

Got Spirituality?

I feel much the same way about spirituality as the mother in Barbara Kingsolver's novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, felt about food. In *The Poisonwood Bible*, a missionary takes his wife and four daughters to Congo with no support from any denomination or other outside source. The missionary and his family soon discover that they are entirely unprepared for the challenges of living in a tiny, isolated African village. The mother in *The Poisonwood Bible* says she can't even find food for her family:

For a long time I could not work out how all the other families were getting by. There seemed to be no food to speak of, even on a market day when everybody came around to make the tallest pile out of what they had. It didn't seem to stack up to enough sustenance for the two dozen families in our village. Yes, I could see there was charcoal for cooking it, and shriveled red pili-pili peppers for spicing it, and calabash bowls to put it in, but where was the *it*, whatever it was? What on God's earth did they eat?

I feel much the same way about spirituality as the mother in *The Poisonwood Bible* felt about food. I receive magazines full of zafus to sit on, singing bowls to ring, and crystals to gaze at. I see stores full of incense for smelling, beads for clacking, candles for burning, and bells for tinkling. I am offered workshops on yoga, instant enlightenment, and month-long silent retreats. There are pyramids to sit under, pilgrimage sites to visit, and nine million ways to start the day. Almost everyone seems to be selling it. So lots of people must want it. But where is the *it*, whatever it is? What on God's earth is spirituality?

Our reading this morning came from Douglas Coupland's collection of short stories entitled *Life After God*. In an earlier novel, Coupland coined the term

“Generation X.” Generation X is the tail end of the baby boomers. The teenagers of the 70s who were accustomed to a high standard of living and expected to rise to an even higher standard than their parents. The children of the grown-ups who discovered that God was dead. Children born into a world without God. Talking about my generation.

In *Life After God*, Coupland describes life lived in suburban paradise that rendered any transcendental ideas pointless. Politics existed elsewhere in a televised non-paradise. Death was similar to recycling. Coupland suggests that this might be the finest thing to which we may aspire, the life of peace, the blurring between dream life and real life. And yet in spite of this nirvana-like existence, he doubts it. He doubts that a suburban paradise is the finest thing to which we may aspire. He yearns for something more.

The Gen Xers grow up out of their suburban paradise. One is on antidepressants, another is an alcoholic, another is living with AIDS, one became a born-again Christian after giving up dealing drugs, another becomes a slacker tree planter in the back woods of British Columbia. As they get older they find a searing need burns inside to share their feelings. Sincerity is no longer shameful. They find the glamour of corruption fades. They don't want to waste anymore energy on decadence. So instead, on a good day, they learn tolerance, compassion, love, and distance.

The Gen Xers, this generation born without God, realize how hard it is, even with the desire, and even with the will and the time, how hard it is to reach that spot inside that remains pure, that spot that we never manage to touch but we know exists. One of the Gen Xers says,

I am trying to escape from ironic hell: cynicism into faith; randomness into clarity; worry into devotion. But it's hard because I try to be sincere about life and then I turn on a TV and I see a game show host and I have to throw up my hands and give up. Too many easy pickings! Clarity would be so much easier if there weren't so many cheesy celebrities around.

Ever feel like that? That clarity would be so much easier if there weren't so many cheesy celebrities, lying politicians, and bloody wars around? Wouldn't clarity be much easier if ironic hell was not sitting on our door step to challenge us at every moment? A while back, Madonna visited Jerusalem to speak at a conference on Jewish mysticism. In case you haven't been keeping up with the pop star news, Madonna is now considering herself bi-religious and has taken the new name Esther, no doubt because Madonna is about as non-Jewish a name as you can find. Clarity would be so much easier if there weren't so many cheesy celebrities around to challenge our escape from ironic hell.

