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“Spiritual Literacy: Connections”

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1 Corinthians 12:14-31

There was once a man riding in a row boat, who took out a knife and began to bore a hole under his seat. When his fellow passengers asked him what on earth he was doing, he answered: “What do you care? Digging a hole under my own seat, is none of your business!” Have you ever encountered that sort of attitude: “I can do whatever you want and it’s none of your business!” It has led to tremendous oppression and suffering. The truth is that there is no such thing as an isolated action that does not have some impact upon others and the world itself. We are all in the very same boat, and that boat is getting smaller every day.

Religious mystics of every faith tradition have long understood what has been confirmed by science and the natural world--that everything in the universe is interrelated, not separate at all. In fact, one definition of spirituality is: “The art of making connections to God and the world.” Connections to God, to others, to nature and the universe are essential to the Christian spiritual life. We do not grow in faith in isolation. Even monastics live in community and participate in worship. There is no escaping the fact that we are profoundly connected to one another and to all creation. We deny that connection at our own peril. The history of the western world is characterized by rampant dualism: mind vs. body, humans vs. nature, God vs. the world, science vs. religion. When we realize our interconnectedness to all creation we can rise above such arbitrary distinctions and understand the ways in which the things that appear to be opposite, are really quite similar. In recent years such dichotomies have given way to much more holistic thinking in which we recognize that everything is profoundly interconnected--time, space, matter, all living things. For years now physicists have understood that the world is not a machine with independent and individual pieces. The world is more like a living, breathing body in which each part impacts all the rest. Swiss psychologist Carl Jung put it this way: “When you look inside yourself, you see the universe and all its stars in infinity. There is an infinite mystery within yourself as great as the one without, and they are interrelated.”

In the Pulitzer Prize winning book by Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, the main character describes her awareness of her place in the universe. She says, “All of a sudden it came to me, that feeling of being a part of everything, and not separate at all. I realized that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed.” All things are more profoundly interconnected than we know.

Sadly enough, it occasionally takes a traumatic event before people realize this fact. Whether it is a crisis within your own family, or a national or world event,

we realize how closely we are connected to our human family when tragedy strikes. Many of us vividly remember acts of loving kindness we received after an accident, when a loved one died, or when we were hospitalized or ill. Some of us of a certain age will never forget the moment we heard that JFK or Martin Luther King had been assassinated. Or the day we learned that the Challenger had exploded. Or that Princess Diana was dead. Or the day known as Columbine. Or 9/11. Such moments become frozen in time, a surreal landscape which curiously connects us to others, even those we do not know. We instantly feel connected, and at such times we long to be with others because trauma unites like nothing else does.

One year ago 5 young school girls were killed in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. A reporter who went to cover the story was invited to be a part of the very private Amish mourning rituals. That experience completely changed his life. He wrote, "Few from the outside world will ever see up close these extraordinarily private and pacifistic people as they deal with the enormous suffering of losing their children to a brutal act of violence. While they live differently, the Amish are the first to dispel any notion they are better than the rest of us. One "preacher" told me, "You English (their term for the non-Amish) sometimes think we're perfect; we're not. We've got all the problems you have, and we have bad people, too. It could have been an Amish that did this horrible thing." "Still," he writes, "It is at times of great suffering and loss that the best of what the Amish are truly shines. As I visited in the victims' homes, sat on the mourning benches, talked with the families about the details of that terrible day, and watched one mother tenderly care for her daughter's damaged body, I was struck by how prepared they were for this. Not simply in a technical sense, but in a deeply spiritual, community sense. The Amish were well rehearsed for this tragedy because of their connection to one other. Faith, family and community are the bulwarks against evil, the balm for even the greatest pain and suffering and the strength to carry on after the worst interruptions of our lives. Though warmly received by the Amish, I felt at all times like an intruder, because I knew this was a time they relied completely on the most intimate relationships they have; and for the Amish, that's saying a lot. The talk was constantly of God and prayer and love. It was so pronounced it was palpable. The mother tending to her daughter as the girl lay in an open coffin, said with a teary smile to the many children around her, "See, she's with God in heaven now." And I observed first-hand, the power of forgiveness. When I visited the home of shooter Charles Roberts, I saw this amazing principle in action: in the almost supernaturally generous extension of immediate forgiveness by the victims' families; and, in the humble way the Roberts' family accepted this gift. Others in the Roberts' circumstances might have refused such an offer, whether out of guilt, or shame, or a

desire for privacy in their own pain, but the Roberts humbly accepted. An Amish leader explained the importance of this by saying: “ God has offered us forgiveness in the work of Christ on the cross, but we must accept that gift to enjoy it. Once we’ve accepted it, then we can share it with others.” Because the Roberts' accepted the gift, they can continue to share it, and this cycle of forgiveness will go on to heal this community much faster than one embroiled in hatred and vindictiveness.”

