

Spirits Alive

Souls on the Journey

by Flora May Sherwin Litt-Irwin

*I will give you the treasures of darkness
and riches hidden in secret places,
so that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel
who call you by your name. Isaiah 45:3*

The following is a prayer response to God, the Revealer of Secrets,
inspired by the above scripture,
written by Joyce Rupp in *Fragments of Your Ancient Name*

*Secrets from the storeroom of the divine,
Disclosures as yet unnamed and restricted,
Veiled concealments and awaiting revelation,
All this rests within your enormous treasury.
What could you be keeping hidden from me?
What is disguised that can enhance my growth?
How and when will you reveal something more?
All these questions rise and fall from my mind
While you, Revealer of Secrets, simply smile,
Knowing full well no one hurries this process.*

Today: *I open my spirit for further revelation.*

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Sharing First Thoughts

Travelling on a bus from Toronto to Hamilton, I was seated beside a young woman. I do not often speak much with a fellow passenger, but this time a conversation easily began. She was a second year engineering student at McMaster University. Inquiring about her plans, she shared with me her dream of going to Africa upon graduation. She had a deep desire to help the people by building up the infrastructure of a country there. I could hear the passion in her voice as she spoke. But, she had some doubts about how that would work out, being a woman in a traditionally male profession. And she wondered about safety in Africa, a concern certainly shared by her parents!

There was a light in her eyes as well as the passion in her words. This seemed more than a 'chance encounter', if such there ever is. I felt nudged to encourage her to hold fast to her dream as she continued her studies and waited to see how God would unfold the future before her.

Reflecting that such an encounter can often be for the benefit of both persons involved, I was listening as I walked home. There came into my mind these words: *Passion in the soul is not only for youth: it is ageless!* I had thought that maybe I had been on that bus for her! But I needed that message which arose from within. I needed to acknowledge a passion in my soul to find expression in writing! A risk to me to take too?

There is truth in the Zen saying that '*when the pupil is ready, the teacher will come*'. It is more than sixty years ago since a writing of Teresa of Avila, a 16th century Spanish Carmelite contemplative, 'fell off the shelf' into my hands and heart. Not by accident, I'm sure. This book, called *Interior Castle*, was the first spiritual classic I had ever read. These are some of her words which challenged me then, and still do today.

"We are incomparably foolish when we do not strive to know who we are, but limit ourselves to considering only these bodies. We have heard, and, because faith tells us that we have souls, we know. But seldom do we consider the precious things that can be found in this soul or who dwells in it or its high value. Consequently, little effort is made to preserve its beauty. All our attention is taken up with the outer walls of the castle; that is, with these bodies of ours . . ."

It is true that the outer life demands much of our human attention and energy. We can become entirely focused and engrossed there and easily put aside, for another time, spiritual seeking and intentional noticing of the movements in the inner life. Dag Hammarskjold spoke profoundly when he said, "*The longest journey is the journey inwards.*"

In my life, there has always been a deep longing, a longing for experience not only of outer-sight but inner-sight, and an unveiling of a measure of the Creator's plan for my human existence here. This became an insistent calling in my soul.

Writer Richard Bach says: "*The simplest questions are the most profound. Where were you born? Where is your home? Where are you going? Think about those once in a while and watch your answers change.*" My answer to those questions have changed over the years of my life, and there have been other questions: Who am I? Where did I come from? What is my 'aliveness'? Why am I here? What is the meaning and purpose in this passage of time called my 'life'?

In 1895, Clara H. Scott wrote the words and music to this hymn which expresses my own prayer.

*“Open my eyes, that I may see glimpses of truth thou hast for me;
place in my hands the wonderful key that shall unclasp and set me free.
Silently now I wait for thee, ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!*

*Open my ears, that I may hear voices of truth thou sendest clear;
and while the wave-notes fall on my ear, everything false will disappear.
Silently now I wait for thee, ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my ears, illumine me, Spirit divine!*

*Open my mouth, and let me bear gladly the warm truth everywhere,
open my heart and let me prepare love with thy children thus to share.
Silently now I wait for thee, ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my heart, illumine me, Spirit divine!”*

I do not pretend to have found, nor do I expect to find, answers which, in their completeness, cannot be known in this life. Although there have been *glimpses of truth*, as the hymn puts it, Christian scripture ever reminds me to bow with humility and awe before the mystery. I know that the measure of divine light which illumines anyone’s path is indeed pure gift, but is only a shadow of the glorious promise to be revealed in the heavenly life to come. In the words of the apostle Paul: *“Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then, face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.”* 1 Corinthians 13:12

Yet it was these very words which kept me wondering and asking questions, spiritual and theological, human and social, sensual and psychological. Along the way, I have listened for God’s responses to my seeking, although I am sure I have missed many. I daily pray to continue waiting for and attending to God’s whisperings, and to respond as I am led. For it is in believing and trusting that I am a child of God, a ‘spirit alive’ on a particular ‘soul journey’ here and now, that I find meaning, joy and peace.

Two years ago, when I first felt urged to write, I thought of it as an integrative exercise for myself. Having for many years led workshops on Christian spirituality, ways of meditation and prayer, and the healing ministry, perhaps writing was to be a gathering-up of the spiritual insights of the journey. Then, when the further thought came of sharing my discoveries with others through writing, the inevitable voices of resistance arose from within: *“What you might write has already been written, several times over! Your understanding is far too limited to be helpful to anyone else! The subject is far too big and broad, and beyond you. You have no credentials that count!”*

But there was another voice, a quiet and very clear one:

“Remember that you can’t and don’t need to know everything about the ultimately unknowable and indescribable. Yet you can write of the ‘glimpses of truth’ that have come to you.”

So I, a life-long learner, began to write of what for me is unfolding truth:

we live in an inspirited world, for God’s fingerprints are all over it and God’s presence everywhere within it;

we are created unique spirits of the same essence as our Creator;

we are God’s beloved, enabled by Spirit to live in relationship with the living Christ:

we grow and learn through spirit encounters and soul experiences;

we bless the lives of others and creation, as with soul awareness we are open to graced healing;

we give glory to God in finding and fulfilling our missions here.

It is a wonderful journey of discovery upon which I invite you to reflect with me. I offer now two further suggestions as we begin:

1. There are many quotations in this writing which have spoken to me along the years and which may speak to you. If you should be impacted by one as you read, I suggest that you ‘stop and stay’ with it, for the Spirit may be waiting to stir something relevant to your own life through those words. Since this writing is not a novel, there is no need to move quickly through it in order to find the resolution in the story!

2. For your own reflection on the material, it may be helpful to write in a journal. Memories of past experiences may arise for you as you read mine, inviting a response. I have included questions in the Appendix for each part of this writing. It could be helpful to record your responses in your journal as the Spirit leads you. You may want to share discussion of the questions your responses with a friend.

I close this First Word with a small section from *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* by William Wordsworth. If you have not read this poem in its entirety, I suggest it for your reflection on the earthly life journey. These are but a few special verses from this, my favourite poem.

*“Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting,
The Soul that rises with us, our life’s Star
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God who is our home . . . “*

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Part 1

Inspirited World

“When you get free from certain concepts of the way the world is, you find it is far more subtle and far more miraculous than you thought it was.”

British philosopher and writer Alan Watts (1915-1973)

The psalmist expresses this another way.

*“The heavens declare the glory of God,
the vault of heaven proclaims his handiwork;
day discourses of it to day, night to night hands on the knowledge.
No utterance at all, no speech, no sound that anyone can hear;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their message to the ends of the world.”*

Psalm 19:1- 4 The Jerusalem Bible

As a child born and brought up on a farm, I was aware of human interdependence with nature and the awesome beauty and wonder of it. Simone Weil says, *“The beauty of the world is Christ’s tender smile for us coming through matter.”* In a baby’s eyes or a face wrinkled by age, in a waving field of wheat or twinkling star, I could see it. It was not difficult to realize that this earth is full of diverse manifestation and movement, a wondrous energy and indefinable mystery pervading all. Without the usual distractions of life, and when the world around me and I myself are somewhat quieted, particularly in a garden, meadow or woods, I hear the hum of the earth and feel the energy of it. Creation sings, moans and groans, dances and rests, lives and dies to present form, even as I do. Without doubt, God’s divine design is in it all, but much is mystery.

Yet a particular experience was a further awakening moment. It was late afternoon, and I was in my little vegetable garden gathering fresh things for supper. I was quietly pondering the wonder of all that had grown and matured from tiny seeds, and being thankful. To my amazement, for just a few seconds, every plant began to glow, one blending with another until a radiant haze was over all, then gradually fading from my sight. Raising my eyes, I noticed that each tree also had a luminous light emanating from the foliage. I blinked my eyes, and could no longer see it. I know now that the light was still there!

I did not then understand that I had been privileged to see the ‘aliveness’ of the plants as this shimmering light. To me it was an illuminating experience which led to a heightened awareness of the energy flowing in, through and out from all in creation, including persons. Sometimes, not always, I can still see this amazing radiance, but never as distinctly as that first experience. I had been able to ‘behold God’ in the natural world in a way other than the external beauty. There is Spirit-presence everywhere and in everything in creation, animate and seemingly inanimate.

“And I have felt

*A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts: a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.”*

William Wordsworth

I learned that all creation radiates the glory of God and exists in varying states of vibration. The spectrum of light radiating from any human is in constant flux, evidencing, in swirling colours, the

spiritual state, the thoughts, and the emotions active in the soul at any moment. This is commonly known as the 'aura'. I had seen the aura or energy field of the garden plants and the trees.

One of my early book mentors was Agnes Sanford. In what I believe is her last book before she died entitled *Creation Awaits*, she writes: “*God is not only pure energy but is the Creator of all the light-energy from which all worlds are made. The thing is inconceivable; it is stunning. Yet it is true. Science can give no cause for the creation of all worlds, but the Bible can. And God said, ‘Let there be light and there was light’ Genesis 1:3. From that light every created being or animal or object was created, and so the substance of every plant and animal and human is the original energy of God that we call light.*”

The Bible has many references to light, used either metaphorically or metaphysically. Jesus said, “*I am the light of the world,*” and the fullness of the divine creative light which moved through him enabled him to teach and preach and heal as no other. We too have this same Spirit-light in and moving through us, and Agnes Sanford was one who, in her teaching, prayer and healing ministry powerfully evidenced this in profound and simple ways. She has written:

“Not only is the light of God so present in my plants that people wonder what kind of fertilizer I use, but also this same light flows between me and all living things”.

Her powerful and effective prayers were not only for people but plants, animals, and all creation, including the San Andreas fault, where two moving plates of the earth meet in western California. She taught that God has given us the obligation to understand the creative and re-creative light of God and, as light-bearers, participate in God’s healing activity in creation.

Creation and Creatures

“All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, all things wise and wonderful: in love, God made them all.”

Cecil Frances Alexander

I grew up singing this hymn and still appreciate its truth. I was taught that God, who made all things, held the stars in their places, caused plants to grow through sun and rain, and enabled the food chain to evolve to sustain the life of creatures. As a farmer’s daughter, I instinctively felt the aliveness of creation and I learned from childhood the relationship between creatures great and small. But I was not taught, nor did I fully understand, that all creation is inspirited, alive with God’s creative energy.

St. Francis of Assisi of the early 12th Century is a beloved Catholic saint, honoured as the patron saint of ecology and the environment. He felt deep kinship with nature, exclaiming the wonder of creation, and exhorting the creatures as well! He is reported to have preached to a flock of birds, and he begins his *Canticle of Praise* by addressing them. I am so appreciative of St. Francis’ words of wonder and wisdom, praise and gratitude.

*“My brothers, birds, you should praise your Creator”,
Most High, all-powerful, all-good Lord,*

*All praise is Yours, all glory, all honour and all blessings.
To you alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no mortal lips are worthy to pronounce Your Name.
Praised be You my Lord with all Your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,*

*Who is the day through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour,
Of You Most High, he bears the likeness.*

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
In the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair:*

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
And fair and stormy, all weather's moods,
by which You cherish all that You have made.*

*Praised be You my Lord through Sister Water,
So useful, humble, precious and pure.*

*Praised be You my Lord through Brother Fire,
through whom You light the night
and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.*

*Praised be You my Lord through our Sister,
Mother Earth who sustains and governs us,
producing varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs”*

No one who lives or works with birds or animals will deny that there is a kind of communication amongst them. While species of creatures have an energy communication with their own kind, this is also true between different species. Crow talks with cow, and cat with dog. And we too have a communication with them, as pet owners are quick to affirm. Creatures often respond to the human voice, action or even intention, with their own sound or movement. So, a dog may wake from sleep and go to wait at the door at home when the master/mistress decides to leave the office, even before starting out for home!

Animals are very sensitive to energy and quickly react to our feelings and thoughts as well as words or actions. Since all creatures have their aliveness from God, it seems reasonable that they have a kind of soul awareness also. Indeed, they often sense what we do not. At my farm home, our dog would howl whenever there was a death in the surrounding countryside, and long before we knew of it. Sometimes I see my granddaughter's cat attentively following with his eyes movements in the room which I do not see with my human eyes. Could it be that he senses spirit presences? I cannot know, but I do wonder.

