

BEING REAL

SPIRITUAL TOOLS FOR AUTHENTIC LIVING

A Series of Excerpts for Further Study and Reflection

INTRODUCTION

We all long to be “real,” to be “authentic” persons. What follows is a series of offerings on acquiring the necessary spiritual tools to lead a truly authentic life.

In April 2003, Trinity Institute, an outreach program of Trinity Church in New York City, held a conference on Benedictine Spirituality as a model for leading an authentic life in the contemporary world. The excerpts used in this series will be drawn from that conference and supplemented by other authors whose work complements the following themes:

- 1) What Does It Mean to Be Real
- 2) Being Real About Life
- 3) Being Real About Yourself
- 4) Being Real With Others
- 5) Being Really Balanced

This first section is a general introduction to the concept of authentic living by Kathleen Norris, Renee Miller, Rowan Williams and Joan Chittister. They ask: What is authentic spirituality? How do we recognize it? How do we acquire the tools to live an authentic life? And how can you be “really authentic” in the contemporary world?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE REAL

A monk in his travels once found a precious stone and kept it. One day he met a traveler, and when the monk opened his bag to share his provisions with him, the traveler saw the jewel and asked the monk to give it to him. The monk did so readily. The traveler departed, overjoyed with the unexpected gift of the precious stone that was enough to give him wealth and security for the rest of his life. However, a few days later he came back in search of the monk, found him, gave him back the stone, and entreated him, "Now give me something much more precious than this stone, valuable as it is. Give me that which enabled you to give it to me."

--From a story told by Anthony de Mello

Recognizing Spiritual Authenticity

Kathleen Norris

[What are the qualities that mark spiritual authenticity?] The first is that we recognize it when we see it at work in others, and we can't help but remark on it. We want to make the names of [these] holy people known. This is the ancient tradition of sainthood by popular acclamation, and unfortunately we've all but lost sight of it. ... But we might remember that Basil the Great was the name bestowed on a young man by the poor of his day because he had used his fortune to provide for them, and brought them hope in troubled times. The recognizing and naming of [authentically spiritual] people is still a human need. In our own time and in our own nation, we might look to Cardinal Bernadine as he faced his death from cancer, and Father Michael Judge, who died a few blocks from here going to the assistance of firemen at the World Trade Center. They might be seen as examples of contemporary saints by popular acclamation.

[Real authentic] holiness is an inspiration in our own troubled and divisive world because, I think, its qualities are universal. People from all cultures, all religions, all places can point to people who embody gratitude and hope, who foster peacefulness and compassion. Thinking about my own communities of faith, it's easy to look and name those anonymous saints, those friends of gods and prophets who live and work in our midst, usually quietly and without calling attention to themselves. And this brings me to a second point about [authentic] holiness. Recognizing it in others is a valuable thing, but if we

recognize it in ourselves we're dead wrong. We have merely succumbed to the temptation that the ancients appropriately named "vainglory," that does nobody any good and leads straight to the pool of Narcissus.

--Kathleen Norris, Trinity Institute Benedictine Spirituality Conference, 2003, 12-14.

Becoming Spiritually Authentic

Renée Miller

We know [spiritual authenticity] when we see it. We may not be able to articulate what it is we see, but we see it. We all, at one point or another, seek to be in the presence of [such] a holy person because we somehow sense that if we can sit at the feet of such a person, the inner disparities of our own life will be gathered together and resolved. That is why people search out spiritual guides and gurus. There is a hope and anticipation that there is someone who is somehow closer to divine truth than we are and that their truth will somehow be conveyed to us.

When we seek out holy people and find them, what is most palpable about them is that they have a sense of "completeness"--they seem free of the anxiety, duplicity, and complex desires that so characterize and plague our daily lives. They seem to have become detached from what is extraneous. They have a single-minded focus and there is a peace and contentment about them that seems strangely absent in our own lives.

While this is attractive, we are shy about seeking to become holy ourselves. Partly this is because we misunderstand holiness. We think holiness is something that can only be acquired by heroic effort. We are sure it will require all night vigils, being a member of a monastery community, living a life devoid of fun and frivolity, meditating for hours each day, wearing out our knees and our backs in prayer, never lying or cheating or feeling lust in our heart. Or, if none of that, at least it will be a life that is dreary, so concentrated and focused as to be boringly dull.

Let me suggest to you that holiness is not what you think it is. In theological terms we talk about holiness as being 'set apart'--set apart for God. Even that, however, is a misunderstanding of the word. The actual root word is *hool* with "w" placed at the beginning, and it literally means whole. The simple duty of us all becomes nothing more, nothing less than becoming whole. Holiness is the process by which we integrate the loose threads of our life into a whole tapestry of beauty and divine grace. This is a creative task for the entirety of our lives. The Good News is that we can set aside all the to-do lists of things that we think are

required for reaching some standard of moral and spiritual perfection, and open ourselves instead to the invitation and creative possibility of becoming whole in God.

