

Workshop #1: Belonging in a Sacred Way

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I am here to speak about spirituality and climate change. I and the others who will speak plan to tell how we as individuals came to view this physical world as sacred and holy and how that change in perception has made it easier for us to try to preserve the environment.

I was born in a town of 2000 people in beautiful area of the world—central New York State in the Finger Lakes region. I was surrounded by woods and creeks, birds and animals—all of which I came to love. I left that town for college and became a doctor. As a doctor I had a great profession, enough money, and a good family. In addition to the pleasure of my profession, I had the love of art, looking at it and making it. And I had a lot of great friends.

“So,” you think, “This guy had everything.” But despite my having everything I was discontented. Life in this beautiful town of my childhood was like life everywhere else. A child across the street for whom I baby sat, died a horrible death from leukemia when he was 6. When I was 13 while cutting through a back yard, I found a woman tied up in her basement who had been badly beaten and left for dead.

My profession of medicine exposed me to all kinds of human suffering from diseases and from fellow human beings. I could find a lot of pleasure in my family, my friends, my art, my humor and entertainment, but my world view was “The world has pockets of beauty and awe, but it is a godless, bleak place.” Also like every other human being eventually does, but at an earlier age I experienced my own personal loss and serious disease.

Drugs, alcohol, gambling were not for me. Sports, busyness, creativity were only temporary relief from my discontent with the world and my place in it. I wanted more. Although I was essentially an atheist my wife went to an Episcopal church. I hoped I could find something in the spiritual world even if it was all in my head. There I took a course on meditation and very quickly I felt brief moments of peace, calmness. I decided to pursue meditation and did so once or twice a day for 20 minutes. I joined a group in which we encouraged each other to be bold. We learned how to tolerate the odd effects of meditation like legs that shook or waves of dizziness or feelings of weepiness. We learned to take the feelings of peace and happiness in meditation into our everyday walking around lives.

We also tried to ask the mystic’s questions like “Am I connected to every person on the planet?” “Is every atom alive and aware?” When I asked those questions and got answers that seemed as though I was connected to everyone and everything, I kept asking and testing those feelings. The great thing about meditation and asking those questions is that you can eventually get a good sense of what is true and what is not. Visions of mermaids and unicorns might occur, but they don’t seem to last.

What I am saying is that mediation got me in touch with spiritual reality—a reality I did not know existed until I let myself look for it. My willingness to experience and listen to the spiritual side of life, has made me truly happy and satisfied with life and my place in it. I am no longer discontent.

The suffering of myself and others still occurs. Some of my patients still died—from cancer, from AIDS. I had known one of my patients murder another of my patients. Disease, Violence, injustice and climate

The Wonder of It All!
The Depth of our Belonging to the Evolving World

change are not things I ignore. But I can say that I feel deeply connected-- through and through-- to a powerful, loving presence that flows through the animate and inanimate world. This world we live in I consider alive, loving and aware. The spiritual world and the physical world are one and the same. It makes me love this world and want to be sure it keeps in balance.

Feeling deeply connected to the physical world as a loving, aware being makes decisions about climate change easier. I don't have the answers to climate change, but that doesn't mean that I just give up in despair. I also don't just burn up as much carbon as I wish. This insight has changed me in 3 ways.

1. I would never knowingly hurt a best friend because I really and truly love my friends. The same is true for the world. I am not there yet, but I am closer to thinking about my love for the earth the same way I think about my love for best friends and wonder how my decisions respect and love the earth. This constant love is a great way to feel.
2. That love for the earth extends to everyone on the planet. Everyone, that means everyone, is holy and sacred or if you are Christian, everyone you meet is like Christ—everyone is a part of God with a capital G. When dealing with ideological enemies or people who really mean to hurt me, I know I am dealing with God. I can let my murderous thoughts fly away after I notice them. I don't need to let snarky or hurtful remarks 'slip out.'
3. I can go to the spiritual world and ask questions. "Am I connected to every human being on earth?" "Does love permeate everything in this world?" "Is this feeling of love just internal or is it external as well?" "Can I hold all of humanity in my heart at the same time?" "Does the world have anything to tell us about how to save itself?" You can learn to trust your visions and distinguish between what is just imagination and pretend and what is real.

All human beings experience moments of joy and awe. Those moments are messages that the material world is alive, aware of us and communicating to us. If we build on those moments as true eventually we can feel and live a new truth—that we are deeply connected to each other, to the physical world and to an as yet undefined but real loving force that stays with us constantly.