Hymns of creation and creatures continue to be part of my church life. At Christmas, we often sing what is known as the Huron Carol:

*“T’was in the moon of wintertime when all the birds had fled,
that mighty Gitchi Manitou sent angel choirs instead”*

And we sing the French Carol:

*“Jesus, our brother, kind and good, was humbly born in a stable rude,
and the friendly beasts around him stood, Jesus, our brother, kind and good.”*

In this carol, the donkey, cow, sheep and dove speak of the gifts they bring to Jesus. In truth, each creature does bring the gift of its life to offer, even as I do. There is a sense of worship, awe, truth and beauty conveyed by these carols.

Aboriginal and Celtic Spirituality

“Every flower of the field, every fiber of a plant, every particle of an insect, carries with it the impress of its Maker, and can - if duly considered - read us lectures of ethics or divinity.”

English author and essayist, Thomas Pope Blount *A Natural History* published in 1693

Aboriginal people have always understood and honoured their oneness with creation, giving thanks for the wonders of their earthly home, and thanks to animals and plants for food and shelter. By showing gratitude to Gitchi Manitou, the Great Spirit, and to the earth, with ritual and respect, they lived in relational harmony with creation in a way that many non-aboriginals lost. We must learn again or perish. They listened to the voices of nature and each other, believing that spiritual wisdom could be heard through both. We sing the Dakota hymn,

“Many and great, O God are your works, Maker of earth and sky.

Your hands have set the heavens with stars, your fingers spread the mountains and plains.

Lo, at your word the waters were formed; deep seas obey your voice.”

In recent years, many aboriginal tribes have encouraged the revival of the early practices of their people, to their benefit and that of society.

Creation does indeed carry the impress of the Creator. But though I deeply appreciate and respect God’s inspired world, I know I am created to worship only the Creator. John M. Jones, S.C.

writing about Celtic spirituality in a book entitled *‘with an eagle’s eye’* says,

“Celtic culture recognized nature as sacred. They saw God everywhere around them, yet they were not guilty of pantheism. The hills, the sky, the sea, the forests were not God, but their spiritual qualities revealed God and were connected to God. All the world was a theophany, a marvelous revelation of God’s goodness, wonder, and inventiveness.”

In Celtic writer David Adam’s words, *“Celts prayed that their eyes might be opened, that all their senses might be made alert to that which was invisible. They prayed that they might have the eagle’s eye to see him who comes at all times . . .”* For them, the Holy One was to be found in any place, encounter or event, but they also regarded some places as especially sacred and named them ‘thin places’ - special places of connection with the Divine where the veil between the seen and unseen worlds is thin, even permeable. We each have experienced ‘thin places’ in our lives where we feel especially close to God and the spiritual world.

I have felt a kinship with my Irish great-grandmother and her roots in County Caven, Ireland. Long ago, I saw, as in a dream/vision, a very old stone building and well, and a shrub-like tree from which fluttered small pieces of cloth. I had no idea what this could mean. Through research I discovered that the Celts tied prayer cloths to a tree, often beside what they considered to be a holy well - a thin place for them.

Poet, scholar, and popular writer of many books on Celtic spirituality, J. Philip Newell, has included this prayer in *Celtic Treasure, Daily Scriptures and Prayer*.

“O God of those who have gone before us,

O God of our children and those still to be born,

O God of creatures and all growing things,

O God of the heavens and the seasons,

of winter’s barrenness and spring’s energy,

of summer’s fruiting and autumn’s ripeness,

you are the God of all life.

May we know you and reverence you in all that lives.”

Creation Spirituality

“Tread softly! All the earth is holy ground.

It may be, could we look with seeing eyes, this spot we stand on is a paradise!”

Christina Rossetti

In 1983, Matthew Fox, an American priest and theologian, raised consciousness within the church and beyond in his publication of *Original Blessing*. He affirmed the goodness and sacredness of the universe which is to be experienced as blessing. In response, God’s people are to be a blessing in creation. This is part of what he means by ‘creation spirituality’.

As rural or urban people, we can so easily look without seeing, listen without hearing, walk without noticing, and miss the gifts of beauty, message and meaning that nature reveals.

“A newly arrived monk was anxious to learn the truth of Zen, and said to the Master: ‘I have been initiated into the brotherhood. Will you be so kind as to show me the way to Zen?’ The Master said: ‘Do you hear the murmuring sound of the mountain stream?’ The monk said: ‘Yes, I do.’ ‘There is the entrance,’ said the Master.”

Zen Mondo

Thich Nhat Hanh in *The Miracle of Mindfulness* reminds us of the need for mindfulness in everyday living, in breathing, moving, sitting, listening, looking, working, eating . . . He teaches that mindfulness arises from an awakened mind. And this state is achieved and evidenced by smiling, by attention to the breath, and by the practice of being totally aware (mindful) in the present moment - the moment that is now, the only moment we truly have.

I am certain that the Creator intends us to be people of awakened mind, heart, and senses, living with wonder, gratitude, and mindfulness. Particularly in recent years, we have been led to a heightened awareness of what God expects of us as earthly inhabitants. The effects of thoughtless, irresponsible exploitation of creation for pleasure or profit are before our eyes: on our land, in the waters, and in the air we breathe. Since God is within all, when we abuse earth, sea and air, we commit an offence against the Creator. We acknowledge this sin of which we are all a part, and we sorrow for it.

Dr. David Hawkins M.D., Ph. D. writes: *“The source of all life and all form is, of necessity, greater than its manifestations; yet it’s neither different nor separate from the manifestations to any degree. There’s no conceptual artifact of separation between Creator and created. . . . The Maker of all things in heaven and on Earth, of all things visible and invisible, stands beyond both, includes both, and is one with both.”* Selected quotes from *Power Vs. Force* pgs. 231, 232

Community in Creation

“To be’ is to inter-be. We cannot just be by ourselves alone.

We have to inter-be with every other thing.”

Thich Nhat Hanh

How awesome is the natural world! Birds and butterflies migrate together, following invisible energy pathways north to south, south to north. They call to one another in their special form of communication. Canada Geese move in formation, changing lead bird as needed. All creatures feed, tend and train the young. Male penguins sit on eggs on the ice or snow so that females can go to the sea to feed. Creatures live and travel in flocks, herds or packs, and fish move in schools. Neither are we to go it alone! Like other creatures, we are made to be in relationship. And we do live in community. As John Donne says, *“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of a continent, a part of the main . . .”*

We are inter-related without doubt, and responsible for the quality of the energy vibration we emit which affects the life of persons, animals, plants, water and the atmosphere, near or far.

Dr. Masaru Emoto is a Japanese researcher who claims to have proven by experiment that drops of water and water crystals are affected by thought and emotion. Should we then pray over the water which we drink and use to water our plants, as well as over the water used in baptism?

Like many of you, no doubt, I have consciously or unconsciously extended love toward my plants and seen them thrive. I have also seen the plants in my flower boxes droop when the very air in and surrounding my home was permeated with my grief. I have learned that I do not think or feel or act independently, in spite of what I may once have supposed. I write more about this later.

Part 2

Spirits Alive

“Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it . . .”

Isaiah 42:5

The record in the book of Acts reads: *“The God who made the world and everything in it, who is the Lord of heaven and earth . . . gives to all mortals life and breath and all things . . . so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him - though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’”*

Acts 17:24a,25b,27-28

As scripture says, it is God who gives us life and breath. We are each an individualized consciousness or spirit-essence of God. To me, a ‘spirit alive’ is one born of the Divine Spirit, able to be open, receptive and responsive to God, the Source of life. As God’s created ones, we are all ‘spirits alive’ and we are intended to be spirits fully awake and aware of our innate nature. We are unique as humans, created not just to know about God as an abstract idea, but to know our Creator in a spirit-with-Spirit relationship, a wondrously close and intimate relationship, even as Jesus did. He lived in and out of the wonder and power of this reality. This is our ‘spirits alive’ created potential too, and a life-long process of discovery.

Scripture says, *“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than the angels, and crowned them with glory and honour.”*

Psalms 8:3-5

Spirit I Am

“Thus says the LORD, who stretched out the heavens, and founded the earth and formed the human spirit within . . . “

Zech.12:1

In the familiar words of philosopher and theologian Teilhard de Chardin, *“We are not human beings on a spiritual journey, but spiritual beings on a human journey”*. Yet so often we identify ourselves not by our spirit nature but by societal titles such as family name or role, or by our address, nationality, colour, gender, work or status in the community.

When certain of these identifications change, by choice, necessity, opportunity or loss, we suffer stress and probably distress, in some measure. Perhaps among the most difficult changes is the loss of employment, separation and divorce, the death of a loved one, or a loss through infirmity or aging. At times of any change, we can experience debilitating effects in every area of our being: spiritual, mental, emotional, relational and physical. And, the results of stress imprinted in every cell of the body can, if not cleared, manifest in illness.

Even those changes perceived as 'good' can cause stress because we must adapt and adjust to a different life, in some way. A self-perceived happy, secure, independent or healthy life can change unexpectedly. Perhaps it is then, if never before, that we may say, "*Who am I, really?*"

In Hebrew scripture, God named God's self, saying to Moses in Exodus 3:14, "*I AM WHO I AM*", and in Psalm 46:10 the writer hears God say, "*Be still, and know that I am God.*"

Since God's is a Spirit name, so is ours, for in Genesis 1:27 we read:

"God created humankind in his image"

So I believe we can say, "*I am who I am, for I am God's image.*" To me, my I am-ness, my spirit, is like a radiant spark of God who spoke Self-defining words to Moses.

Other scriptures also confirm our essential spirit identity:

"Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" 1Cor:3:16
(The biblical note on this verse points out that the Greek word for 'you' is plural.)

Jesus named his I am-ness in various ways:

"I am the Good Shepherd, I am the Way, I am the Truth, I am the Light, I am the Door"

Although, as mentioned, we tend to name our I am-ness in human and social terms we can name ourselves by the same spiritual I am-ness as did our Brother Jesus. Paul affirms our spirit nature:

"For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within?"

1Cor:2:11

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition then, each human is one of God's own offspring. There is a wonderful children's song which says it so well. "*If anybody asks you who I am tell them I'm a child of God.*" This is our real family name, an eternal family name, and our true identity.

In her book about angels, Jane Howard writes, "*The angels. . . . bring us messages of our true identity; that we are one with 'all that is', seen and unseen, if only we could remember how to hear this truth. They would show us that we are one with the wind, one with the sun, one with the flowers, that we are one with the angels themselves and one with God.*"

As a 'spirit alive', a 'spirit-centre of consciousness', I belong to God, my Creator and Sustainer. My individual 'spirit' is the vital, dynamic energy of my being, my particular eternal life-essence, my 'breath', named in ancient terms as 'ruach', 'pneuma', 'spiritus', or in the Sanskrit, 'prana'.

Speaking of the body and spirit after death to this life, the writer of Eccles.12:7 says, "*The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath (or the spirit in the note) returns to God who gave it.*"

Spirit and Soul

“With all your science - can you tell how it is, and whence it is, that light come into the soul?”

Henry David Thoreau

“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.” Psalm 103:1

For years I felt confused about the two words, spirit and soul, for speakers and writers seemed to use them differently, even inter-changeably. Dictionary definitions certainly did not help! The definitions of `spirit` include these: *“The intelligent, immaterial and immortal part of man; the soul as distinguished from the body which it occupies; the human soul after it has quitted the body; an apparition; a supernatural being”*.

The definition for `soul` given in the Webster’s Dictionary is: *“The spiritual and immaterial part of man; the immaterial spirit which inhabits the body; the moral and emotional part of man’s nature; the seat of the sentiments or feelings; the animating or essential part”*. And in the Oxford Dictionary the definition is quite similar: *“The spiritual or immaterial part of a human being or animal, regarded as immortal; a person’s moral or emotional nature or sense of identity”*.

I longed for a clearer understanding, and what I present here is where I have arrived through study and reflection, listening prayer and meditation over many years - at least for now!

To me, though intermingled, spirit and soul are not synonymous. I know of a family who found a letter, written in 1846 by an ancestor here to a relative in Great Britain. The letter began with these words: *“My first concern is with the state of your soul.”* Not something we normally write or ask about quite so directly! In fact, today we might think it an affront to our privacy! Although often when we say, *“How are you?”*, we are really asking about more than the physical. Very occasionally we may say, regarding an opinion or a decision, *“I’ll have to do some `soul-searching` about that!”* But, this word `soul` - what are we talking about? What do we understand by `soul`?