To become whole in God means aligning our lives with God through such things as: *Seeing* the world and ourselves through God's eyes. *Forgiving* others even when the pain of hurt and betrayal sticks in the throat like hard, dry clay. *Not judging* others even when their behavior makes our heartbeat quicken and our breath shorten. Having the courage to *face evil* and overcome its power with the goodness that is foolhardy in the eyes of the world. Staying in the place of *unconditional love* even when love seems imprudent and so difficult as to make us want to run away.

These are the loose threads that we spend our lives weaving together into the beautiful tapestry of holiness--wholeness in God. Far from being dull and drear chores of the soul, becoming whole in God can be an adventure as thrilling and dramatic as the latest Hollywood action movie, and the result is that we no longer need someone else's holiness to rub off on us just so we feel better about ourselves.

Acquiring the Spiritual Tools

Rowan Williams

St. Benedict is, as usual, uncompromisingly prosaic when he describes the monastic community as a workshop. It's a place where we use specific tools, and he lists those tools with blunt simplicity in chapter four of the *Rule*, tools that are lent to us, ... to be returned on the last day when we receive our wages. It's an imagery that, for me, conjures up a landscape in monochrome: a gray sky, a stone wall, the tools, worn smooth with long use and skillfully patched up over time, taken from the shelf each morning until finally hung up when weariness and age arrive. [An authentic spiritual] life is one in which we learn to handle things, in businesslike and unself-conscious ways, to handle the control of the tongue, the habit of not passing on blame, getting up in the morning and not gossiping. A [spiritual] lifetime is one in which these tools are fitted to our hands. Simone Weil wrote somewhere about how the tool for the seasoned worker is the extension of the hand, not something alien. And Benedict's metaphors prompt us to think of an [authenticity] that is like that, an extension of our bodies and our words that we've come not to notice.

In a recent essay on Benedictine [practices], Professor Henry Meyer Harting of Oxford describes it as “completely undemonstrative, deeply conventual, and lacking any system of expertise.” Very broadly, that’s the picture I want to develop, with reference to this early and potent image in the *Rule* of the workshop and its tools. ... At this stage, though, perhaps the most important thing to emphasize is the “deeply conventual.” The [spiritual authenticity] envisaged by the *Rule* is entirely inseparable from the common life. The tools of the work are bound up with the proximity of other people, and the same other people, which is the catch. As Benedict says, the workshop, God’s workshop, is itself the stability of the community. Or, to pick up an earlier language, it’s the unavoidable nearness of these other people that becomes an extension of ourselves.

--Rowan Williams, Trinity Institute Benedictine Spirituality Conference, 2003, 7-8.

At the very start, then, of thinking about Benedictine [spirituality], there stands a principle well worth applying to other settings, other relationships, not least to the church itself. How often do we think about the [authenticity] of the church, the *holiness* of the church, as bound up with her habitual acceptance of the otherness of others who have made the same commitment? And what does it feel like to imagine holiness as an unself-conscious getting used to others? The presence of the other, like a tool worn smooth and gray in the hand. The prosaic settledness of some marriages, the ease of an old priest celebrating the Eucharist, the musician’s relation to a familiar instrument playing a familiar piece: These belong to the same family of experience as the kind of sanctity that Benedict evokes here. “Undemonstrative,” as Henry Meyer Harting says, because there’s nothing to prove.

Well, the tools of good works, in the *Rule*, include the Golden Rule, several of the Ten Commandments, and the corporal works of mercy: clothing the naked, visiting the sick, burying the dead and so on. But the bulk of them have to do with virtues that can be seen as necessary for the maintenance of stability as a context for growth in holiness. It’s as though Benedict were asking, “What does it take to develop people who can live stably together?”

--Rowan Williams 9-10.

With a slightly artificial tidiness, we might see the practices Benedict commends for nurturing the stability of the workshop under three heads: the monk must be transparent, the monk must be a peacemaker, the monk must be accountable.

--Rowan Williams 10.

Respect is another of those worn-smooth tools that are simply there as an extension of my bodily being. None of this is learned without the stability of the workshop. The community that freely promises to live together before God is one in which both truthfulness and respect are enshrined.

--Rowan Williams 18.

