



Domestic Spirituality

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Sitting alone for 30 years in the desert atop a 60 ft pole is not my preferred path to godliness. Yet that is precisely the course chosen by Simeon Stylites, the 4th century ascetic and present-day saint of the Church.

For three decades, this wily Syrian lived bound by a rope to the top of his towering column. His perch, 3 feet in diameter, included a crossbar to keep him from toppling off in his sleep. From time to time his disciples came with a ladder to bring him food or remove his waste, but there, in splendid isolation, Simeon pursued his obsession: uninterrupted communion with God.

This was not the beginning of Simeon's pilgrimage. In fact, for 6 years prior to this he lived atop a pillar just 6 feet high. Embarrassed at the smallness of his perch and what it reflected about his intentions, Simeon moved to a more worthy abode.

As you wander through the pages of church history, you discover countless individuals—both women and men—who went to strange lengths in search of intimacy with the Divine. There are those who lived in caves; those who chained themselves to crosses and circled the desert; many who confined themselves to secluded monasteries, living by vows of silence and separation; still others who passed their years isolated on rugged pinnacles of granite in the middle of the Atlantic ocean. Whatever course they chose, these spiritual eccentrics lived with a passion for the presence of God. In the grip of this desire, they felt compelled to relinquish all responsibilities, ambitions, relationships, possessions and commitments which they perceived as peripheral to their pursuit.

As I read these stories, I feel conflicting responses. At one moment I feel inspired.

These testimonies are compelling, stirring, even convicting. They capture something of the intensity of David's prayer in Psalm 27.4:

"One thing I ask of the Lord and that is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple."

Personally, I cannot help but be impressed by the intent of their hearts and the focused nature of their pursuit.

At the same time, I am frustrated—deeply frustrated. The spirituality of these devotees hinges almost entirely upon the act of withdrawal; to pursue the presence of God, one must leave behind the pursuits of ordinary life. As a model of spirituality, it centers upon solitude, isolation, quietness and retreat, and has almost nothing to do with the constant and busy ebb and flow of my everyday life.

I am not an ascetic or a desert recluse. I am a husband and a father. I have made certain life-choices that mean acts of withdrawal will always be the exception and never the rule. I cannot run off to the desert or climb an isolated peak in the middle of the Atlantic. I certainly cannot live perched on a pole for the next 30 years. I have a marriage to nurture, a family to provide for, children who wake in the middle of the night in need of comfort. I have responsibilities in the workplace, friendships to maintain, neighbours to relate to, and study commitments to fulfill. Because of this, the spirituality of the desert will always draw my attention as a distant, even admiring observer, but never as a full participant.

I may well brush this frustration off as an aside if this spirituality of withdrawal did not have the pervasive influence it has today upon the Christian community. Almost everywhere I look, I see spirituality defined by images of retreat. In my Evangelical tradition, the ultimate measure of one's spirituality is the daily 'quiet time'—a period of personal solitude for Bible reading, meditation and prayer. Depending on the

tradition, this may be broadened to include experiences such as liturgy, Eucharistic celebration, charismatic worship or days of 'spiritual retreat'. We may affirm mission, social action and witness as activities important to the Christian life, but when we speak of spirituality we revert to images of personal piety, inner reflection and solitude.

It would be foolish to suggest that spirituality and withdrawal have no connection. Of course they do! You need only scan the gospel accounts of Jesus to see this exemplified. Furthermore, even a cursory awareness of the rich traditions of Christian spirituality reminds us of the immeasurable value of solitude, silence and retreat. This is partly why the testimonies of pole-sitters like Simeon attract us. My contention, however, is this: if the act of withdrawal is definitive of our understanding of spirituality, then we are sold short when it comes to our experience of God. Those of us for who can only withdraw momentarily end up feeling side-lined, having to content ourselves with being observers while others take center-stage with God.

Sharing my frustration with this 'desert obsessed' spirituality, Ernest Boyer Jr. in his book *Finding God at Home* asks a telling question: "Is there childcare in the desert?"¹ The answer is obvious. If many of us find our primary calling not to the desert but to the routines and responsibilities of domestic life, then we need models of spirituality that embrace those elements of our lives.

Helpfully, Boyer draws a constructive contrast between two contexts for spirituality, each one as valid as the other. The first he calls "life at the edge." This is the context for the more traditional desert spirituality, one characterized by relinquishment and separation. The second he calls "life at the center." It is here, at the very centre of everyday life, we discover the possibility for an equally formative spirituality of the home, neighborhood and workplace.

Theologian Ray S. Anderson has described spirituality as a "domestic skill."² At first sight this seems an unlikely term, but as we begin to discover the routine centers of life as rich

contexts for spiritual pursuit, we may find that spirituality has as much to do with the domestic settings—the ordinary, mundane and immediate places of life—as it has to do with mountain tops, deserts and 60 foot poles.

