

BENCHMARKS OF A HEALTHY SOUL
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Readings:

“No individual life is an end in itself. One can live fully only by participating fully in the succession of the generations, in death as well as in life. Some would say (and I am one of them) that we can live fully only by making ourselves answerable to the claims of eternity as to those of time.”¹

Wendell Berry – *Life Is a Miracle*

“But if I am to let my life speak things I want to hear, things I would gladly tell others, I must also let it speak things I do not want to hear and would never tell anyone else! My life is not only about my strengths and virtues; it is also about my liabilities and my limits, my trespasses and my shadow. An inevitable though often ignored dimension of the quest for “wholeness” is that we must embrace what we dislike or find shameful about ourselves as well as what we are confident and proud of. That is why the poet says, ‘ask me mistakes I have made’.”²

Parker Palmer – *Let Your Life Speak*

“Strictly speaking, there are no enlightened people, there is only enlightened activity.”

Shunryu Suzuki Roshi

There has been great suffering in the world this week. The spread of the swine flu has caused international alarm. People are sick and dying. Violence continues to flare in Iraq, Afghanistan, and

¹ Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000), p. 8.

² Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), pp. 6-7.

Pakistan – to name only a few. There is fire and pestilence, wars and rumors of wars.

In the United States corporations continue to suffer the consequences of economic collapse. Chrysler is filing for bankruptcy, and hundreds of thousands of people are out of work. People continue to face foreclosure on their homes. Despite government bailouts banks and credit card companies continue to gouge the public with interest rates that are nothing short of usury.

Within our own church family there are also many who suffer. Some of our members suffer from unemployment, divorce, disease, loneliness, depression, and death. I have visited with all of them this week. Their pain is visceral and wounds every aspect of their being – body, mind, and soul.

I wish I could tell you that I have a solution to all of these problems. But my understanding of the human condition teaches me that suffering is an irrevocable dimension of life. This observation is not one of despair or negative thinking. Rather, it is an acceptance of life and the inevitable suffering that attends our living. That does not mean that I do not feel pain, or the frustration of being misunderstood and undervalued, or that I never despair. Rather, I

am growing in my ability to embrace the suffering that marches in my parade. Perhaps I have become more like Edgar, Gloucester's loyal son in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, "A most poor man, made tame to fortune's blows, who by the art of known and feeling sorrows am pregnant to good pity. Give me your hand, I lead you to some biding."³

The question that I think we must pay more attention to is how do we keep healthy in the midst of so much suffering? We know all of the characteristics of pain, disease, old age, and death. Do we know the benchmarks of a healthy soul? We are very quick to define the broken. Can we discern the recreated and the whole? Allow me to offer you some of the benchmarks of a healthy soul. The list is not complete, but reflect those that I think are essential.

A healthy soul is a soul that has made peace with impermanence. A healthy soul is a gracious companion to the constant change of life. Every thing and every person we have ever known in life are changing. Sometimes the change is imperceptible. For example, did you know that the Appalachian Mountains used to be the biggest mountains in North America, even bigger than the

³ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act 4 scene vi (Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1980), p. 1207.

Rockies? Who noticed the change? No one. They were undetectable in anyone's lifetime. Other changes are lightening fast like instant death on a highway, a flash flood or a fire that destroys a home. Our bodies change, our minds change, and our children change. Wealth, health, values, family, nation, and even traditions change. Nothing is permanent, and that includes the self. Indeed, the self is in constant metamorphosis.

At the root of every spiritual discipline I know of the dying of self is essential to spiritual health. It seems like a strange contradiction when you think of all the years we spend developing self-esteem, self-differentiating, defining personal boundaries, and defending personal identity. In fact, we are told that if these developmental tasks are not completed the human personality will not be healthy. At about the time we get all of that established some minister, teacher, guru, or spiritual master tells us that the self must die. And some are so brutal as to suggest that our self has been an illusion all along.

Dying to self does not mean that we do not have an ego or should not cultivate a healthy ego. But a healthy ego understands that it is not differentiated from the form and flow of life. Dying to

self means that the ego sees itself in relationship with all other life forms. Dying to self means that we are absorbed into and interdependent with the nations of people, plants, and animals. We do not stand out as an exceptional personality upon whom life bestows favor or punishment. To put it simply, we cannot take things so personally. If Japanese beetles eat up my garden this year it does not mean that God or Mother Nature has a personal grudge with me. If my mother-in-law wins the lottery it does not mean she received a special blessing from God.

Another benchmark of the healthy soul is the discipline of presence. Since life is constantly changing we had better be mindful of the present moment. It will not be here long. Our life, said the psalmist, is like a passing shadow. If we try to cling to it and live in the past we will not have lived at all. Or if we try to project the future and live in a world we can only imagine we also will not have lived. Trying to live in the past or in the future is only a reflection of an ego that insists on controlling life.

I think that sometimes we are like parents who physically abuse their children. One of the characteristics of parents who physically abuse their children is that they are goal oriented. They have high

expectations of their children. Their expectations are often inappropriate and their children get punished because they cannot live up to their parent's high standards. Many of us cannot enjoy the present moment because we are punishing ourselves. We want to win more, earn more, drive bigger cars, and achieve greater status. We could always do better; our best isn't good enough, and we are never sure that we are all that we could to be. Such a soul never knows the joy of life.

