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The great balancing act

Rich Heffern | Mar. 22, 2010 NCR Today

How do we live out our unique identity and embrace our own mystery? One way is to open the ancient overflowing toolbox of our spiritual traditions. Nestled therein are many reliable implements that have stood the test of centuries of use in the work of creative inner integration and soul crafting.

What are some of these tools? Patience, silence, incubating darkness, the wonderful yeasting action of prayer, wise and careful discernment, the adventure of striving for simplicity, meditation techniques, the great and not-so-easy art of letting go, the simple craft of mindfulness, the call to the death-rebirth dynamic of the paschal mystery, the cultivation of a contemplative attitude, renunciation, fasting, forgiveness, and the endless mystery of forgiving others.

Once we have these tools at hand, where can they be put to work? Where else but in our everyday life? We do not naturally connect spiritual exercise with daily life. We identify the practice of spirituality with white flowing robes and far-off places -- a monastery, a retreat center, or a misty landscape somewhere, empty of the humdrum and routine. We wait for bewitching music, swelling cascades of violins like we hear in the movies, to cue us that this is a sacred moment. We over-romanticize spirituality, push it out of reach, waiting for just the right moment or occasion. We tell ourselves it can't happen here -- right in the living room with the kids and the television on, or in the office with the boss hovering over my shoulder and spreadsheets sprawled across my desk.

Nevertheless, it is our ordinary life that we are to transform into wholeness. It is an exhilarating truth that every moment of our daily lives, every experience, at whatever time or place, can serve as spiritual exercise. The realm of the sacred is everywhere.

A few years ago my teenage stepson wanted a car. His request for help put me in an ambivalent place. Though convinced excessive driving is environmentally destructive, though I'd just written an article praising the virtues of environmental responsibility, I could also see that boredom and immobility would have been corrosive to his spirit at that important time in his life. Further, he needed some breaks in a life filled with mishaps and trials; he'd worked hard in school and was willing to work for the car's upkeep.

Though I'd like to report that this deliberation proceeded with great-souled equanimity on my part, alas, that was not the case. Kicking and screaming all the way, I found myself dragged through a dilemma that in the end resolved itself and resulted in real growth for me. The problem cornered me and forced me to let go of my own pet agendas and open myself to a different vision and wisdom.

It was the late, great Dr. Seuss himself who said, "Life is the great balancing act." Sorting through these difficult dilemmas, working out the necessary compromises, and finding workable, practical solutions to knotty problems, I'm convinced, is true prayer, close encounters with the divine mystery working in our lives. It is the painful arena of upset plans, nagging selfishness, tricky challenges, slippery banana peels under the feet of our easy posturing, the arena of self-emptying and surrender, where we are at once most human and most in touch with the divine. This is sacred work. Sometimes we must hold two equally balanced and strenuous tensions

within us at the same time. When this happens -- hard as it is to maintain -- it is a very holy moment.

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