What happened? Why, after the boomers went to all the trouble of disposing of the supernatural inside and outside of religion (and bless their hearts for it, because we needed to learn how to question dogma), how, after the boomers did so much to create a life of peace, the blurring between dream life and real life, after the boomers created a suburban paradise that rendered any transcendental ideas pointless, how did the word "spirituality" not only worm its way back into our everyday parlance, but also become something completely and absolutely indefinable that everybody seems to yearn for? Even Madonna? Where is the *it*, whatever it is? What on God's earth is spirituality?

Well, some suggest that somewhere along the line folks realized that God wasn't exactly dead. In fact God hadn't really changed at all. Rather our

perception of God was changing. In some cases the name “God” was completely inadequate to talk about whatever *it* was they were talking about. For many the word “religion” has become too static, a noun, too much of a “thing” and not enough of an “experience” or “activity.” The word “spirituality” came to the rescue to denote some kind of inner life. What do they all mean by spirituality? Darned if I know. Is it that clarity that helps us escape ironic hell? Is it mindfulness, awareness, presentness, compassion, connectedness, devotion, faith, gratitude, hope, joy, imagination, justice, kindness, love, mystery, peace, play, reverence, silence, stillness, transformation, or zeal? Is spirituality that connection to something larger than yourself? Probably yes, yes and, yes but also, yes and no.

It seems to me, spirituality is like pornography, I know it when I see it. And it’s even more subjective. Whereas we might all agree that something is or isn’t pornographic, we may never agree on the spiritual way to start the day. I am a Gen Xer, but I did not grow up in the suburbs. Behind our backs, the government called us “potentially at risk” kids while to our faces they called us “Inner City Angels” and created social programs to reduce the “potential risk.” In truth, I was never remotely at risk, though the programs were fun. But I guess what I really want to tell you is that there were no turquoise glowing swimming pools for me and my friends, except at the local Y, and you have to work pretty hard to get a spiritual experience at an inner city Y, no matter how you define spirituality.

Instead I hung out at a Unitarian summer camp for a couple of weeks each year. It was a dismal little place always barely managing to keep its head above financial waters. Plyboard cabins with insulation falling out of the walls, army bunks with germ infested foam mattresses, the pond choked with algae. I loved it. Every year from the time we were eight, a gang of us boys and girls got together

there and when the first blush of reunion was over and we had settled into the joy and freedom of camp life, one night, inevitably a solemnity would overtake us and we would ask each other “Were you able to be yourself this year?” The understanding being that here, in the safety of summer camp, and in our little gang of friends, we were truly able to open our hearts to a place of connection and purity. Sadly, none of us said we had been able to “be ourselves” in school until our youth group years were almost over.

One could say that the whole experience of coming out of my shell, of loving others out of their injuries and defenses, of being with others in naïve innocence and in paradise, was a spiritual experience. But there was this one summer evening when we were all in our late teens and we decided to have a sleep out under the stars on the commons. After the usual group games and rough housing that pass for platonic contact in young hormone-laden lives, we noticed, above us, the northern lights had come out. The lights shimmered in blues and whites, greens and reds, over us, through the stars. The lights streamed upward to an open point like a teepee and we lay on our backs, caught our breath and wondered. It was as if the whole universe was holding us in its home and our little paradise grew out to meet the greatness.

This was and remains for me an experience of complete and utter clarity, total presentness, awareness, mindfulness, love, and - in spite of myself - I can call this a moment of spirituality even though I can't define the term.

No simple answers here, I'm not going to give you a definition of spirituality so you can say “Ah yes, just as I thought,” or another definition that would relieve you with a dismissing “Ha! Spirituality is a load of hogwash.” If I could have my way, I would leave you in agony about the question because only our agony, only

our struggle will spur us to escape a numbing ironic hell, full of surface politics and cheesy celebrities. In the meantime, and I do not say this lightly, in the meantime, may you continue to reach for that place inside that remains pure. That place that we may never manage to touch but we know exists. May you search for your connection to that which is larger than yourself. And know in your heart of hearts that you, whoever you are, are loved and that you belong here.