On July 1, 2011, Canada Day, I watched the celebration in Ottawa on television, and heard, among the musical numbers, the song *“Body and Soul”*, sung by a B.C. artist, and a number called *“Soul Influence”* by a group of Canadians of African heritage. And I recalled a much older lovesong entitled, *“Heart and Soul”*. The word `soul` has been used in a song title or referred to as a genre of music for years. Some of us may say, `soul` is the whole being of an individual, as in *“He/she is a good soul”*. Others refer to the non-material, non-physical part of an individual, the spiritual part, as `soul`. And still others consider `soul` to encompass the mind, will, and emotions, or sense perceptions, thoughts and feelings.

Several biblical writers speak of the heart or the inner being or the inmost parts.

“The LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance but the LORD looks on the heart.”

Samuel 16:7

In Paul’s words: *“I pray that out of his glorious riches God may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.”*

Ephesians 3:16

And the wisdom writer of Proverbs says, *“The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to the inmost parts.”*

Proverbs 18:8

But in Luke 1: 46-47 we read, *“Mary says, `My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior . . .”* While today, some consider `soul` to be the same as `spirit`, it does not

seem as though Mary did! In my understanding now, my spirit empowers my particular soul expression. And this is manifested through, not separated from, all of my being! But, as previously said, I am not only the sense perceptions, thoughts, images and emotions which make up my soul experiences and condition here in this dimension, I am the 'experiencer', the consciousness, the 'unknowable I', the living 'spirit child' of God.

Spirit, Soul and Body

“Do you not know that your body is a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit within you which you have from God, and that you are not your own?”

1 Cor. 6:19

“The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath (or the spirit) returns to God who gave it.” Eccles. 12:7 In *The Secrets of Life*, current popular writer Stuart Wilde says, *“Within our humanity there’s a long-forgotten dream, one in which we remember our true heritage in the abode of light, and where we are truly infinite.”* Although in a human body in this dimension, I do remember my true heritage. And whatever my body’s changes, it remains the sensual vehicle through which my spirit and soul express as I learn and grow through experiences in this plane of existence.

Morton T. Kelsey includes a wonderful writing in his book *The Other Side of Silence*. It helps to further clarify who we are. It was originally intended as an introduction to a period of meditation, and so it begins, *“Having stepped into the silence, comfortable, relaxed, breathing quietly, I remind myself. . . I have a body, but I am not my body. My body may be in different conditions of health or sickness. It may be rested or tired. But it is not my real “I.” My body is my precious instrument of experience and action, but it is only an instrument. I treat it well; I seek to keep it in good health, but it is not my total self. I have a body, but I am not my body.*

I have emotions, but I am not my emotions. They are countless, contradictory, changing, and yet I know that I always remain I, myself, in times of hope or despair, in joy or pain, in a state of irritation or calm. Since I can observe, understand and judge my emotions, and then increasingly direct and use them and bring them to a transforming center to be changed, it is evident that they are not myself. I have emotions, but I am not my emotions.

I have desires, but I am not my desires. They, too, are changeable and contradictory, with alternations of attraction and repulsion. I have desires, but they are not myself. They give me energy and power, but they are not me.

I have an intellect, but I am not my intellect. It is more or less developed and active; it is undisciplined, but teachable; it is an organ of knowledge and judgment in regard to the outer world as well as to the inner world. But my intellect is not myself. I have an intellect, but I am not my intellect.

I am a psyche capable of growth, infinite growth. I have an ego and a will, but they cannot bring the growth. I need them in order to bring me to the transforming center, the divine Lover, the Christ, and He will give me growth. He will heal my body, quiet my emotions, empower the desires which lead to growth, enlighten my intellect and make me gradually into the likeness of Him upon whom I look. I am not this divine Lover, but I can be transformed into His likeness and image as I bring myself before Him. I can become an instrument of that kind of love toward myself and toward others. I am a psyche capable of infinite growth when I come and remain in His presence.”

However we define `soul`, we know we are not talking about an isolated part of ourselves, for we are an inter-related whole as a person - spirit, soul, and body. The apostle John, in a letter written to a personal friend and leader in the church, Gaius, says in 3 John:2, "*Beloved I pray that all may go well with you, and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul.*" Paul saw the connection between soul and body!

Inter-relatedness

"I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works."

Psalm 139:14

We are each an amazing, unique and inter-related, spirit, soul and body entity, incarnate in a physical body in this dimension, and disincarnate in a spiritual body in other dimensions.

"What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown a physical body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body."

1 Corinthians 15:42a, 44

And being inter-related, what happens at one level of being affects all others. Basic facts with which we are all familiar. An experience at the physical level, good or ill, affects the inner being. Put simply, when I am given a hug from one I love, my soul is warmed also, but when I am physically unwell, I may feel depressed or anxious in soul. When I am in distress of soul, my body reflects this; anxiety affects my digestive system, and fear constricts my heart function. But when at peace inwardly, my body reflects that; I have better physical energy and my body hums!

From our experience, we know there are many soul conditions which can and do affect the body in varying degrees, and if unrecognized or not dealt with, compromise the immune system, resulting in harmful physical effects. Among these are anger, guilt, bitterness, shame, unforgiveness, distrust, jealousy, grief, and negativity. The list goes on.

In Jesus' healing ministry, he often touched at the soul level one who came for physical healing. "*What do you want me to do for you?*", he said to blind Bartimaeus. Perhaps Jesus' was really asking Bartimaeus if he wanted to be healed, knowing that, in the answering, Bartimaeus could open himself to receive.

"Your sins are forgiven", Jesus often said to one seeking healing of body, perhaps because that one's illness had a root in guilt or shame. And Jesus healed the root.

"Pick up your bed and walk", he said to the paralysed man, perhaps knowing that in his soul the man suffered from doubt or too little faith in what could be possible, or a weakness of will, and needed to trust enough to take the action Jesus directed.

We cannot know for sure what was in the mind of Christ, but often, when healing an outward or body condition, he also addressed an inner or soul condition. So, listening to the body gives us messages that may well have a soul source, messages which may be crying out for soul attention! Jeremiah surely knew the spirit-soul-body connection. He says to the Israelites:

*"If you will not listen, my soul will weep in secret for your pride;
my eyes with weep bitterly and run down with tears . . ."*

Jeremiah 13:17

We do have the ability, through exercising the gift of free will, to consciously take charge of what we think and feel, and, as led by God, make life-giving changes and choices. And the soul's goals and intentions, motivations and affections are further expressed in and through the body, enabling us to experience sensual life and to perform as directed by spirit and soul.

This spiritual body, in which life continues beyond the physical, is an energy body of individual spirit-enlivened soul, bearing the imprint of life experiences in physical sojourn. I believe that in the heavenly dimension of life, we do not lose our sense of uniqueness, but have a much expanded awareness and comprehension of ourselves and other living beings.

Incarnate Encounters, Impact and Protection

“The good is what preserves and enhances life; evil is what hinders or destroys it.”

Albert Schweitzer

We constantly encounter and are affected by other entities and energies in creation, whether earthly or heavenly, incarnate or disincarnate, visible or invisible, obviously active or seemingly inert. And my spirit essence and soul state have an impact on the spirit life around me.

As individual spirits in human incarnations, we are different, as our DNA and fingerprints prove. We may say we believe or disbelieve in such as the existence of God, an after-life, an immortal spiritual body, a meaning and purpose in being here. But our lives are lived, choices made, words spoken and intentions activated, either consciously or unconsciously, out of our belief system.

“Every time we say, ‘I believe in the Holy Spirit’ we mean that we believe there is a living God able and willing to enter human personality and change it.”

J. B. Phillips

Thankfully, there are many spirit-souls alive in bodies who understand life as sacred gift, and live and serve from that perspective. You who are reading this are such ones. God has imbued all people with the ability to realize their inter-connectedness with God and one another. When centered in the powerful God-Spirit flowing through our lives, we emanate divine love and light which impacts others positively, and diminishes the darkness in this dimension of duality. We make a life-giving difference!

We know that there are disturbed entities here with us. We may encounter those who have become despondent or desperate, angry or violent, or otherwise sick in soul, and even what we might call malevolent or evil. There is a Scottish proverb which says, *“The devil’s boots don’t creak.”* And so it is that we do not always easily or consciously recognize a being of negative, life-depleting energy. But, if we pay attention to how we feel in the presence of such a one, we will become aware.

Some embodied spirits who commit life-destroying deeds have become too soul-wounded to know or care about their own life or that of any other. If controlled by a negative ego power, awareness of Higher Power is dimmed or usurped, and destructive choices are made. Often it is only upon dying to this dimension, that such spirits discover soul self-knowledge, the blessing of forgiveness, and the ever-existing potential for making different life-giving choices. The ultimate meaning and mystery about any person’s chosen encounters and experiences in life is spiritually complex, and beyond any other’s human knowledge. We can be too quick to judge!

However, I have felt the effects of another’s anger or jealousy, as their negative energy radiated consciously or unconsciously toward me. And it was through breathing out that energy, and breathing in the pure light of God, that I felt cleansed and free. By intentionally visualizing this white light of Spirit, strong and radiant within and around us, we can protect ourselves from such invasion. In meditation and in prayer, whatever our way of practice, we strengthen our connection with God’s love, power and protection, and heighten our spiritual awareness such that we are better enabled to meet the challenges we face. To do our part in maintaining a vibrant

connection with God's Spirit is a spiritual responsibility, for the sake of our own well-being, and the impact we make upon others.

Disincarnate Encounters Here

“Later Jesus appeared to the eleven [disciples] themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.” Mark 16:14

Einstein has said, *“The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything except our way of thinking.”* For me, and perhaps for you who read this, you have changed your way of thinking many times in your life. I no think that there is no encounter anywhere that is not ultimately a spiritual one, whether in physical body or not, in the natural or the supernatural world. We live in a sea of spiritual life.

Reflecting further n spiritual encounters in this dimension of life, I begin with two stories which raised my awareness.

In my years of teaching, a yung boy in my class had been absent for a couple of days because of the death of his grandmother. Upon his return to school, he came to my desk at the first recess time asking if her could tell me something. I said, *“Of course.”* After a little hesitation, he softly said, *“My grandmother came and stood at the end of my bed last night.”* “Yes”, I said, *“What happened?”* He answered, *“She looked different and she didn’t stay long. But I knew it was her. I think she just came to say good-bye.”* He smiled a little sadly and without another word turned to leave the classroom. What a sacred moment that was! I felt so honoured and trusted to have him share that with me. Obviously, I have never forgotten,

Our loving one another does not end with our experience on earth, for as spirits eternally alive, we continue our living and loving in and from another dimension. I share now another personal story, one which caused me to be much more aware of the reality of spirit life and the spirit world.

After two years of struggle with cancer, my son Bryan died at age 28. Within a couple of weeks of his dying to life in this dimension, I chose to drip off material to a friend, for some work we were engaged in together for our church. At the door of her home, she commented that she was surprised to find me remembering the task at such a time of grieving. Actually, giving some attention to this was helping hold me steady in those early days of profound sorrow. I did not go in to visit, and saying “Good-bye”, turned to leave. At that moment, I heard in my head a voice I knew to be my sons’s saying, *“Who says you get your best work done on that side?”*

There were many things he wanted yet to do in this life, including working for the preservation of our forests and waters. But in his spiritual body on the Other Side, he had discovered that life and work were certainly not finished. He had important things to do in and from that dimension. I have often felt his presence, his love and support in my ongoing journey, including an urging to get on with this writing. What our life intention together was, and is, I do not completely know. He was, and no doubt still is, an adventurer and a risk-taker; and I do remember he once said to me, *“Don’t be a wimp, mother!”* I remembered those words when i chose to put in writing my truth as I have come to know it.

Other persons have told me of a visitation from a love one who had recently died to this life, and

always it has been a blessing to them. Perhaps it has been a sensing of a presence, or a voice impressed on the mind. After the death of my son, I have continued to have such occasions of knowing that he is near in his spiritual body, especially at times when I am needing encouragement or support. Often he reminds me of his presence through a symbol he knows I will recognize, like an eagle, for he always wore one on a neck chain, or through a particular expression he used. For others and for me, a message of love may come through such means as a special song that arises in the mind, an odour or a favourite flower that appears. I believe we are receiving loving messages from the Other Side far more often than we know.

Also, there are some beings who, in spiritual bodies, are seemingly trapped in this dimension. These entities are called 'ghosts'. They may be suffering the soul shock of accident or sudden death, or desire to remain here for their own control reasons. They need our prayer to help them to let go of the life just lived, whatever it held for them, and return to the higher realms of spirit light and love for their healing.

Life on the Other Side

“It appears that death itself is only an illusion; life goes on unimpeded by the limitation of perception that results from being localized in a physical body: Consciousness is the vital energy that both gives life to the body and survives beyond it in a different realm of existence.”

David R. Hawkins M.D., Ph.D. *Power Vs. Force*

The sister of the late Steve Jobs, Apple founder and CEO, shared his last moments with the world in her eulogy. She said that on his deathbed, he stared into the future, as he had so many times in life, and uttered these final words: “*Oh wow, oh wow, oh wow!*” In an article, The Torstar News Service commented about these words: “*No one will know for sure if Jobs had suddenly had another great idea as he passed on or was commenting on where he was about to go.*”

We can only imagine on this side what he may have seen, but we may well say, “*Wow, oh wow!*” on our arrival in heaven.

