

JOSE PARAPPULLY SDB, PhD
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