

Evensong Address
St Catharine's College, Cambridge
12th February 2023
Dr Larry Culliford (Medical Sciences, 1968)

Sustaining Ourselves

Readings (NRSV):

OT: I Kings 19: 11-14.

NT: I Corinthians 2: 6-16.

Hymn: *Dear Lord and Father of Mankind* (New English Hymnal, 353)

To sustain oneself implies, naturally, maintaining both physical and mental welfare, also the fostering of healthy relationships... but there is more. Like all living things, people need feeding in order to grow and develop. We need nurturing, enabling us to evolve... To sustain a fully meaningful life, to avoid stagnation and prosper, I want to suggest, we can help ourselves by actively seeking spiritual maturity and wisdom.

In *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (1992), the monk and teacher, Sogyal Rinpoche wrote, "Learning how to meditate is the greatest gift you can give yourself in this life". Meditation, like mindfulness practice, silent prayer, or what the 20th century Cistercian monk and spiritual writer, Thomas Merton referred to as 'contemplation', involves acquiring a skill: the ability to remain still and silent for a period, maintaining conscious awareness. A common aim for some mindfulness practitioners is to improve general well-being and reduce anxiety; but this is only a beginning.

Meditation, together with other spiritual practices, leads to improved awareness of life's spiritual dimension, making this increasingly an aspect of a person's day-to-day life experience. This dimension - the spiritual - is seamlessly engaged; as a creative, linking and shaping principle; with four others... Thus we have a scheme or set of five dimensions, best thought of (to avoid conflict with those who oppose the idea) not as dimensions of 'objective

reality', but dimensions '*of human experience and understanding*'. The five are as follows:

The *Physical* dimension (of energy and matter) – representing the miracle and mystery of *existence*

The *Biological* dimension (of organs and organisms) – the miracle and mystery of *life*

The *Psychological* dimension (of mental activity) – the miracle and mystery of *consciousness*

The *Social* dimension (of relationships) – the miracle and mystery of *love*

And, both underpinning and overarching these:

The *Spiritual* dimension (of souls and the sacred) – the miracle and mystery of *unity*

I'd like to tell a brief story. In 1982, recently returned to England after six years in Australia and New Zealand, I was at a crossroads. Uncertain about my future, I was considering some kind of religious life when I went on a meditation retreat in Cumbria. Sitting afterwards in warm sunshine one afternoon overlooking Morecombe Bay, I lost myself in a period of deep stillness. How long it lasted, I don't know; but when it was over and I re-opened my eyes, there was an insistent kind of voice filling my mind, saying, "*You are a psychiatrist, Larry. That is what you have trained to do... Go and do that!*"

On returning to London, looking in a medical journal, I immediately found the training post I needed to complete my studies in order to take the UK specialist qualifying exams. Success in getting appointed, and in the exams, eventually led to an NHS consultant post and more. For example, in the late 1990s, I helped found the 'Spirituality and Psychiatry' Special Interest Group within the Royal College of Psychiatrists. Also responding to inner prompting, I began publishing books and articles about wisdom and spirituality, initially focused on answering the question, 'What is mental health?' Somehow, I knew intuitively that this amounts to much more than the absence of mental

illness. Biological, psychological, social, and spiritual health are all obviously linked.

This episode, in Cumbria, I should add, was not by any means the only occasion I have felt guided, and my path made (at least relatively) smooth, by the Holy Spirit... Importantly also, when the going got tougher, I have often felt securely sustained, through faith and the gift of hope.

To sustain ourselves, in order to grow and develop, I am suggesting we do well to acquire the skill of spending regular time each day in stillness, engaged with sheer silence beyond the noise and distractions of earthquake, wind, fire... the busy world, social media and the rest; persevering patiently, attentive to both outer and inner experience, and maintaining the practice over time (in my case, for more than forty years).

It is true that, for the most part, nothing seems to happen; but, *firstly*, subtle change will be going on; change that persists increasingly between the sessions, I assure you. *Secondly*, when something does happen - a breakthrough, an epiphany, small or large - it will be meaningful, vital... transformative. "*Receiving the gifts of God's Spirit*" (as St Paul has it; I Corinthians 2: 12), we may feel encouraged, in this way, regularly to "*Put on the mind of Christ*" (I Corinthians 2: 16).