And another person in the eye of this secular world, spoke impacting words of faith to a listening crowd of thousands. In his sermon at the late Jack Layton’s funeral, Rev. Brent Hawkes said, “*In death we continue our spiritual journey.*” He was obviously affirming publicly his faith that as eternal spirits, life continues on the other side.

In her book *Embraced By The Light*, a New York Times #1 bestseller in 1992, Betty Eadie describes events of her near-death experience which, for many people provided significant probability, if not proof, of the existence of life after death. Others have reported similar experiences. The 2011 book by Todd Burpo entitled *Heaven is for Real* is an amazing story of what his four-year old son Colton told of his trip to heaven and back while undergoing surgery in hospital. The child’s report of his experiences and encounters in the realms beyond this earth is both wonderful and assuring for wondering and wistful adults.

That there are planes of existence other than this where we now live, is truth long held by many spiritual masters. Christians trust the words of Jesus, who said to his disciples, “*In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.*” John 14:2-3

As well as knowing the resurrected and living Jesus in the heaven dimension, I believe there will be encounters with others also in their spiritual bodies. And among these, I will know and be known by those with whom I have shared love and life here, a belief expressed by well-known poets and writers of the past.

*“Eternal form shall still divide
the eternal soul from all beside,
and I shall know him when we meet.”*

Alfred Lord Tennyson

*“They that love beyond the world cannot be separated by it.
Death is but a crossing the world, as friends do the seas;
they live in one another still.”*

William Penn

Researchers in several fields now seem to agree that upon dying to this life and passing through the tunnel to another spirit dimension, we are welcomed by many who love us: departed spirit-alive relatives and friends, other disincarnate entities, and hierarchies of angelic beings. It is not my intention, nor am I equipped, to write about these except in very general terms. There are many books to be found on these subjects.

I do believe however, that just as there are spiritual entities alive here in physical bodies, living in varying degrees of awareness of God, and varying states of goodness and godliness, so it is in the other dimension. But there, as here, a loving God provides healing for God’s children, enabling transformation and movement toward fullness of potential.

There is a wonderful hymn the church has been singing for many years in faith and gratitude for the saints of heaven.

*“For all the saints, who from their labours rest,
all who by faith before the world confessed
your name, O Jesus, be forever blest.
Hallelujah, hallelujah!
O blest communion, fellowship divine!
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;
yet all are one within your great design.
Hallelujah, hallelujah!”*

Words by W. W. Howe, (Verses 1 and 3)

I am certain that my devout parents and those who by love, teaching and example encouraged me as a child, and all other family and friends who have now passed over to the Other Side, are among the saints of heaven. I will meet them all again.

In an out-of-body experience some years ago, I saw my life, to that point, pass before me as a very fast movie. I did not understand this at the time, but the experience awakened me, as nothing else had, to the responsibility and effects of my thoughts, words and actions in this life. I now believe this was a preview of the life review I will experience after arrival on the Other Side where we are lovingly received and gently tended by spirit beings.

Since most of us on our soul journey are saints in the making still, we are in need of correction and healing, because of mis-choices and mis-takes made, and mis-adventures experienced. I personally do not think that we are instantly perfected upon our heavenly arrival. but are exposed to a life review which enables us to assess the life just completed, seeing the effects upon our own

soul, others, and creation. The purpose of the review is for the gathering up of the life just past and for learning, not for judgement but for assessment. In our expanded consciousness, I believe we will know this. Here and hereafter, discovering and becoming who we are meant to be is a life-long and lives-long process.

Angels

“By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth.”

Psalm 33:6

Among the host of heaven, the ones with whom we tend to be most familiar are those we call angels. Growing up, the angels I saw were in stained glass, wall hangings, picture books or paintings. I sang about them in hymns and heard about them in stories and poems, and I wondered why church people did not talk about them. I thought that if angels had lived, then they must still be alive now. I felt they were real.

In society, angelology has gained in popularity. Books about them abound. They appear in every size and form on lapels and coffee tables, calendars and cards, in movies and songs. And as well, there was the popular TV program *Touched by an Angel*. Perhaps their increased popularity could be because, at some level of consciousness, persons yearn for the spiritual world, not naming this as a yearning for God. Many seem to want to believe, or do believe in angels, even though they may have turned away from attendance and participation in religious institutions.

A song sung by ABBA affirms a spiritual perspective on life, a belief in angels and in an after-life.

“I have a dream, a song to sing, to help me cope with anything.

If you see the wonder of a fairy tale, you can take the future even if you fail.

I believe in angels, something good in everything I see.

I believe in angels; when I know the time is right for me, I’ll cross the stream. I have a dream.”

And Barbra Streisand sings of awareness of angelic beings in these words:

“We are standing on holy ground, and I know that there are angels all around . . . “

As years went on, my experiences of spiritual presences helping, protecting, encouraging and guiding, confirmed my belief in their active existence. A good friend was driving home on a dark, rainy night. He decided to take a short-cut which took him through back roads. Driving along, he suddenly saw a tall, shining ‘being’ standing beside the road. He stopped and got out of the car for a better look, but the ‘being’ seemed to be moving away across a field. What he then noticed was that a bridge, over which he had been about to drive, was washed out! And the shining ‘being’ had disappeared.

Angels are here, with us and around us. Most of us do not usually see them with our natural eyes, yet they are present and assist us in many ways. There are numerous biblical reports of human experience with angels. In one story in Genesis 28:12 entitled ‘Jacob’s Dream at Bethel’ we read, *“And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.”* Hearing a Rabbi speaking recently, he noted that the angels in this story were going back and forth between earth and heaven, from this realm to the other! Yes, they are surely here.

“God will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” Psalm 91:11-12

I include two family stories: As a student, my oldest son had a summer job in a steel factory, and while feeding thin strips of steel into an auger, his gloved hand was caught and being drawn into the machine. He surely would have lost that hand had it not been amazingly released! None of us have forgotten, and believe this was a supernatural rescue, an angelic one!

In the early days of seatbelts in cars, my daughter had not put hers on, but while driving in a busy urban area suddenly felt impelled to do so. At the very next intersection she was involved in an accident which necessitated her being taken to hospital with severe injuries. We know she was saved from being killed. I myself, have had more than one experience of similarly amazing rescues on the highway! Probably you have also. Too often we hear persons say about such experiences, *“That was lucky!”*, when we need to be saying, *“Thank you!”*

Some time ago, I felt I was being nudged to offer workshops on angels. I have done this several times. To prepare, I listened to other people’s stories, did biblical, inter-faith and cultural research and read widely, with much prayerful discerning. I continue to give thanks for the help of angels in ordinary and crisis times, in distress and indecision, healing and prayer, and in writing!.

“Are not all angels spirits in the divine service . . . ?” Hebrews 1:14a
Angels, as agents of God’s love, are God’s servants and messengers. They do their work through spiritual communication and sometimes intervention, but never interfere with our free will. And they like to be invited into our lives.

Countless spiritual beings of various vibratory levels inhabit the heavens. These are ranked by Paul, and somewhat differently by others. Sometimes all are referred to as ‘angels’ but actually are of differing ranks with differing services. In the ranking, ‘angels’ are of the closest vibration to humans, yet they are of a different order of beings, and do not incarnate here though they may on very rare occasion appear in their spirit form in this dimension. We humans exist on this plane at a vibratory level which allows us to incarnate in a human body.

*“What are human beings that you (God) are mindful of them . . . ?
You have made them for a little while lower than the angels . . .”* Hebrews 2:6-7
Jesus too, in his earthly incarnation, *“for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor . . .”* Hebrews 2:9a

Angels and archangels embody God’s love, and exist to do God’s bidding in various assigned ways. Some of the highest we know according to their biblical names: Archangels Michael and Gabriel who are ranked higher in vibration than ‘angels’, and, as a group, Cherubim and Seraphim, are often ranked as the highest. Paul lists eight hierarchies. The biblical record tells us that they may appear as either male or female or as light beings, and may seem to have wings or not. Angels are ever available to help and can be summoned to protect us. I specifically ask their protection when in the car and I never leave home on vacation without asking them to protect our house and property. And I ask and thank angels also for providing protection around family and others who may be about to enter a situation of possible danger.

Spirit Guides

“The dignity of the soul is so great that each has a guardian angel from his birth.”
St. Jerome - 5th century

The being called a ‘guardian angel’, believed by many spiritual writers to be assigned to journey

with each of us personally, is also known as a 'spirit guide'. The spirit guide has a particular and very special role as an accompanying spirit being, and is vigilantly attentive to the spirit-soul's journey. Had I been Roman Catholic, as a child I probably would have learned this traditional Roman Catholic prayer:

*"Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom God's love commits me here.
Ever this day be at my side, to light and guard, and rule and guide."*

No human being is ever abandoned or left bereft in any condition or circumstance. The spirit guide is said, by some writers, to have been incarnated in flesh one or more times. This is in order to be equipped to journey with a human by having experienced and gained understanding of life in this dimension. I wonder if they do not gain that understanding from work on the Other Side.

I believe that my spirit guide's primary task is to help me find and fulfill my particular purpose for being here on this earth at this time. I trust that we are each lovingly and diligently guided toward and supported in the fulfilling of this sacred intention.

Only recently, my spirit guide's image was impressed on my mind and a name heard in my inner ear. This was a great surprise, though I had been asking for such a blessing for a long time. Now the sense of companioning presence seems stronger, but I suspect I am simply more aware. I feel understood and loved by this entity to whom I feel connected, and I listen to thoughts that seem imprinted on my mind, always for my protection, guidance and encouragement, for these are messages from God. I know there are those who consider that such disincarnate beings are merely the product of imagination or personal perception, and that psychology can explain why I want to believe in their existence. I strongly question such explanations.

Many aboriginal people look to animal spirit guides (totems) for wisdom and growth in self-knowledge. In Native American Indian culture it is believed that each person is united with an animal spirit guide at birth as their invisible companion through whom personal messages are to be received. Aboriginal peoples understand that each creature has a unique and powerful spirit nature, and represents certain characteristics.

As humans we can learn and benefit from attentive listening to the animal spirit guide with whom we resonate. This spirit-creature may be alive here or in the other dimension. It is thought that their messages may come to humans through observation of their specific attributes, or, as in dream interpretation, may be received figuratively. It is important to attend to what the animal symbolizes for each of us personally.

Rather than too quickly discounting this, I have found it instructive to pay attention to creatures to whom I am drawn at a specific season of my life. For example, for several years robins kept appearing to me in unexpected times and places. Apparently, the message of the robin is encouragement to learn something new. Hawks command my attention and inspire me to search for truth and look at the big picture of life. If I were to consider one animal as a spirit guide, it would be the wolf who is said to represent intuition, endurance and loyalty, among other attributes. On a lighter note, I think there may indeed be some wisdom in the song I learned in childhood from the Dr. Doolittle movie *Talk to the Animals*.

"If we could talk to the animals, learn their languages, maybe take an animal degree. . . "

Beings of Higher Wisdom, Light, and Power

“Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders . . .”

from the vision of John, Revelation 5:11a

In the heavenly realm of spirit beings, spiritual researchers speak of beings high in divine energy and wisdom, some as members of a divine council and some as teachers.

Throughout the eons of life on this earth, beings of great Light have come her incarnate in human bodies to guide this planet and all upon it toward God-designed potential. We may know some of these as ‘the sages of the ages’ contributing wisdom and insight, calling and challenge for the ultimate good. As highly-developed spirit-emissaries, here by divine appointment, they powerfully communicate God’s will and purpose through spoken or written word, or art form, and primarily by action and way of living. And in one way or another many have suffered if not been killed for so doing. Followers of all the world religions revere special beings to whose word and witness they continue to turn for life example and direction.

For Christians, the witness of the incarnation of Jesus the Christ, by whose name his followers are known, excels beyond that of other prophets, visionaries, teachers and saints of the ages. The author of the gospel of John writes that the Christ, the Light of God, was the Word of wisdom and power spoken into the world at its beginning. And Jesus the Christ embodied this Word and this Light in an earthly incarnation. The God-man Jesus, ‘*now crowned with glory and honor*’, came to this dimension to teach and proclaim through his living, dying and rising, the truth of the eternal presence, power and unconditional love of God, so that we and all creation might be healed and enlightened. Through him we are absolutely assured that we are eternally ‘spirits alive’!

Every year at Easter, the church celebrates the reality of eternal life and hope. Many in the Christian church may sing the hymn, “*Christ is alive!*” .

“Christ is alive! Let Christians sing. The cross stands empty to the sky.

Let streets and homes with praises ring. Love, drowned in death, shall never die.

Christ is alive! No longer bound to distant years in Palestine,

but saving, healing, here and now, and touching every place and time.