1. God in the Ordinary

I am intrigued with the domestic nature of Jesus' spirituality. Time and time again in the Gospels, Jesus embraces the most ordinary circumstances and places, finding within them rich sources of spiritual meaning. While moments of withdrawal are an important aspect of Jesus' relationship with the Father, they are the exception. Jesus spends the largest part of his time in the most everyday settings—homes, neighborhoods and marketplaces—identifying and responding to the presence of God. Jesus does not call followers out to the desert. Rather he fleshes out the nature of the spiritual journey right at the center of daily life.

Furthermore, in the midst of the ordinary, Jesus describes the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. Bypassing images of angelic choirs, palaces, and centers of power, Jesus describes the Kingdom in the most everyday terms. He tells stories of vineyard workers, fishing, family meals, homemakers, household chores, seed sowing and neighborhood parties. More often than not, it is while seated at a dinner table that Jesus expounds the nature of grace, discipleship and Christian hope. Routinely, Jesus paints a very domestic and accessible picture of the Kingdom of heaven by bringing truth into the domain of ordinary life.

My wife loves her garden. She has spent the last year cultivating a thriving vegetable patch in our back yard. Gardening is a domestic task. Knees are scuffed and fingernails get caked with grit. But in the midst of turning the dirt, pulling the weeds and running the hose, my wife often notices the voice and presence of God. Parables of her own come to mind, pictures form and allegories become clear. Spiritual truths are tangible and transformation happens without ever having to leave the ordinary behind.

2. God in the Mundane

What images come to mind for you when you think of discipleship? In my tradition, one of the most dominant New Testament images is the soldier. It's a military picture, one that conveys a sense of relinquishment, leaving and transience. With Jesus as our captain we are summoned to give up civilian pursuits (2 Tim. 2:4), relinquish ties, responsibilities and possessions (Mt. 19:21), put on the armor for battle (Eph. 6:10-18), and be packed and ready to move at a moment's notice (Mt. 9:9; 10:1-42). It is a discipleship of surrender, readiness and movement.

It is this image of discipleship that has moved so many into missionary service and other forms of 'full-time' Christian ministry, for it often involves a surrendering of family ties, career and financial security. It is also this call that beckons so many into monastic-type orders where spirituality takes on a prescribed form. More often than not, it is this image of discipleship that carries with it a strong sense of personal 'call,' for the soldier always awaits the commander's orders. Thus, the clergy, the missionary and those in religious orders will often speak comfortably of God's call as a personal experience.

There is, however, another image of discipleship in the New Testament: the farmer. While the image of the soldier infers relinquishment, leaving and transience, the image of the farmer speaks much more of the mundane—of roots, routines and the repetitive rhythms of ordinary life. In essence, it is a much more domestic image.

Traditionally, the farmer is the one who gives a lifetime's investment in one piece of land, working that same ground year in and year out. It's the work of sowing, weeding, nurturing and harvesting. The annual cycles of the land are routine and predictable.

No doubt, the image of the farmer is the less glamorous and exciting of the two, and in it the sense of God's call is harder to define. Regardless, it encompasses so much of what everyday spirituality is about, and for many who live out their faith in the mundane

environments of home, neighborhood and workplace speaks more immediately.

Of course, these two images are not mutually exclusive, as if we live out an either-or spirituality. Both speak to every disciple at different points along the way. The farmer must relinquish and surrender just as the soldier must endure the routine and repetitive. It is only how these experiences are applied and embraced that differs.

The tragedy lies in the fact that the calling of the soldier is often held up as the 'higher' of the two—more reflective of genuine surrender to Christ. The average Christian who lives out his or her faith in suburbia, employed in the marketplace and paying the mortgage, can be left to gaze longingly at the pastor, missionary or monk as the one who has chosen the higher path. This is wrong! However we live out our discipleship, and in whatever context we discover implications for God's call, we are assured of God's presence, even amidst the most mundane tasks.

3. God in the Immediate

Australian John Williamson's captivating song "Cootamundra Wattle" describes an interaction between an elderly man and his wife. Surrounded by tokens and objects of the past, the woman is seated inside longing for the happiness of times gone by. Her husband's response is to invite her outside with these words:

*There's all the colors of the rainbow in the garden, woman,
And symphonies of music in the skies.
Heaven's all around us if you're looking.
How can you see it if you cry?*

"Heaven's all around us if you're looking:" that simple line captures so much the mystery and wonder of the Incarnational faith we Christians profess: God with us! Heaven is not only a future hope but a present reality. Through the birth of Jesus Christ, God has entered into the ordinariness of our earthly existence. He is not only the God enthroned on high, but God of the

immediate. As Eugene Peterson translates John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.” It is God’s presence in the neighborhood that forever seals the domestic settings of our lives as places for divine encounter. Through “God with us” we touch the eternal through the immediate.