So the *Rule* envisages [spiritual authenticity] as a set of habits, like goodness in general, of course, but not reducible to goodness only. The [authentic] person is not simply the one who keeps the commandments with which the catalogue of tools for good works begins, but one who struggles to live without deceit, their inner life manifest to guides and spiritual parents, who makes peace by addressing the roots of conflict in him or herself and, under the direction of a skilled superior, attempts to contribute their distinctive gifts in such a way as to sustain a healthy circulation in the community. You can see why Benedict is clear about the need for long probation for [anyone seeking authentic spirituality], and why he's so hard on wanderers who can never have adequate experience of living with the same people and becoming habituated to charity with these particular inescapable neighbors. ... The 72 tools of good works are precisely like the 72 first chapters of the *Rule*: a preparation for hearing what the spiritual giants have to say. They're a method by which persons who can hear the questions come into existence. ... So the product of the workshop is people who are really there. Perhaps it's as simple as that. What Benedict is interested in is producing people who have the skills to diagnose all inside them that prompts them to escape from themselves, themselves in the here and now. ... Benedict regards [the spiritual] life as a discipline for being where you are, rather than taking refuge in the infinite smallness of your own fantasies. Hence, he can speak in one of those images that continue to resonate across the centuries of the expansion of the heart that obedience to [a] *Rule* [or a spiritual practice] will bring. The life is about realizing great matters in small space, ... about "inhabiting a great hall between narrow walls." That is the definition of life itself offered by the Welsh Quaker poet Waldo Williams, in one of his best known poems, and it's not a bad commentary on the practice of a *Rule*.

But I've already hinted at some of what makes [practicing a] *Rule* hard ... these days. And in the last bit of these reflections, I want to draw out just a little more on this so as to suggest where [practicing a] *Rule* is salutary... for us individually and corporately. The idea fundamental to [a] *Rule* ... is that there are some good things that are utterly inaccessible unless you take time. That's probably the greatest brick wall of all. It's not just a matter of personal neurosis. Given the

24-hour pattern of news provision we live with, we're discouraged very strongly from any suspicion that the significance of events might need a bit of time to understand. ... But the truth is that serious and deep meanings only emerge as we look and listen, as we accompany a long story in its unfolding. Whether we're thinking about the meaning of a life, mine or anyone's, or the meaning of a period in international affairs, stability is still the key, a staying with that gives us the opportunity ourselves to change as we accompany and so, only so, to understand more fully.

--Rowan Williams 22-24.

The workshop is, at the end of the day, a solid and tough metaphor for that spirituality which is a lifetime's labor yet also an expansion of the heart, just as all good physical work is an expansion of the body into its environment, changing even as it brings about change. [Spiritual authenticity] in this perspective is a much-patched cloth, a smooth worn tool, at least as much as it is a blaze of new light. [Spirituality] must be, finally, a state we can live with and in, the hand fitted to the wood, forgetful of the join.

--Rowan Williams 29-30.

Leading an Authentic Spiritual Life

Joan Chittister

How do we now here, at this moment in this place, live and act in a contemplative, Godly way? There are two stories, one from the Sufi masters and one from the monastics of the desert that tell us most, I think, about what it means to live an illuminated, a contemplative life in hard times. In the first, the Sufi tell about a spiritual elder who asked the disciples to name what was the most important thing in life, wisdom or action? And the disciples were unanimous in their opinions. "Well, it's action, of course," they said. "After all, of what use is wisdom that does not show itself in action?" And the master said, "Well, perhaps. But of what use is action that proceeds from an unenlightened heart?"

In the second story from the desert monastics, Abba Pullman says of Abba John that he had prayed to God to take his passions away from him so that he might become free from care. And in fact, Abba John reported to him, "I now find myself in total peace without an enemy." But Abba Pullman said to Abba John, "Really? Well, in that case, go and beg God to stir up warfare within you again, for it is by warfare that the soul makes progress." And after that, when warfare

came, Abba John no longer prayed that it might be taken away. Now he simply prayed, "Lord, give me the strength for the fight."

We might well learn, you and I, from those ancients. It's a moment again in human history, isn't it, that needs the deepest wisdom and certainly will require holy struggle in behalf of all creation and in resistance to chaos. ... Christians, now must choose either to retire from this fray into some paradise of marshmallow pieties where they can massage away the heat of the day, the questions of the time, the injustice of the age, with spiritual nosegays and hypnotic exercise and protests of powerlessness where they can live like pious moles in the heart of a twisted world and call that travesty peace and religion. Or [we] can gather [our] strength, [our] spiritual strength, for the struggle it will take to wake up from pious sleep, to bring the reign of God now. If we have learned anything in this country, we know it is not an easy time and we know it is not an easy task.

--Joan Chittister, Trinity Institute Benedictine Spirituality Conference, 2003, 8-9.

Where can we possibly go for a model of how to live in ... [this]? My suggestion is that we stop drawing our sense of human possibility from the periods of exploration and their destruction of native peoples, or from the period of industrialization and its displacement of people, or from the periods of the world wars and their extermination of peoples. No, my suggestion is that little people, people like you and me, begin to look again to the fifth and sixth century and to the spiritual imagination and wondrous wisdom that made it new.

--Joan Chittister 10-11.

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