Christ is alive, and comes to bring good news to this and every age,

till earth and sky and ocean ring with joy, with justice, love and praise.” Words: Brian Wren v.1,2,5

Restored to the true knowledge of who we are, and God’s purposes, we are called to participate both in our own ongoing transformation, and that of all creation, as God’s divine plan unfolds.

Part 3

Souls on the Journey

“To be or not to be isn’t a choice; one may decide to be this or that, but ‘to be’ is, simply, the only fact there is.”

David R. Hawkins M. D. Ph.D. *Power Vs. Force*

According to the United Nations (UN) Population Fund, as of November 1, 2011 there were seven billion earthlings on this planet. The UN estimates the world’s population will reach eight billion by 2025 and 10 billion by 2083. Although difficult to comprehend, at least seven billion souls are here living out their soul journey, deciding ‘*to be this or that*’, as David Hawkins puts it. Each one has their own purpose and opportunity to fulfill it; each has their own challenges to face, and choices to make. Each experiences joy and sorrow, comfort and pain, success and failure, and all

the opposites of life in this dimension of duality. And each can find the courage and trust needed to see the journey through with grace.

Purpose

“Jesus marks the point in history at which it becomes possible for man to adopt consciously as his own purpose, the purpose which is already inherent in this own nature.” John MacMurray

As God-created spirits, we are alive whether in this dimension or another. To discover ‘why’ may seem the unanswerable question to many. But according to John MacMurray, we already do know our purpose, although we have a choice whether and how we live it out. I take this to mean that our purpose is imprinted in our very spirit. In Jesus, we see this defined and the potential for fulfillment demonstrated.

As a young teen, I heard the following quoted from the Presbyterian Shorter Catechism, and it spoke to my inner being: *“What is the chief end of man (and woman)?”* And the answer was: *“The chief end of man (and woman) is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.”* This was not expressed in my everyday language, but the spirit in me understood that I was asking the same question: *“What is the purpose of my life?”* The answer given then was surprising, yet it impacted me as truth.

I was hearing that the purpose of my life is to live it for a divine purpose, and in God’s honour, and enjoy relationship with God in this life and forever. I, as all others, am created to be in loving communion and partnership with God who awaits my opening to the spirit-with-Spirit relationship which is God’s desire and intention, even God’s yearning!.

“Do you suppose it is for nothing that the scripture says, “God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”?” James 4:5

In this earth plane, I am to discover how my little life can give glory to God in the midst of the delights, dilemmas and dangers here. I am to *“do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God”*, in the words of John Wesley, as I live and learn and serve here.

And further, God wants me to be in inner joy all along my journey through this life and into the next. How soon I realize I cannot possibly be or do any of this on my own! But God provides the way, through the indwelling Spirit and the companionship of the risen Christ.

Soul Challenge

The rabbi Zusya said a short time before his death,

“In the world to come, I shall not be asked, ‘Why were you not Moses?’

Instead, I shall be asked, ‘Why were you not Zusya?’” *Way of Man* by Martin Buber

To be my unique soul-Self is a great challenge, opportunity, and responsibility. Only through surrendering to the moving of the Spirit can I be nudged toward the fulfillment of God’s will for my life, and my own earnest heart’s desire. To invite and allow the Spirit to guide me in the exercise of the gift of free will is certainly a soul challenge. I had to discover through experience the potential and power of this gift, and the necessity of sensing daily how to use it.

For me, as for many if not most of us, the path of learning has been neither an easy or a straight path. Forgetting or ignoring the privilege and potential of relationship with the Creator may result in a sense of lostness and loneliness which can leave a person vulnerable to the shadow side of the ego, and to the making of choices which can wound the soul and body.

Aldous Huxley said, *“If most of us remain ignorant of ourselves, it is because self-knowledge is painful and we prefer the pleasures of illusion.”*

In Jesus’ parable of the rich fool, the rich man thinks to himself, *“I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry.’”*

And God says, *“You fool . . . !”*

The false self keeps us on the surface of reality. Thomas Merton calls it the illusory or ‘smoke self’. He says, *“Its well-being needs constantly to be fed by accomplishments and by the admiration and affirmation of others. The ego self likes to keep us in delusion.”*

We know the difference between ‘knowing about’ God and ‘knowing’ God (‘knowing about’ being related to mental knowledge, and ‘knowing God’ being about intimate relationship, with all its wonder and mystery!) Similarly, there is a difference between ‘knowing about having a soul’ and really ‘knowing our own soul’.

“Know thyself” has long been a familiar adage handed down to us by Socrates, and many others have admonished us to keep in touch with what is going on within.

Lao-tzu says, *“It is wisdom to know others: it is enlightenment to know one’s self.”*

And Robert Brault admonishes, *“Know thyself, or at least keep renewing the acquaintance!”*

Renewing the acquaintance with our soul, for ultimate health and growth toward wholeness, is a life-long challenge and responsibility, and requires real intentional attention!

Current writings remind us of the importance of being fully present in the moment. We need to start by being present to ourselves, to our own souls, in each moment, in order to be present to another in each encounter or activity of each day. Paul calls us to “pray continually”, to be open, attentive and responsive to God at all times, in all places and circumstances, because God is always present in, with and among us in every moment. “Being present to the Presence” is a brief way of putting it.

Richard Rohr, in the introduction to his recent book, *The Naked Now - Learning to See as the Mystics See* writes: *“It is living in the naked now, the ‘sacrament of the present moment,’ that will teach us how to actually experience our experiences, whether good, bad, or ugly, and how to let them transform us. . . . When you can be present, you will know the Real Presence.”*

How can we be really present in each and every moment, whether to God or any other? To be truly present and attentive to another person is more than making and keeping eye contact! It is listening with an open heart, with a loving Christ-centered heart, listening with soul.

Although we want and intend to, we can find ourselves distracted or disturbed by what else seems to intrude, of thought, image, or feeling. For we listen through the filter of our soul self! Past experiences, and what we may be holding concerning them, or wonderings, anticipations, if not fears of the future, affect our ability to be really and truly present and able to listen to another, rather than be somewhere else in mind or heart! It is our calling to be as clear a channel as we can be for God’s love to pour through. And this requires us to pay attention to our inner being. It is a soul challenge and responsibility.

Soul Care and Attentiveness

“True spirituality does not operate from the outside. It emerges from the very center of our being.”

Jean Maalouf

My mother used to do ‘spring cleaning’, a time of getting rid of winter’s debris and dust.

Now, we think we do not need to do spring cleaning, for we have central vac! And we can use it anytime! Furthermore, since we are busy, another time will be fine! Or will it? In matters of soul-cleaning, we may think that Lent is the time to pray as the psalmist, ‘*Create in me a clean heart, O God*’. So we choose to ‘let it go for now.’

But that really does not work, for, particularly under stress, we may be surprised by the strength of a reaction we have in a relationship or circumstance at home, work, church or other social scene. We may say or do something we really did not consciously intend or want, may react in unexpected ways that surprise us and others, and later wonder from whence that came!

It came from what is stored in the soul, in the mind, images, memories and emotions stored in every cell of the body. Using a metaphor for the unconscious mind, it has been said that “*the unconscious mind drives the bus, and emotion is sometimes the fuel that fires it!*”

Cellular memories, imprinted as a result of life experiences, (widely acknowledged as the cause of 95% of all diseases), whether remembered consciously or unconsciously, are like transmitters sending out destructive energy patterns within the body, causing disease, chronic pain, and shutting down the immune system.

We have to be honest, and ask ourselves: How much intentional attention do we really give to what is going on inside, in our soul? Do we truly believe it matters that we do? Why do we tend to ignore the inner being, and simply not want to go there?

Parker Palmer, a highly respected writer and teacher, and a familiar name to many, writes, “*There’s a lot of fear connected with the inner journey because it penetrates our illusions. Taking the inner journey will lead you into some very shadowy places. You’re going to learn things about yourself you’ll wish you didn’t know. There are monsters in there - monsters you can’t control. - but trying to keep them hidden will only give them greater power.*”

The possibility of having hidden monsters in the soul sounds pretty strong to us! We may not have monsters inside, but we may have persistent, niggling thoughts and feelings, old tapes from childhood, family, society, or church, or painful memories, unresolved griefs, confusions . . . the list goes on.

Most of us have had experiences in life that left an imprint on the soul. We may not want to revisit them, but still they are part of us, and in their hiddenness they do have power over us. And, if not before, it seems that in glorious middle age (anytime over 35 !) there will come, in one way or another, awareness that we have to pay attention to our need for soul healing.

“It is unlikely that we will deepen our relationship with God in a casual or haphazard manner. There will be a need for some intentional commitment and some reorganization in our own lives.

But there is nothing that will enrich our lives more than a deeper and clearer perception of God's presence in the routine of daily living."
William O. Paulsell

How do we listen to our own soul, stay tuned into our inner being? Primary ways which have helped me over the years, and still do help me to listen to God and my soul include: *private prayer* that is both conversational and the prayer of deep communion with God, and *communal worship*, whether in church setting, spirituality group or prayer group. *Journalling* is also significant in my spiritual life.

I began keeping a diary as a child, and the writing progressed into journalling in which I often ask myself bottom line/root questions about my feelings, thoughts, responses and choices: 'Why do I feel or think or behave this way? Where did this kind of response begin? Why?' There is an African proverb which says, "*Do not look where you fell, but where you slipped.*" So I inquire of God and myself as I look at the times and places where I 'slipped' I listen for a word of wisdom from within, and write what comes to me.

John Lennon said quite simply but truly, "*Your inside is out and your outside is in.*" The state of my inner being does express through my words and actions, even as the outer experiences of my life have an inner effect. I need to pay attention to both, and writing helps me, sometimes in the form of a poem or psalm. The Psalmist questions his soul, and then, remembering God's faithfulness in the past, admonishes his soul: "*Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.*"

Psalm 42:11

Other assists to my inner work include accessing the wisdom of my *dreams*, and practising *The Daily Examen*, learned in the Ignatian Exercises. The Exam involves 10 minutes every night asking myself two questions with the help of the Spirit: where I was most able to give and receive love that day, and where least able.

Praying with scripture, prayer walks, and nature are means through which God's loving presence is profoundly revealed to me. *Visual arts*, icons for meditation, and clay for creative expression assist me. *Music* of varying kinds is very uplifting and instructive in my spiritual life, the blessings often received through the words of a hymn or a melody that arises unexpectedly in my mind. I pay close attention daily.

Some of these ways are, initially, active meditation, involving words, reflection, images, senses, imagination, memories, feelings, visualization, writing or movement, but often leading into more passive ways: resting prayer, prayer of the heart, and moments of deep contemplation.

Then there are *retreats*, either for a day or a longer time, and the commitment of meeting regularly with my *Spiritual Director*. This is one who helps me be aware of inner movements in my soul of consolation or desolation (either toward or away from God who is Love), and aware of any unhealthy attachments, before the body starts to make me listen!

There is a prayer entitled "*The Opener*" from Joyce Rupp's new book of daily readings, *Fragments of Your Ancient Name*. The prayer is powerful, if we pray it sincerely and are willing to respond.

*“O Divine Opener, you who free us,
there are guarded, closed, tight places within the deeper dimensions of self,
places that require your assistance so our true goodness can be liberated.
Pry apart the teeth of our stubbornness,
swing back the door of unforgiveness,
lift up the lid of ego-centeredness,
knock down the walls of falseness and greed,
and all that prevents oneness with you.”*
Then she writes an invitation for response for the one praying which says,
“Today I visit one of the places of my unfreedom.”

I sometimes think of the soul as like the glass shade on a lamp. If it is sooty, our spirit-light which burns within cannot shine through as it is intended to do. And we know, the cleaning and polishing of the glass is not only for ourselves, but also that we may be light-beams of God’s loving and healing Presence in this world.

By mis-use of the gift of free will, I have clouded the state of my soul in many times and ways. So often I have felt like Paul who said *“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate . . .”*. There was much self-knowledge to learn, including the movements within the human psyche, the nature of the ego and its desire for control, the need for approval and love, what was delusion and what resulted in real peace in my soul.

I have discovered that it is helpful to have some understanding of the functioning of the human psyche which is part of the amazing way we are created. Both the personal unconscious with its instructive ‘shadow,’ and the collective unconscious with its universal archetypes, hold rich material to aid in self-knowledge. On this inner journey, we become conscious of both the blessing of having an ego which grounds us in our living here, and the propensity for the ego to seek control which can lead us away from surrender to God’s intention for our life.

Soul Healing

“Beloved [to Paul’s friend, Gaius], I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul.” 3 John v. 2

It is the apostle John’s prayer that his friend be well in body as in soul. God knows and understands that we are not always well in our soul, that we may have been wounded by life experience and circumstance. God wants to heal us. In truth, we have all been or are in the need of God’s healing, although acknowledging this can be difficult. Our soul’s ills are of varying depths and dimensions, but all are serious and call us to acknowledge them, that, by being open to grace, they may be healed.