In his book *Hallowed Be This House*, Thomas Howard grieves the fact that our modern scientific world-view has rendered daily life devoid of mystery. Everything can be explained apart from religious faith. Consequently, even the church has embraced the resulting and tragic division between the sacred and the secular. Expression of religious faith is removed from the ordinary contexts of life, relegated to the imagination, places of withdrawal and retreat, and the ritual of Sunday worship.

In contrast to this de-hallowing of the immediate, Howard calls us back to an awareness that “we do, in fact, walk daily among the hallows.”³ Not only is God present in all the places of life, but God’s eternal purposes find root in the most immediate settings. As the gospel story and the story of the early church weaves in and out through the houses, neighborhoods and lives of ordinary people, these ordinary places are forever validated as legitimate contexts for response to the transforming presence of God.

A spirituality of the immediate does not make light of the future hope of the Kingdom yet to come. It does, however, take seriously the Kingdom of God that is here and now; a Kingdom found within us and potentially within all the places of daily life. God’s Kingdom is present when I sit down to the evening meal with my family, when I meet my neighbors around our mailboxes and we chat together about our day, and when I sit my daughter on my knee and read a story before she goes to sleep.

Conclusion

Spirituality is a popular term today. Bookstore shelves are weighed down with titles addressing the popular longing for

personal meaning, self-fulfillment and transcendence. Christians believe this reconnection is made available to us through Jesus Christ. The task remains ours to promote and nurture this connection, to deepen and strengthen it. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that there is more than one way to do that.

Certainly we need to withdraw from the hustle and bustle of ordinary life, to find moments of stillness and solitude through which to reestablish perspective and focus on our relationship with God. But withdrawal is not our only path. We can also find rich sources for spirituality in the midst of the daily and routine.

I will always be a distant admirer of people like the pole-sitter Simeon Stylites, and the many disciples of history who have given themselves so unreservedly to the pursuit of God. But I can never be a full participant in their spirituality of withdrawal. I need help to identify other models of spirituality, models that embrace the presence of God at the center of life. Moments of withdrawal will always be the exception for me. A spirituality that does not embrace the ordinary, the mundane and the immediate as fertile contexts for divine encounter simply places me on the spiritual sidelines.

Each afternoon I take my little girl for a walk around our neighborhood. She is just 3 years old, and I am constantly fascinated by what she sees as we walk. She is transfixed by the rays of light coming through the trees, or the shape and ‘crunch’ of the fallen leaves. She watches as the water trickles through the drains and delights in touching the hedges as we walk by. Her eyes will follow the path of a small black beetle crossing from one side of the footpath to the other and she giggles when we see our neighbor squirting the cat with the hose.

And then when we are home, and she stands on a kitchen chair next to me as I prepare the dinner, she loves to run her hands over the chicken fillets and splash her palm in the little puddles of water on the bench. My daughter observes and notices things that I have long since brushed aside as

insignificant. With her help, I am learning to see again. For I cannot help but feel God's pleasure as this little person, in her simple way, acknowledges the wonder and the mystery of the most ordinary stuff of life.

As we move into a new Millennium, Jürgen Moltmann calls us to a new spirituality which he defines as a new lifestyle: "The whole of life as it is lived is seized by God's vital power and is lived 'before God', because it is lived 'out of God'."⁴ Moltmann's spirituality is distinctively inclusive for it finds expression in "the whole of life," not just some aspect of religious experience set apart from the routines of living. It is a domestic spirituality, for it discovers and nurtures the presence of God right where we are. It does not live from retreat to retreat, but finds rich sources of life in the now of every moment and every task. It is the spirituality that my daughter lives out so naturally.

Times of withdrawal will always be a necessary part of the spiritual journey. However, as we nurture all of our spiritual senses in the midst of the ordinary, the mundane and the immediate, we may well find God breathing new life and purpose into all the crevices of our lives. Spirituality is about all of life and all of who we are. It has to do with moments of retreat and peak-hour traffic, with periods of silence and the noise of little children, with the communion table and the workbench, with hushed Sunday worship and frantic family dinners. The promise of "God with us" is not confined to the mountaintop. It is, in fact, an invitation to "know Christ and the power of his resurrection" right where we are. It is a journey not just for pole sitters in the Syrian Desert, but for all of us!

¹ Ernest Boyer, Jr., *Finding God at Home: Family Life as a Spiritual Discipline* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

² Ray S. Anderson and Dennis B. Guernsey, *On Being Family: A Social Theology of the Family* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), chapter 9.

³ Thomas Howard, *Hallowed Be This House* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1979), 13.

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life* (London: SCM, 1997), 81.