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'Get a life!'

Rich Heffern | Jul. 31, 2009 NCR Today

Teenagers, those perennial fonts of wisdom, often express themselves in timely, insightful clichés. One of my favorites is the exhortation, ?Get a life!? It?s good advice. Since lifestyles are an outward expression of inner values (or lack thereof), in order to live simply and generously we must pay close attention to our inner spiritual reality. How do we find the way to the divine mystery and then how do we connect with it? Just living a life, with all its challenges, rewards, and ups and downs, is an engaging and productive spiritual path.

Our popular image of a holy person, someone intensely living out a spirituality, has long been of someone withdrawn from the world, a loincloth-clad guru meditating alone in a cave somewhere, a monk cloistered away in silence, a gaunt, hollow-cheeked face. But this image has been gradually, and rightfully, changing to that of a person hip deep in reality with her sleeves rolled up: a social worker surrounded by the homeless in the inner-city; a volunteer slain by death squads in the middle of Central American poverty; a white-and-blue robed nun mopping the brow of a dying sidewalk dweller in Calcutta, a protestor splashing blood on a missile silo in the Midwest.

And that life we live, that true spiritual path, need not always be packed with round-the-clock toil and service. Spirituality writer Pat Livingston, a sought-after speaker at Catholic conferences and workshops, recalls the time she gave the keynote address at a New York City gathering. Afterward in the reception line, a man asked her what she was going to do with her time in the Big Apple afterward. ?Prepare my next talk,? she answered.

?What?!? he gasped. ?You?re smack in the center of world civilization with art galleries, museums, restaurants and theater that are all once-in-a-lifetime experiences, not to mention the chance to watch the sunset from the top of the Empire State Building, and you?re going to lock yourself in a room with a speech?? He?s right, she thought, and out she went for a day on the town that would glow in the photo album of her memories. She got a life.

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