In his book *Silent Power*, Stuart Wilde writes, *“In the etheric (. . . an energy body . . . sometimes called ‘the subtle body’), you can see how the human condition is complicated by the ego/personality, but you can have a deep compassion for it. For a human is not just a mind, body or an emotion - it is light. The brilliance of the human light overshadows the personality traits and weaknesses that come from human frailty. In the vitality of the light is the sacrosanct identity of the eternal spiritual being . . . it is the spiritual heritage that flows from your connection to the God-Force.”*

Trusting the presence and renewing power of the spirit light within, which “*flows from our connection to the God-Force*”, and being fully open to this healing energy, is particularly difficult when we are in severe emotional, mental or physical pain. Those who, against their will, have suffered from aggression, or abuse of any kind, surely know this. Every cell in the body carries the painful memories of such experience. God suffers with us, but is able to cleanse our whole being from the effects. Here, the challenge is a spiritual one, for the mind readily raises a question: How could a loving God let ‘this’ happen? In truth, the aggression/abuse is an offence against God as well as the victim!

There are those with whom I have been privileged to walk in Spiritual Direction who receive counseling or therapy. They often attest to the freedom that comes from willingness to trust that through the powerful energy of the divine Spirit flowing through the human spirit, God’s healing process can and will happen. Through openness to this infused divine light and love of God, the memories carried by every cell of the body are released, the cells cleansed, and the soul set free. This is a process which leads to wholeness: spirit, soul and body. It is an amazing grace.

In 1998, Rochelle Graham, Wayne Irwin and I authored a book entitled *Healing from the Heart*. In this book there are sections I wrote which you may wish to read: Healing of Inner Attitudes, Pessimism, Criticism, Depression, Emotions and Memories, Grief, and Forgiveness. These are found on pages 130-139 of that book and included here in the Appendix. Some of you may feel drawn to one or more of these sections, either for yourself or another in the healing process.

Augustine said, “*Prayer is not conquering God’s reluctance, but laying hold of God’s willingness*”

So when the Spirit brings us to awareness of the need for healing, how do we avail ourselves of what God longs to give? Openness and sincere desire for the healing action of the Christ Spirit in our souls is our choice and our part. It is a letting go of ego control and being humbly present before God. While acknowledging need has already placed us on the healing pathway, we pray for deep willingness, courage, and the ability to receive healing. I believe in God’s psychiatry, in God’s timing, and in God’s power.

Lord Byron said, “*How little do we know that which we are! How less what we may be!*”

There is deep within us a hope of becoming all we may be, all that God intends, a hope infused into the soul by our Creator. Michelangelo, the famous sculptor, said, “*I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free*”. I believe that God, the Sculptor of our souls, sees the angel within each one of us, and carves until our Real Self, our Christ Self is free from all that would hold us captive.

A story from my life: My parents always told me to “be good” and somehow I got the idea that maybe who I was in myself wasn’t ‘good’. (As an adult, I realized that they were only trying to fulfill their responsibility of parenting as they knew it.) But the effect of the words was deep, so I judged that whoever I was and whatever I did was not ‘good enough’! I had to learn this was my perception, not God’s. I needed soul healing for myself, but also because judgement of others is often self-judgement reflected outwards! My inner critic has always been very active, and I continue to pay attention to my shadow side from where self-criticism is prone to speak.

Since the mind feeds on what is put into it, thoughts and images focused upon really matter. Paul said in Philippians 4:8, “*Fill your minds with those things that are good and deserve praise:*

things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and honourable.”

I have learned that it is participating in God’s intention for my healing that I clear from my mind plaguing thoughts or images that go round and round. I need to clear my inner space, and speak Christ’s truth to my soul when needed, to do some soul re-programming!

To help myself be open to God’s truth, and the Spirit’s work of inner transformation, I have found affirmations based on scripture helpful. These are repeated 20 times before sleep, and over many days, until God’s truth and peace enter into my inmost being to stay.

These can be such as

“I am precious in God’s sight.”

Isaiah 43:4

“Jesus my shepherd is restoring my soul.”

Psalm 23:3

“God’s purpose is being fulfilled in me.”

Psalm 138:8a

“I am a beloved child of God.”

You will know what words to use, what truth needs to be deeply acknowledged in the soul.

Affirming truth with faith, helps God’s love penetrate the soul at the place of need. Our guardian angel (spirit guide), with us from before our birth, and ever with us here in love, encourages and helps us in the healing process, but never interferes with our free will. It is a gift of God’s grace to be able to believe and trust how precious we are to God, how passionately and unconditionally loved we are.

Of the various other conditions that can darken the soul, I have chosen just one other to reflect further upon here: unforgiveness. It can be like a very dark cloud, like soot on the soul glass, a block to the radiant light within. For me, self-forgiveness has been the place to start and has been difficult to learn. As Paul himself confessed. I have *“done those things which I ought not to have done, and not done those things which I ought to have done”*. Loving and forgiving my neighbour has always been easier for me than loving and forgiving myself!

In Deuteronomy, Moses spoke to the Israelites saying, *“Choose, so that you may live.”* I really did not want to hear that both offering forgiveness and receiving forgiveness is a choice, but I know it is. Choosing life is often to decide to forgive oneself, to say in faith, *“I forgive myself as I am forgiven.”*

God brought peace and release through the action of the Spirit in the Psalmist’s soul.

“The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.

Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you.”

Psalm 116:6-9

Forgiving others is not easy soul work either. But God has taught me the wisdom of a particular scripture: *“Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”*

Luke 6:28

In some situations we can only pray to come to the place of being willing to forgive another. God does give this grace according to God’s timing - knowing when we are ready. I remember praying for grace to forgive a certain person. And what I heard in my inner being was, *“You have grace! Exercise it!”* That was pretty clear! So I did exercise the grace given by God and prayerfully forgave the one whose words and actions had been hurtful. And I felt release.

God cares about our suffering, and does give grace to forgive what we once felt was impossible to forgive. Only then are we free, perhaps not from the memory, but from bondage to the offence

against us. And while forgiveness is a choice, it may need to be affirmed over time, as the freedom of the forgiveness becomes a new reality in the soul.

In Matthew 18: 21-22 we read that “*Peter came and said to Jesus, ‘How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven times.’*” Peace and release do come from forgiving one who has hurt us, and from realizing that person is also God’s beloved, although perhaps without their knowing it, woundedness or illness in their soul has caused the hurtful or abusive behaviour.

Spiritual writer and teacher Paramahansa Yogananda (1893 - 1952), author of *Autobiography of a Yogi* upholds the daily offering of love and forgiveness saying, “*Today I forgive all those who have ever offended me. I give my love to all thirsty hearts, both to those who love me and to those who do not love me.*”

God has a dream for us, an intention, a will for our highest good. There is a hymn, words and music by Bruce Harding in *More Voices* which speaks of God’s active movement toward healing for our human souls, and for creation.

*“Like a healing stream in a barren desert,
Spirit water bringing life to dusty earth,
God is trickling through our lives as a dream unfolding,
promising revival and new birth . . . like a healing stream.”*

In the healing journey, I had to learn the difference between ‘correction’ and ‘condemnation’, and that while I certainly often need soul correction, God never condemns me. Neither am I to enter into self-condemnation. The truth is that I am never separated from God, although I may think I am or deserve to be. Thankfully, in my experience, God never ceases to love and forgive, never gives up on us, and, as God’s own ‘spirits alive’, keeps calling us back through our inner spirit.

Through faithfulness to spiritual practices, growth in discernment, attentiveness to Presence in daily life, and the offering of hospitality and service to others, Spirit deeply communes with our spirits. And by divine design, our personal loving, caring spirit guide, and our angels, ever watch over, guide and support us as we pray to stay on the path of our earnest heart’s desire.

Often persons find that it is through a particularly challenging time in their life, through crisis and woundedness, through need and through healing, that they come to remember and choose to pursue their true longing for the purpose of God in their life. The challenge may have become blessing. With wonder, gratitude and utmost humility, the message of God spoken through Isaiah to each of us, as to God’s people Israel, is heard,

“You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.” Isaiah 43:4a

Set free from bondage to the past, and prayerfully trusting the present and future to God’s unfailing, unconditional love, peace is found.

“Prayer draws us into the sacred truth - which often runs counter to what we are told by the world - that we are loved and accepted, that our sense of meaning and purpose grows out of our sacred connection with God, life and all that is, that the power we have is the power of the Spirit within us, a presence and power that is gift, a presence and power that the world cannot remove.”
Jean Blomquist in *Spirit of Gentleness*

Part 4

Soul Growth

“I pray that, according to the riches of God’s glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” Eph 3:16-17

Recently, I went with a friend to the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. There, I was ‘stopped in my tracks’ by the sculpture of an Italian artist, Giuseppe Penone, whose central theme is an exploration of the relationship between the human and nature. For him, nature represents the great memory, the ever-present model of the processes of change and growth that shape the individual life. He works with materials of nature - stone, resin, leather and wood, and his art pulsates with an awareness of a common vital force in all living things. He has been inspired by the quiet slowness of growth in the natural world. His wood sculpture shows how the tree grew inside that it may ‘live’ in the present. A quote of his on a plaque nearby reads, *“My artwork shows, with the language of sculpture, the essence of matter, and tries to reveal with the work, the hidden life within.”*

I thought, yes, this is true for us as for the tree. We have a hidden inner life, the human soul. And in the soul there is a quiet slowness of growth, fulfilling in us, as in all nature, the vital force active in us, according to the intention of the Creator. We so often are ‘stopped in our tracks’ by the wondrous beauty and quiet growth we see all around us in nature, but how often are we stopped such that we ponder the quiet growth going on in our own soul?

Growth As Process

“Adopt the pace of nature; her secret is patience.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Among the several symbols of spiritual transformation used by Teresa of Avila is the butterfly. Camille Campbell refers to its process of growth in the preface of a centering book entitled *Meditations with Teresa of Avila*. *“This is the challenge of Teresa’s ‘Come out of your cocoon’: to search for God in the most deeply personal way; to read the signs of the times in one’s own life; to travel the paths of creation-centered spirituality to the center of one’s own soul; and to recycle this energy into compassionate loving service.”*

The butterfly became a symbol of spiritual growth for me, for growth is a process of being changed, a metamorphosis which takes place in the inner being. This happens over time as each new stage in transformation is reached. But getting there does involve the patience that nature models: openness and willingness, resting and waiting, as well as struggle and surprise in the process of each transition. As with the butterfly, the life energy of the divine within guides the process. We too are called to surrender ourselves to this journey.

Many years ago, I expressed my own experience in these words:

*“Such a warm and sheltered place,
my cocoon,
dark, yes, but quiet and still,
resting, waiting,
waiting for what?
to struggle again?
I want no more.
I would remain,*

but can I?

*Stirrings within,
shakings from slumber,
a new desire for light, for freedom!*

*Break out of my refuge?
courage enough?
Leave my shelter from the world?*

*The door must be burst open;
a trumpet call resounds:
'Lazarus, come forth,
leave off your grave clothes,
it's resurrection day!'*

*Love dries my wings,
strengthens them for flight,
old life to new,
transformed,*

*free to live, to fly
by the power of the Christ
alive in me.*

In Alan J. Lerner and Frederick Loewe's classic play *Camelot*, Lancelot says, "*The perfection of the soul takes time.*" The slow, quiet growth in our souls does take time. God knows we are a 'work in progress' on a healing pathway intrinsically linked to society, nations, and all creation.

Growth Within Covenant

"If I can get out of the way, if I can be pure enough, if I can be selfless enough and loving and caring enough to abandon what I have, and my own preconceived, silly notions of what I think I am - and become truly who in fact I am, which is really just another child of God - then the music can really use me. And therein lies my fulfillment. That's when the music starts to happen."

John McLaughlin

Before coming to this earth plane, the spirit-soul can know in far fuller measure than even imagined here, the beauty and power, the creativity and compassion of God. Before coming here, we knew the faithfulness of God to God's covenant with us, as spoken to Israel long ago.

"I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people." Leviticus 26:12

The truth of God's covenant is professed in the United Church Creed of 1968.

"We are not alone, we live in God's world . . . in life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone."

I am called to remember and trust the truth that I am never alone in any experience of this earthly journey. And in the midst, the God of covenant presence and love is ever at work, moving each of us more and more toward greater authenticity of personhood and inner freedom, more and more into harmony with God's purposes. And I am safe within God's process!

Soul Silence

“Under all speech that is good for anything there lies a silence that is better.” Thomas Carlyle

I have always had a need for silence in my life. As a country child, there were many opportunities to enjoy the silences between the sounds of nature or farm animals or machines. I learned early in life the blessing in times of outer silence, not realizing then how much I also need inner silence.

In my soul journey, there has been a gradual movement through the many helpful ways of active meditation to a longing for a more passive level of experiencing, to a quiet resting in the deep inner stillness of divine Presence, simply loving God and letting myself be loved. In deep silent prayer, my soul is bathing in the Presence, in the light and love that is God. In this time, there is an infusion into my being, which I may later experience as healing, insight, guidance, faith, hope, or courage, according to my need. But the purpose is the silent resting in the Presence, not the seeking of effects.