Spiritual exercises include religious practices such as what we are doing here this evening: ritual, worship, singing and chanting, praying, reading and listening 'mindfully' to scripture; also simply coming together to form what the Buddhists call a 'sangha', a group of mutually-devoted, wisdom-seeking, spiritual friends.

It is encouraging, too, that, despite the prevailing secular, consumerist culture, non-religious people also naturally seek out places, activities and occasions to inspire feelings of awe, wonder and delight; also opportunities to experience special feelings of fellowship with others, and kinship with the natural world. Wittingly or otherwise, they are seeking *spiritual* experiences, and often find

themselves - as we do - wanting to give something back through volunteering, acts of service, and random acts of kindness, reflecting the idea that 'we give to get', and that *everyone* is in need of our generosity... Everyone we encounter will benefit from our kindness, compassion, respect, tolerance, forgiveness and gratitude. Where we have it in our power to share with others our time and presence, and wisely (that is, without exhausting ourselves) share these gifts of the Spirit on them, I can think of no reason to hesitate or hold back. Can you?

An undergraduate at this College, I received a science degree; and have noticed people of science increasingly confidently reporting that the basic stuff of the universe is not material at all (Galileo Commission report, 2020). Sub-atomic particles have no independent existence, emerging from an ocean of energy and returning to it, depending on conditions. If I have understood the situation correctly, the universe consists ultimately of a dynamic field of pure energy... waves and vibrations (light and sound); a cosmic breath, a sacred wind... a holy spirit.

Numerous scientists now insist that the universe itself is conscious; is the source of consciousness; our brains being receivers, processors and transmitters of consciousness, rather than originators of it as we have long believed (Woollacott & Lorimer, 2022). Moreover, the left and right hemispheres of our brains have different, complementary agendas, and engage differently with the world (McGilchrist, 2009, 2021). In a predominantly secular culture, the deeply silent, poetic, intuitive, emotional, *holistic*, therefore 'spiritual', right brain is routinely devalued and neglected, while the relatively superficial, verbal, mechanical, intellectual, utilitarian, *binary*, essentially worldly, left brain tends to dominate. The unvarying duality the left brain espouses; habitually distinguishing *us* from *them*, *right* from *wrong*, *good* from *bad*, and so on; renders its nature judgemental.

The left hemisphere, working like a spotlight, insists on the familiar, rejecting new ideas even in the face of good evidence, attending to minutiae, breaking everything down to its constituent parts. The right hemisphere, in contrast, is

more like a floodlight, seeking out what is new, appreciating things whole and in broad context, intent on grasping the bigger picture.

Spiritual practices and secular wisdom exercises, especially meditation, serve to correct this Left/Right imbalance, according to a process that is also furthered by breaking down false barriers between people; for example through observing the practices, visiting the holy places, and engaging purposefully with the scriptures of other world religions; treasure-chests of wisdom for the asking.

Several such valuable texts have influenced me; and, I would say, helped me understand more fully the love teachings of Christ: about loving self, as well as loving neighbour, about loving God and His Creation; about feeling loved, cherished, blessed. Here, for example, are the first few lines of the Dhammapada, the *Sayings of the Buddha* (Byrom, 1976):

*We are what we think.
All that we are arises with our thoughts.
With our thoughts we make the world.
Speak or act with an impure mind
And trouble will follow you
As the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart.*

*Speak or act with a pure mind
And happiness will follow you
As you shadow, unshakeable.*

Among such precious scriptures, worthy of study, I would include the *Bhagavad Gita* (1987), *The Upanishads* (1965), the *Tao Te Ching* (1973), and the *Inner Chapters* of Chuang Tsu (1974), for example; also the love poetry of the Sufi mystic, Rumi, who wrote:

*Your task is not to seek for love,
but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself*

that you have built against it.

(Quoted by Shumway-Cook, in Woollacott & Lorimer, 2022, p100; see also Rumi, 2005)

In attending to these different traditions, Thomas Merton has often been my friendly guide and mentor. Here's what he says about contemplation, from the beginning sentences of his masterly book, *'New Seeds of Contemplation'* (1972):

"Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source."