These are lessons our world needs desperately right now. The way that one simple community united to heal and bless those going through the most difficult journey imaginable, could teach us so much. Recognizing our connection to other people, nature, and the universe makes us better human beings. And isn't that what this spiritual journey is all about, to become better human beings, to grow more like Jesus day by day? One of the early church theologians named Iraneus once said, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” When we embrace our connection to all creation, we become fully alive. We realize that we are created in the image of God, that Christ dwells in us and we in him, we are not alone, and our thoughts and actions have great impact upon others and the world around us. Acknowledging the power of connection heals and transforms.

You have all heard that Zen question: “If a tree falls in the woods and nobody is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” Or another version, “If a man shares his opinion and a woman is not there to correct him, is he still wrong?” In light of the spiritual practice of making connections, I would ask: “If you do not recognize your connection to other people and to God, are you really alive? Are you embracing all of the possibilities God has placed in your path for growth and wisdom?” I know that it is hard to connect with others when you are timid, or alone, or depressed. It is sometimes tempting to isolate yourself and wallow in your own private pain and loneliness. I understand how hard it is to be connected when you don't even want to get out of bed. But we are already connected to each other, that is one of the greatest gifts of being human. No matter how disconnected we might feel, we are profoundly interconnected.

Our faith tradition repeatedly stresses that we are expected to initiate relationships for this very reason. In the New Testament letters, the phrase "one another" appears countless times. From the letters to the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Hebrews, James and Peter we are instructed to be devoted to one another, give preference to one another, love one another, edify one another, serve one another, be patient with one another, be kind to one another, forgive one another, submit to one another, esteem one another, encourage one another and pray for one another. We are not to hurt, judge, provoke, slander or

complain against one another. We are repeatedly told that we are family, and we have to treat each other with the greatest of care.

In First Corinthians, Paul uses the metaphor of the body as a description of Christian connection. He was writing to a group of rugged individualists in Corinth, those who completely bought into the ancient Greek and Roman ideal of self-sufficiency. The Corinthians were individualistic Christians, each with their own agendas and their own idea of how the church should function. They had little regard for their neighbors or the greater good. Then along comes Paul with a most curious metaphor: We are the body of Christ. Just as the body needs its various parts to function properly, we need every person to function as God intended.

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” God created a system of interdependence. We cannot escape the reality that we belong to one another and cannot function at our best without each other. Nothing about the spiritual life in the Christian sense is individualistic. Christian faith comes to a dead end without the connection of the body of Christ which is the church. We are a living, breathing body in which every part is important to the whole.

I am sure many of you have read the book *Tuesdays With Morrie*, the runaway best seller of 2005. If you haven't read it, the book is a collection of the wisdom of Morrie Schwartz, a college professor that author Mitch Albom had 20 years earlier. Mitch learns that his beloved professor Morrie is dying, so he decides to visit him every Tuesday during the last months of his life. This time together completely changes both of them, enhancing one man's death while it enriched the other man's life. He wrote, “Morrie once said, ‘The culture we have does not make people feel good about themselves. And you have to be strong enough to say if the culture doesn't work, don't buy it.’” “Morrie, true to these words, had developed his own culture, long before he got sick. Discussion groups, walks with friends, dancing to his music in the Harvard Square church. He started a project called Greenhouse, where poor people could receive mental health services. He read books to find new ideas for his classes, visited with colleagues, kept up with old students, wrote letters to distant friends. He took more time eating and looking at nature and wasted no time in front of a TV. He had created a cocoon of human activities—conversation, interaction, affection—and it filled his life like an overflowing soup bowl.” Morrie mastered the art of connections, and he not only lived well, he died well.

You know, I must have a pretty common face, because on several occasions throughout my life people have said, “You look just like my cousin in Omaha!” Or, “You look just like a neighbor I had 30 years ago whom I never really liked.”

Has that ever happened to you, when someone told you that you look just like somebody else? There is a website where you can insert a picture of yourself, and it will tell you based upon your distinct facial features, the other people you most resemble. It's called Myheritage.com and the intention is to connect people with their long lost relations. Well, we do not need a web site to tell us who our relations are. We can approach everyone we meet and say, "You know, look just like my brother. You look just like my sister. We must be related." Being connected to each other, to God, and to all creation is not something to which we aspire. It is the reality in which we find ourselves every single day of our lives.

We are all in the same boat, profoundly connected in more ways than we will ever know. Amen.