Today’s spiritual writers, coming from differing perspectives, all affirm the need of the soul for this kind of prayer usually called contemplation. Various words are used for this movement of soul awareness leading to being enfolded in God: inner Stillness, inner Spaciousness, pure Consciousness, uncreated Light, the Ground, the Source of Being, pure Beingness. It is unhelpful to be distracted by feeling obligated to use any particular ‘in’ or so-called ‘right’ words.

There are many different expressions of the inexpressible, but it is the same universal, divine energy which created and recreates us in love. Humanly, we touch the wonder of God’s love in the experience of loving another, and we touch this same love deeply in the experience of contemplative prayer.

Saints and mystics through the centuries knew the human need for solitude and silence to put ourselves in the way of receiving the grace Teresa of Avila called ‘spiritual union’. (Some today would call this prayer ‘coming into resonance’.) The saints of old lived their lives out of this kind of prayerful inner silence whether in desert solitude, monastery or market-place life. For them and for any of us, a moment of true contemplation, the union of our spirit with the Spirit of God, is pure gift, one for which we can only prepare to receive through simply being present to that Presence, open to the Lover of our souls, the Holy One, in solitude and soul silence.

I heard Josh Groban sing “*You Raise Me Up*”, music by Rolf Levland and lyrics by Brendan Graham. To me, it is a very spiritual song, for the words touch my experience in prayer.

*“When I am down and, oh my soul, so weary;
When troubles come and my heart burdened be;
Then I am still and wait here in the silence,
Until you come and sit awhile with me.*

*There is no life - no life without its hunger;
Each restless heart beats so imperfectly;
But when you come and I am filled with wonder,
Sometimes, I think I glimpse eternity.*

*You raise me up, so I can stand on mountains;
You raise me up, to walk on stormy seas;*

*I am strong when I am on your shoulders;
You raise me up; To more than I can be.*

The words of a hymn by Shirley Erena Murray also call us to silent openness.

*“Come and find the quiet centre in the crowded life we lead,
find the room for hope to enter, find the frame where we are freed
Clear the chaos and the clutter, clear our eyes that we can see
all the things that really matter, be at peace and simply be.”*

*Silence is a friend who claims us, cools the heat and slows the pace,
God it is who speaks and names us, knows our being face to face;
making space within our thinking, lifting shades to show the sun,
raising courage when we're shrinking, finding scope for faith begun.”*

“Silence is a friend who claims us’ . . .” The psalmist tells us that it is in inner silence and stillness that we can experience, even for a moment, this deep intimacy with God, a resonance, a union of our spirit with divine Spirit.

“Be still before the LORD.” Psalm 37:7a:

“Be still and know that I am, God.” Psalm 46:10

Without some stillness and silence in our lives, without “*making space within our thinking*’, (and our feeling), without inner quietude, we can miss not only knowing our own soul and our soul’s need, but fail to avail ourselves of the fullness of God’s silent work going on in our whole being.

“*The glory of God is a human being fully alive; and to be alive consists of beholding God.*”

These words of Saint Irenaeus, the second century Christian bishop and writer, tell me that I can be alive but not yet fulfilling God’s desire and my spiritual potential. Only as I come to ‘*behold God,*’ fix my attention, contemplate God with all that ‘I am’ in my being and living, can I become more fully mature as God intends.

Soul Responsibility

“Spirituality is the pattern by which we shape our lives in response to our experience of God as a very real presence in and around us . . . To be spiritual is to take seriously our consciousness of God’s presence in all that we do.” Howard Rice

To recognize that God depends on imperfect human beings to get things accomplished in this world according to God’s purpose, is fearsome. The prophet Micah spoke clearly to Israel of what God requires. “*God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*” (Micah 6:8)

Quoting the Torah, Jesus succinctly summed up our spirit responsibility in speaking to a Jewish scribe two thousand years ago. “*The first (commandment) is ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.*” Mark 12:29-31

In seeking to grow in love for my neighbour, I have come to fuller awareness of the responsibility to fulfill the biblical admonition: “*Do not judge that you may not be judged.*” Matthew 7:1

Judging others seems a common human frailty, but I have learned that judgement and love cannot live together in the soul. As has been said earlier, in this 'school of living' called earth, every one of us will experience conditions and changes, relationships, challenges and choices which can fulfill or interfere with our purpose for being here, and God's perfect intention. But we do not and cannot know the particulars of the intent of the life journey of any other person in this dimension. Our responsibility is not to judge, but to love, encourage and care for each other's well-being.

The words on a banner on Oprah's show highlight a further calling: "*Take responsibility for the energy you bring into this space.*" Soul awareness and healing is a responsibility so that the energy we bring in and send out, in whatever space, in nature, or with friend or stranger, is wholesome and life-giving. It is a truth that whether released unconsciously or consciously, in thought, word, look or touch, and whether near or at a distance, our energy affects persons, other creatures, plants and all else in this earth and beyond.

Negative attitudes and emotions as anger or resentment, despair or greed, vibrate at a low level, and, as I have already written, we experience our energy depleted when we either entertain such negativity or have it directed toward us. Positive thoughts, words and deeds of love, compassion, forgiveness, hope and peace, vibrate at a high level, and bless us and the world.

Soul Mission

"Blessed is he who has found his work; let him ask no other blessedness." Thomas Carlyle

In his sermon at the Royal Wedding of Kate Middleton and Prince William in April, 2011, the Lord Bishop of London quoted St. Catherine of Sienna, mystic, theologian and patron saint of Italy: "*Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.*"

Some of you may say, as I have, "*I'll never set the world on fire! I'm not that powerful or smart or faithful*" (or whatever other fire-squelching judgement we may put upon ourselves!)

Yet, have we not all had moments when we felt afire? We have experienced a situation or concern about which we felt passionately. Perhaps it was an experience of breath-taking beauty, a depth of love that inflamed our soul, or a moment of awareness in prayer, meditation or contemplation when we felt lifted into the Holy Presence, a moment never to be forgotten.

Jesus was a fiery human being, afire with the passion and compassion of God's nature. I believe that while Jesus came here a highly developed being, he did grow in remembering who and whose he was, what his life mission was about, and in experiencing the Presence, the blazing love and power that moved through him.

I described earlier the experience of seeing my garden aflame with light, infused and radiating with the light of the Creator. In being gifted with a glimpse of this spirit-alive universe, my soul felt afire! This is also my feeling when touched by true love, by beauty and the wonder of sense or sound. I am aware of an inner fire when discovering or sharing the spiritual life, whether with an individual or group, or in writing, as now. We are all 'spirits alive' with the living spirit-flame of God within us. We are warmed by its glow and guided by its light.

Henri Nowen says, "*We who want to witness to the presence of God's Spirit in the world need to tend the fire within with the utmost care.*" We must care for our soul and tend the fire within, for we are in this dimension to witness to the presence of the Creator and the risen, living Christ here in the midst.

Henri Nouwen writes further in *Life of the Beloved Spiritual Living in a Secular World*.
“Think of yourself as having been sent into the world. . . . Everything changes radically from the moment you know yourself as being sent into this world. Times and spaces, people and events, art and literature, history and science, they all cease to be opaque and become transparent, pointing far beyond themselves to the place from where you come and to where you will return. . . . Life is a God-given opportunity to become who we are, to affirm our own true spiritual nature, claim our truth, appropriate and integrate the reality of our being, but, most of all, to say ‘Yes’ to the one who calls us the Beloved.”
from pgs105-106

“We are sent into this world for a short time to say - through the joys and pains of our clock-time - the great ‘Yes’ to the love that has been given to us, and in so doing return to the One who sent us with that ‘Yes’ engraved on our hearts.”
pg 109

In John 17:18, Jesus speaks to God concerning his disciples, “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” And in sending out seventy disciples to preach to the people and to heal, Jesus instructed, “Say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’” (or *is at hand for you.*)
Luke 10:9b

I have come to realize that my overall mission is to continue growing in relationship with God such that I am a small but nonetheless significant aflame vehicle of the revealing of the Love-consciousness (God-consciousness) already here, but still dimly recognized among humankind. I am to witness to the grace-filled message of God’s unconditional love and to Jesus’ living presence among us as the way to the life on this earth that God intends. This is the mission and purpose to which I am called to commit, and fulfill by the power of the Spirit working through me in this brief human life. Each of us has the opportunity to discover and say “yes” to who we really are, “yes” to giving and receiving love, and “yes” to offering our particular gifts to life here in service to God.

I was brought up in the church, but may well have come here already committed to a Christian spiritual path. Whenever I have explored other spiritual paths in any depth, I have had the strong inner call to “bloom where I am planted”. Thomas Merton’s image of paths up a mountain has been helpful to me. If we follow deeply and devotedly our own faith-path, we will meet those on other paths as we near the mountaintop. The 19th C .mystic Ramakrishna has said, “*There is only one God but his names are countless, and countless are the aspects under which he can be considered. Name Him with any name and worship Him in the form you like best, and you are sure to reach Him.*”

I have great respect for followers of spiritual masters of other faiths, and have discovered helpful prayer and meditation practices from other faiths which I have adopted into my own. I believe it is important that we learn to know each other better, that understanding and mutual respect may grow. And I have been blessed by relationships with persons of other faith paths.

Jack Layton’s words to each person of faith, and perhaps of no faith, before he died were these: “*Dream a dream that lasts longer than a lifetime.*” I believe that the dream of love and healing, peace and justice that you and I dream for the earth is God’s own, implanted in us. It lasted longer for Jesus than his life-time here, and so it does for us. Each one of us, who, in our own

soul, is in love with God, healed by God, and a channel of God, contributes to the healing of the soul of this planet and the world.

Particular Mission

“Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone’s task is as unique as his specific opportunity to implement it.” Victor Frankl

I thoroughly believe that within the overall purpose, each of us, in this ‘school-room’ and ‘mission field’ called ‘life on earth’, came with a particular personal intention and purpose. Frankl says, “*You don’t create your mission in life - you detect it.*” As has been said, detecting this particular mission is not easy!

Nancy Reeves, in her book on spiritual discernment, *I’d Say Yes, God, If I Knew What You Wanted*, shares wonderfully insightful stories of experience, her own and those of others. And she offers helpful spiritual practices to assist in the discerning of one’s particular mission for this earth journey. We all have spiritual gifts in particular, some recognized early in life and some latent. These may be surprisingly stirred and developed by the Spirit in later life, and sometimes brought to our awareness through the discernment of others. We will come to understand the connection to the particular mission that is ours.

Paul says, “*There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*”

1 Cor.12:4-7

In this chapter, Paul goes on to list what the gifts may be: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues. And in Romans 12, the list adds ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, and compassion. But the most succinct and all-inclusive teaching comes from the well-known 1 Corinthians 13 which speaks of the gift of love as the greatest of all. “*And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*”

1 Cor.13:13

Along with these named spiritual gifts, I think we bring with us specific well or highly-developed attributes which will enable us to make the contribution or accomplish the work that is ours to do. This work could be in any area of life: research, medicine, science, education, philosophy, politics, engineering, literature, art, music, ecology, religion, social service, farming, industry, trades and so on. And I believe we find ourselves having come to the situation and support which will make the fulfillment of our particular mission possible, though we certainly will face challenges and difficulties which could side-track or discourage.

Joseph Campbell, American mythologist, writer, and for many years a prominent lecturer, is perhaps best known for his simple but profound saying, “*Follow your bliss.*” He taught that the divine purpose implanted within us can be unveiled if we pay attention to what gives us deep joy, an inner sense of a heavenly happiness. He did not see this as self-indulgent but as the way to give to the world the very best one has to offer. It is then that we are in touch with God’s intention for our lives and our soul’s true desire to find and follow it. He did not say that in this world we would not have trouble, but that underneath whatever we face in this life there remains God’s strong and certain plan to lead us to discovering a bliss that is divine. Campbell seems to be saying that this is soul responsibility, and in his words of promise, “*the universe will open*

doors where there were only walls.”

God wants us to have the joy of accomplishing our mission as best we can before we leave earth. And though we make mistakes and take detours, there will be an inner leading and strength which will draw us back on the track our soul really wants to go.

Oprah Winfrey is another who has a passion for coming to understand one's mission in life. She has addressed her public saying, *“Have the courage to follow your passion - and if you don't know what it is, realize that one reason for your existence on earth is to find it.”* Bliss and passion then, can lead us to discover the mission that is one's own; but there is more.

Recent writer W. Clement Stone says, *“When you discover your mission, you will feel its demand. It will fill you with enthusiasm and a burning desire to get to work on it.”* That's where the courage is needed. And perseverance, courage and overcoming obstacles may well be part of one's soul mission! It has been in mine,

Along with what I have considered as drawbacks in my innate personality, it seems that I came equipped with certain inborn gifts and skills to be developed and used to serve my mission. I remember that as a small child, I had a little desk where I loved to sit with my crayons, pencils and papers, cutting and pasting verses and pictures from Sunday School papers, printing bible verses and later writing.