Presence is the breathing in of every moment. Presence pays attention to all that passes before it – the living and the dying. The present moment hears the child that asks, "Will you play with me?" That is hard to do when our ears are pounded by the television, the radio, the telephone, and the blare of traffic. The present moment tastes the orange, and the coffee, and the kiss. The present moment breathes the night blooming jasmine. The present moment discerns the tone of disappointment, the sadness of defeat, and the squeal of victory. To be present is to countenance the rise and fall of life's timbre. When we are present we give full attention to suffering, breathing in the expiration of the dying. The present moment turns off the television to visit with family or friend. The present moment

stops typing on the computer when someone calls. The present moment fronts the visitor with open eyes, open ears, and an open heart. The present moment puts down the game-boy and stops texting on the cell phone at dinner. It says, “You have my full attention.” The healthy soul is present, paying attention to the life before it.

The healthy soul is a forgiving soul. I do not know of a human being who can live with others or live with itself without forgiveness. Now we often get confused about forgiveness. We think forgiveness means forgetting, which is virtually impossible. We think forgiveness means pardon, as in “I beg your pardon,” for an ill-mannered blunder, or a governor’s pardon for a criminal trespass. Or we think forgiveness means that there are no consequences for behavior. There are always consequences for our behavior and those consequences sometimes mean that we must make restitution or be punished for our actions.

I am reminded of my granddaughter, Naomi. She came home from school the other day crying. My daughter, Heather, asked her why she was crying. “Because I hit my friend in the face with a baseball,” wept Naomi.

“Did you do that on purpose?” asked Heather.

“No.”

“Did you hurt her?”

“She cried but she said she was not hurt.”

“Did you mean to do it?”

“No.”

“Did you tell her that you were sorry?”

“Yes,” said Naomi, “and she told me she forgave me.”

“Then why are you crying?” asked Heather.

In a plaintive voice my granddaughter said, “Mo-o-m! Karma!”

I think that forgiveness means that we are invited back into relationships, back into the flow of life, back into the present moment. Those who cannot forgive are those who wander in the memory of betrayal, anger, and distrust. Those who are not forgiven are kept on the margins of marriage, or family, or community. Forgiveness means that we are brought back into the family or the community. We are expected to be partners again and share the common good. A man who has been unfaithful to his wife is not forgiven if everybody treats him like a wounded cat and worry that he might be self-conscious. No, a man who has been unfaithful to his

wife knows he is forgiven when after dinner his wife throws him the dishtowel and says, “I’ll wash, you dry. And by the way, pick the kids up after school and make sure you get them to soccer practice on time.” To be forgiven is to be re-engaged with all of life’s relationships.

And there are some of us who cannot forgive ourselves, who tiptoe around our wounded ego afraid that we will screw up again. Well, let me break it to you gently. You will! Forgiving yourself means honoring your limitations and accepting the fact that you are not or ever will be perfect. Forgiving yourself means trusting yourself enough to risk reconciliation with those whom you have wounded. Forgiving yourself may mean risking new relationships.

I believe that a healthy soul is a hospitable soul. Hospitality was once highly revered in ancient societies. Today we associate hospitality with social graces. But in ancient cultures people would not survive without hospitality. Hospitality required that a place be set at the table for the weary traveler, even the alien and stranger. Their safekeeping was guarded, their person and property respected. The word hospital means a house for the reception and entertainment of pilgrims, travelers, and strangers; it is housing for the needy, an

asylum for the destitute, the infirm, and the aged. Henri Nouwen wrote of hospitality as the free and friendly space for the stranger.

The healthy soul is the one that makes space for old friends and new visitors. Hospitality sets another place at the table to feed the weary pilgrims who cross the threshold of our lives. Hospitality brings travelers in from the cold and sets them by the fire. Hospitality takes their wet cloak and muddy boots and finds a warm robe and slippers. Hospitality fills an empty stomach with bread, an empty heart with song and poetry. Hospitality pays attention to the stories of love and conquest. Hospitality patiently listens to the traveler's tale of death and dreams of resurrection. Hospitality is the living room where we are present and pay full attention to the lives we have welcomed in.

Hospitality is not easy and is often disruptive. Hospitality means there will be more dirty dishes to clean. There will be more people to pick up after. Hospitality is not kind to our schedule, our quiet evening at home, and our favorite television program. And to the extent that we are angry and frustrated by the rigors of hospitality we see how much more we need to mature and grow.

Hospitality, forgiveness, mindfulness or living in the present moment, impermanence, interdependence and dying to self are some of the benchmarks of a healthy soul. There are others to be sure. They are only benchmarks, not weights on a judgment scale. They are the signs that you are still on the path. If you have ever done any hiking you know that trees are marked every hundred yards are so. Blue marks the main trail. Red may mark side trails. Hospitality, forgiveness, and mindfulness assure you that you are on the path. They do not tell you how fast you are going. They do not warn you of dangers ahead. They just reassure you that you are on the right path. You will scale new heights, clamor down into valleys, stumble and trip. But you are on the right path and you can meet whatever lies ahead with wholeness and grace.

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