For those who are not familiar with him, Merton was a writer who, in the 1960s, expressed eloquent opposition to the Vietnam War and the development of thermo-nuclear weapons. He supported Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement; also championed what we might call 'eco-wisdom'. Here's something he wrote in September 1958, after a visit to the General Electric factory in Louisville, Kentucky:

"What struck me most was the immense seriousness of the place - as if at last I had found what America takes seriously. Not churches, not libraries. Not even movies, but THIS! This is it. The manufacture of refrigerators, of washing machines, of tape recorders, of light fixtures. This is the real thing. This is America."

He further commented:

"I don't like it. I do not find it in myself to lay down my life for General Electric or anything it represents." (Merton, 1996, p219)

In the interests of *spiritual* rather than economic sustainability, the task for each of us is the re-sacralisation of our lives, of our cultural world-view. The words 'healing', 'wholeness', and 'holy' have a common root. The practice - and art - of both medicine and psychiatry, rather than the amelioration or eradication of symptoms, involves the healing of people; making them whole. Restoration of social and cultural health similarly necessitates wholeness, requiring harmony with the natural world, plus fellowship, compassion and love between people, despite any differences of gender, age, race, religion, politics, wealth, or anything else.

If we are to sustain ourselves, wider humanity *and* the planet, we must use both sides of our brains so as to unify *worldly* knowledge with *sacred* wisdom. Assuredly we have the means, through the gifts of the Spirit.

Here is Merton again:

"We are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are". (Merton, 1973, p308)

There is no Us and Them, he is saying. We are all one. To sustain ourselves - body, mind and soul - we are wise to prioritise rediscovering, and regularly reinforcing, a vital sense of sacred unity; through spiritual practice, wisdom exercises; through contemplation, meditation, mindfulness, and silent prayer; establishing thus direct communication and communion with the life force of the universe, the Almighty Cosmic Source and Sustainer of all, the Holy Spirit of God.

*Dear Lord and Father of mankind
Forgive our foolish ways!
Re-clothe us in our rightful minds,
In purer lives thy service find,
In deeper reverence praise.
Amen.*

References and recommended reading:

Byrom, Thomas (translator), *The Dhammapada: The Sayings of the Buddha*. Rider Books (1976)

Culliford, Larry, *The Psychology of Spirituality: an introduction* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2011)

Culliford, Larry, *Much Ado About Something: a vision of Christian maturity* (SPCK, 2015)

Culliford, Larry, *The Big Book of Wisdom* (Hero Press, 2020)

McGilchrist, Iain, *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (Yale University Press, 2009)

McGilchrist, Iain, *The Matter with Things* (Perspectiva Press, 2021)

Merton, Thomas, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New Directions, 1972)

Merton, Thomas, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New Directions, 1973)

Merton, Thomas, *A Search for Solitude; the Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol 3*. (Harper SanFrancisco, 1996)

Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (Rider Books, 1992)

Woollacott, Marjorie & Lorimer, David (editors), *Spiritual Awakenings: Scientists and Academics Describe their Experiences* (Academy for the Advancement of Postmaterialist Sciences, 2022)

Scriptures:

Bhagavad Gita (translated by Swami Prabhavananda & Christopher Isherwood; Vedanta Press, 1987)

Rumi, *The Book of Love* (translated by Coleman Barks; Harper SanFrancisco, 2005)

Chuang Tsu, *Inner Chapters* (translated by Gia-Fu Feng & Jane English; Wildwood House, 1974)

Lao Tsu, *Tao Te Ching* (translated by Gia-Fu Feng & Jane English; Wildwood House, 1973)

The Upanishads (translated by Juan Mascaro; Penguin, 1965)

Swami Vivekananda, *Vedanta, Voice of Freedom* (Vedanta Society of St Louis, 1990)

Useful websites:

Galileo Commission report summary (2020):

<https://galileocommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/GC-Report-Summary.pdf>

Larry Culliford's website: <http://www ldc52.co.uk>

The Royal College of Psychiatrists' *Spirituality and Psychiatry* Special Interest Group: <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/members/special-interest-groups/spirituality>

The Thomas Merton Center and The International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS): www.merton.org

The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland:

<http://www.thomasmertonsociety.org.uk/>

The World Wide Wave of Wisdom: <http://www.wwwow.net>