As an adult, I entered a teaching career in the public school system. But always I was active in church life as well. I loved scripture and learning the ways of prayer. Although I always felt that teaching was part of what I was to be about in life, over time the teaching changed direction as I began facilitating workshops in areas of spirituality. After early retirement from teaching, I took courses in spirituality and training in Spiritual Direction. There has always been a passion for growing in the spiritual life, and I gradually came to understand that my calling is to be a spiritual companion for others. The initial sense of my particular soul mission has changed as I became ready for each next phase. I came to realize that there may well be a reason I am a strong introvert with a feeling and intuitive nature. As well as innate nature, I have come to believe that I chose my earthly environment, familial, social and cultural, with the potential it offered for soul mission discovery.

Some people do find their soul intention easily. Even as a child, a person may have a clear knowing and eagerness to be about a certain kind of work or profession, to learn certain skills, or may have obvious natural aptitudes easily developed. Others may still be waiting and wondering. But the intention is there, deep in the soul, and our guardian angel will help each of us to discover it. Although we may think we know, we may still make many un-fulfilling starts. It may be then that we stop and listen more attentively to God's sometimes subtle leading. Or perhaps we may hear God through another who sees in us what we can miss seeing in ourselves! God wants us to have the joy of true spiritual fulfillment here, the joy of mission accomplished as best we can before we leave this earth.

Again, Henri Nouwen writes, *“I still believe that our few years on this earth are part of a much larger event that stretches out far beyond the boundaries of our birth and death. I think of it as a mission into time, a mission that is very exhilarating and even exciting, mostly because the One who sent me on the mission is waiting for me to come home and tell the story of what I have*

learned.”

The greatest story we will ever have to tell is who, by the power of Love, we have become, what we have learned about the giving and receiving of love as followers of Jesus, and as participants in God’s dream and Christ’s continuing mission in this world.

Soul Relationships

“For one human being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation.”

Rainer Maria Rilke

It is true for others as for me, that since we are interconnected humans on this journey, we experience, sometimes profoundly, the effects of others’ choices and actions, for good or ill. In this way, we either support or deter one another on our paths and in our missions. There is the need to develop spiritual discernment, and to journey with spiritual eyes open, as well as with heart compassion.

I have absolutely no doubt that one reason I came here is not only to learn to overcome certain weaknesses, but also to support certain persons in particular on their journey. I am convinced that among many people I meet, I am led to those persons with whom I am to be in significant relationship, according to my life mission and perhaps also theirs. No doubt we have all encountered persons with whom we felt an instant rapport, or an instant apprehension. This may indicate either we have known each other well, before coming here, had other life-experiences together, or have ‘unfinished business’. If the latter is so, part of the mission is to recognize this and pray to be guided in completing the ‘unfinished business’.

As I have already mentioned, I do not think we drop into this dimension inadvertently, but come to the situation, time and place, race and gender which can enable the intention for the particular earth journey, and to certain significant relationships. I am so grateful to my Spiritual Director of many years, Lorraine Dykman, for the accompanying, support, wisdom and discerning which has blessed my life, and to my present director.

And many others, perhaps even without their knowing, have assisted me, stimulating and enabling my remembering a part of my life mission of which I had been unaware, or unconsciously turning from. Theologian and educator Dr. Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng is such a person in my life. She saw in me what I had not seen in myself. She identified my calling to a ministry of Spiritual Direction and encouraged me to trust this calling and become trained for it. I will be forever grateful to her for helping me not to miss the work that continues to be so fulfilling in my life, and which I have come to trust was written in my ‘mission statement’ for this life.

I believe I also came with soul and cell memories stored within me from other experiences and relationships, some relevant to the learning, growing and serving I chose to be about now. But if I could readily remember all the other journeys, I would not be able to function mentally or emotionally here. In God’s wisdom, such memories are mostly blocked.

Some people say they do remember one or more past lifetimes on earth. Many notice a unique affinity for certain places or people that they feel they have known before. I do myself. Credible practitioners have reported the healing of a particular relational, emotional or physical condition through regression into a past-life experience. The wonder and mystery of it all is beyond understanding on this side of the veil!

Our relationship to one another as people on this earth is crucial. The living Presence or God-Force indwells every human being whether spiritually awake to this or not. And since, on this planet, we differ in culture, colour, race, gender and language, it is understandable that naturally we also differ in perception and naming of the Divine, in expression of experience, and rituals of approach.

For centuries, this spiritual diversity has been the source of division and suppression, hatred and aggression. In the multi-cultural, multi-faith, and no-acknowledged-faith milieu of this earth's peoples, it is clear that we are being called to a new level of awakening to a mutually respectful multiplicity of spiritual belief and practice, and to new ways of relating as God's people.

In the words of a prayer by J. Philip Newell in *Celtic Treasure*, “*In the rising of the sun and its setting, in the whiteness of the moon and its seasons, in the infinity of space and its shining stars you are God and we bless you. May we know the harmony of heaven in the relationships of earth and may we know the expanse of its mystery within us.*”

Soul Wonder and Gratitude

“Wonder is the basis of worship.”

Thomas Carlyle

“There is a calmness to a life lived in gratitude, a quiet joy.”

Ralph H. Blum

What greater wonder can we see than the light of the starry heavens or the light in the eyes of a wonder-filled child?

“Because the Celts understood God's presence in and through the created world, for them there was no dualism. Nothing was seen as secular. All was holy or potentially so. Thus, if all of life is holy, all the pieces which make up the mystery of each of our lives are sacred pieces. Patching them together yields the holy.”

John M. Jones, S.C.

Desiring to patch the pieces of my life together, I began to look back over the years of family life, education, profession, relationships, church involvement, and spiritual searching. And I could see, with wonder, that none of my experiences were without purpose and meaning in that there was opportunity to learn and grow from them, including the mis-takes, or perhaps because of them!

Reflecting on my life, I have been increasingly led to gratitude and wonder at what God has enabled. It is so true that, as Frederick Faber says, “*The love of God is broader than the measure of the mind. And the heart of the eternal is most wonderfully kind.*” I have been picked up and turned around when I needed to be, guided into the place I was supposed to be, and given the measure of light needed to walk the next step on my life path over and over again. I have been blessed far beyond my understanding by the ever-loving God and my gratitude overflows.

Meister Eckhart says profoundly: “*If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough.*”

John Powell S.J. in *Through Seasons of the Heart* sums up the journey in these encouraging words:

*There is an old Christian tradition
that God sends each person into this world
with a special message to deliver,*

*with a special song to sing for others,
with a special act of love to bestow.
No one else can speak my message,
or sing my song, or offer my act of love.
These have been entrusted only to me.*

*According to this tradition,
the message may be spoken, the song sung,
the act of love delivered only to a few,
or to all the folk in a small town,
or to all the people in a large city,
or even to all the people in the whole world.
It all depends on God's unique plan for each person.*

*So from my heart I want to say this to you:
Please believe that you have an important message to deliver,
you have a beautiful song to sing,
and a unique act of love
to warm this world and to brighten its darkness.*

*And when the final history of this world is written,
your message, your song, and your love
will be recorded gratefully and forever.*

Spirit Joy and Soul Discovery

“You have put gladness in my heart, more than when their grain and wine abound.” Psalm 4:7

And Psalm 126 is entitled *A Harvest of Joy*:

*“When the LORD brought back those who returned to Zion, we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations, ‘The LORD has done great things for them.’
The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.”*

Psalm 126:1-3

To me, it has been a wondrous realization and joy to know that we are ‘spirits alive’ on the ‘soul journey’ in the time and beyond time. Jesus’ coming into this earth time to live his mission even to death, and then to reveal the truth of life eternal in his resurrection is amazing grace. I have a little saying on my desk which helps me stay focused on my earnest heart’s desire in being here on earth. *‘Only one life, ‘twill soon be past; only what’s done for Christ will last!’*

Life on this planet in the 19th century was described by Charles Dickens saying, *“It was the best of times and the worst of times.”* In this 21st century it still is! I think of a friend, now on the other side, who always prayed giving thanks for the good in the world. He was not unaware of the troubling condition of this planet, but in his prayer of gratitude he was energizing the positive, the good in the world. He prayed with confidence that good would ultimately prevail in the universe for it is God’s and God is good. He knew that although this is the dimension where opposing forces challenge the spirit-souls journeying here, God is present, working in and through those who believe and live and work for the bursting forth again of the prevailing goodness inherent in creation. Would that we all might pray in this way! In Thich Nhat Hanh’s words, *“People deal*

too much with the negative, with what is wrong. Why not try and see positive things, to just touch those things and make them bloom.”

We are awake to the lust for power and greed seemingly rampant in this earth with the resultant violence done to life on this planet. But Henri Nouwen has said that God’s creation is full of joy, a joy only masked by appearances. This calls me to remember that whatever of God’s nature and beauty, compassion and passion for justice is masked in this earth, there is the underlying spiritual reality of God’s joyous Spirit-presence and re-creative power. And therein lies earth’s potential and hope, and our own.

“The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God . . . We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creatures, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait . . . For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” (Romans 8:19,22-23a,24-25)

Nouwen tells us in *Out of Solitude* that we are also to wait actively and with expectation.

“Whereas patience is the mother of expectation, it is expectation itself that brings new joy to our lives. Jesus not only made us look at our pains, but also beyond them.

‘You are sad now, but I will see you again and your hearts will be full of joy.’

A man or woman without hope in the future cannot live creatively in the present.

The paradox of expectation indeed is that those who believe in tomorrow can better live today, that those who expect joy to come out of sadness can discover the beginnings of a new life in the center of the old . . . “

As we trim the lamp wick of our individual souls and keep the glass of our lamps clean, the spirit light of God, inherent in us from our beginning, will shine powerfully and creatively through us, and we will make a difference for God in this world. This is spirit joy in the soul!

Paul clearly tells followers of Jesus that whatever natural and spiritual gifts we have, they are from God and not our own. If we use them without love, they count for nothing. And whatever spiritual knowledge we may glean, if we hold or share it without love, it counts for nothing. But, when we offer our gifts and spiritual discoveries in service to God’s people and God’s creation in love, we honour God and bless the world. This is spirit joy in the soul!

A Final Word

When I first went to Britain, it was a whirl-wind two-week tour of England, Scotland and Wales. It was an overview, and as a first introduction to Britain, it was wonderful. But I came home with a desire to explore the historical story and sites, and the life of the people past and present in a much more in-depth way, including my own ancestry in England, Scotland and Ireland.

Perhaps this can be a kind of metaphor for what I have written in these pages. It is certainly only an overview which may or may not stir you to further reflection and discernment, or to openness and desire for your own discoveries. Perhaps something on these pages will connect in some way to your own inner truth. I trust that the rest will be blown away as chaff in the wind (a metaphor from a country child)! All this will be as the Spirit leads you.

There is a Zen proverb which says, *“Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.”*

Whatever gift of illumination any one of us has received in this life does not make one better than anyone else, only more awed and humbled by the wondrous mystery of this universe of which we are a part. It was William Somerset Maugham who wrote, *“It wasn’t until quite late that I discovered how easy it is to say, ‘I don’t know!’”* There is certainly much I do not and cannot know, and the discoveries which, for me, arose from an inner truth have awed and humbled me. I have been given a different perspective on life and a deeper gratitude for the wonder of it as I continue my journey.

For me, I choose to say as did Paul,
*“It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way,
but that by my speaking with boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body,
whether by life or by death.
For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.
If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer.”*
Philippians 1:20-21

I had gone to the cemetery with my niece Marguerite to bury the ashes of her mother, my sister-in-law. Kay had been like a second mother to me. It was winter and we were shivering in the cold as we lowered the container into the grave. Holding each other, we stood there in silence. I was drawn to raise my eyes to the large tree a little distance away. And I heard, as a clear voice in my head, *“The willow will turn green again.”* It was a grace-filled assurance that there is always new life to come. Kay lives now in her spirit body in another dimension; and so will I.

I offer here in closing a writing of Joseph Campbell whom I have quoted earlier in this writing. .
*“The divine manifestation is ubiquitous,
Only our eyes are not open to it.
Awe is what moves us forward.*

*Live from your own center.
The divine lives within you.
The separateness apparent in the world is secondary.
Beyond the world of opposites is an unseen,
but experienced, unity and identity in us all.*

*Today the planet is the only proper ‘in group.’
Participate joyfully in the sorrows of the world.
We cannot cure the world of sorrows,*

but we can choose to live in joy.

*You must return with the bliss and integrate it.
The return is seeing the radiance is everywhere,
the world is a match for us.
We are a match for the world.
The spirit is the bouquet of nature.*

Sanctify the place you are in.

Follow your bliss. . . .”

I firmly believe and trust that God wants us to know whose and who we are, *spirits alive* on a *soul journey*. We are here with the capacity to find and follow our bliss, here for awe and adoration, relationship, discovery and transformation, in this dimension of life and the next.
Thanks be to God.

All scripture references are from the NRSV of the Bible unless otherwise noted.

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