

## Spirituality Amongst the Suffering

For over three decades there has been an ongoing struggle between those who follow the teachings of their religion and those who find religion to be either irrelevant or an actual obstacle to spiritual growth. Religious people often don't understand those who walk a spiritual path. Those who walk a spiritual path have often given up on religion. I have walked both paths, and I still do.

It's when I try to reconcile my personal spiritual path with either some of the teachings or the misadventures of the Christian Church as a whole that I encounter problems. I feel cut off from people who keep their religion walled off in their house of worship and refuse to engage the world. Then there are those of us who would rather work hours or even days on a project that helps somebody than sit quietly for 5-10 minutes twice a day to listen to what God or our Higher Power is saying to us. It is not an either/or position. We can do both. We don't need to limit our search for God to either a specific religion or a particular approach to spirituality.

However, it took some time to come to this understanding. It was, in fact, seven years after completing seminary that I had an opportunity to learn about spirituality from people who did not accept religion as a way to heal or find meaning in life. It happened only after further pastoral training prepared me to be a hospital chaplain (Dept. of Veterans Affairs). I was asked to work with a special group of people. The men and women who attended a weekly group that I led were military veterans as well as people with serious psychiatric conditions. Once a week we met for an hour on the psychiatric ward to explore what spirituality meant to them.

While most of these veterans believed in God, many of them were not very pleased with God. The God that they believed in had let them down, and they did not know how to reconnect with God during or following their military service--especially those who had been in combat. Many did not know that there was another option to growing closer to their God than religion. One retired Army Chaplain summed up the difference between religion and spirituality by declaring, "Spirituality is for those who have been to Hell! Religion is for those who haven't!"

Some of us have been to Hell, haven't we? In this context, Hell is defined as the places and times when we had no control over our suffering. If we have endured verbal abuse, sexual assault, beatings, false imprisonment, lost hope of surviving life on the streets, succumbed or led others to succumb to the dangers of street drugs or alcohol dependency; we quite likely have some idea of what that Army chaplain meant. If we have ever endured the agony of watching someone die right in front of us from a violent act,



we may still be in that Hell--unable to find our way out. In my experience, the Christian Church (one example of religion) does not face these issues very often or very well.

So where do we turn? Many of us have turned to what's known as "12-Step Spirituality." It is a spiritual path to healing that begins with admitting that we are truly powerless over what ever we have used to dull the pain of suffering. That can be anything. There are groups for people who are dependent or addicted to alcohol, narcotics, food, sex, violence and even our own emotions.

Where do we begin if our problem is neither addiction nor growing up in an environment where addiction was or had been a problem in previous generations? We begin by looking back at our experience and asking, "Where was God when I was suffering and needed help?" We continue to ask questions until we have expressed as much of our physical, emotional, social and spiritual anguish as we can at that moment. We might even want to record our memories in a journal. But the next day, no matter how much we accomplished the day before, we are at risk of reliving the anguish all over again. Until we are both humble and hopeful enough to admit that there is a 'Higher Power,' that we are not the center of the universe, we will find it difficult to heal.

My experience indicates quite strongly that there is no separating the spiritual dimension of life from the rest of a person's suffering. We take our next step in our spiritual journey by acknowledging that we need help. Whether it's in a religious setting, a 12-Step Group, or a therapist's office we must trust someone or a group that will listen. We also need to be open to changing— ourselves.

For listening to really be helpful, the person or group needs to be willing to both create and be a safe space so that we can open up about our suffering. Those who want to help will end up sharing some of the burden that the sufferer carries.

Of course, to really involve ourselves in the depths of another person's anguish, as many caregivers (think nurses, physicians, police, counselors, therapists of all kinds as well as house parents in a group home), requires training, supervised experience and love for God and for all of God's people— not just the one's that we like.

St. Paul wrote in [Galatians 6:2](#) that we should "bear one another's burdens." Until we love people enough to bear their burdens, they will carry them without rest. We who listen to those who suffer also need to be listening to God or our Higher Power.

Rev. Larry LaPierre