

**Now Here Be
The Reverend Karen Lewis Foley**

Readings: Karen Foley on her own spiritual practice,
quoted in the newsletter of Church of the Larger Fellowship
Excerpt from Robert C. Morris' "The Second Breath,"
an article on spiritual practice in *Weavings*, a journal of spiritual writings.

When my daughter, Nancy, was five, she looked up from the floor where she was building with her blocks and announced: "If you want things to be pretty you have to concentrate on it, and if you don't want them to fall down you have to work hard, and the more you work on it the more you learn how to do it." How could I know then that my little daughter was giving me a heads up for my future spiritual life?

If we want to cultivate an intentional spiritual life, say people who are serious about it, we have to concentrate on it; and if we don't want it to fall apart we have to work on it; and sure enough, the more you work on it the more you learn how to do it! "Spiritual discipline," I learned, requires the very kind of discipline Nancy was talking about and practicing there on the floor with her blocks!

Spiritual practice may not be for everyone. For some of you this homily may be an exercise in listening to my take on something that doesn't affect you much—in which case your sitting and listening may *be* a sort of spiritual discipline!

Certainly we know the benefits that regular meditation, prayer, yoga, tai ch'i, meditative walking, and other practices bring: calm, balance, focus; even energy and greater compassion. And the classic reason for spiritual discipline: paying attention to our relationship with God/Spirit of Life/The Way/grounding in the natural world—whatever we name that which lives at the center and depth of existence.

Certainly we know the barriers to spiritual practice. Lack of time or space. Distractions. No support from family. Changes in routine. When I lived in two temporary homes during our move to Maine, I found out how hard it is to maintain a daily practice when routine and place are turned upside down! Sometimes the barrier is just our own self-concept. People tell me, "I'm disorganized, I'm too easily distracted, I can't sit still." I know how hard it is to find a practice that fits one's life and stay with it for years because I've done it, fallen away, done it again, changed it, gotten tired of it, and done it again. So I know and love, and *live*, the legitimate question: how *do* we bring focus to our spiritual life?

First we have to get over the idea that we have to do it a certain way, for a certain amount of time, and perfectly. We decide: "I'm going to meditate for twenty minutes every morning." But we have only ten minutes, or we're tired and skip it a day or two, or we're too distracted to focus. It can feel so daunting we give up, convinced that a spiritual life is only for certain special people with more spacious lives than ours, or that we're just lazy, inept, or, worse yet: *just not spiritual*.

There's the second idea we have to get over: that spiritual practice is "special" and "separate" from regular life; that we aren't "spiritual enough" to pay attention to this part of ourselves. The word "spirit" means simply "breath" or "that which animates and gives us life," so how can we *not* be spiritual? An alive body can't *not* have spirit. So, whatever you've believed about spirit or spirituality till now, know that we all *do* have spirit; it is only a question of what we do about it. We can choose not to pay attention to our spirit, but as long as we are alive, it is as much a part of who we are as our body is. Practicing yoga has convinced me that body and spirit are part of one organic whole. They don't just affect each other; they *are* each other. I have come to believe that how we live each day accurately expresses our inner spiritual life.

I like what Anna Quindlen has to say about living life, and it applies to spiritual discipline: "I learned to love the journey, not the destination. I learned that it is not a dress rehearsal, and that today is the only guarantee you get."* Spiritual discipline isn't just about results (although they do happen over time). It is about being present. Or as Buddhist practitioners say, *Being Here Now*. * [from Quindlen's acceptance speech for an honorary doctorate from Villanova University]

It can be daunting to focus on BEING. A big word, it holds the whole world in its hands. How do we just *be*? That might sound vague and intellectual. So what if turn the phrase around and begin from the other, more concrete, more accessible end? *Now Here Be*.

I invite you to try something—sitting right now, right where you are. You don't have to participate—you can use these next moments for thinking of loved ones or planning your day. But for those who want to try this: I invite you to close your eyes if you want, but you don't have to. Just get comfortable and ... take a breath.

Now, be aware: for this moment as you sit here, Now is the only moment we are in. Experience this moment. Experience Now.

Now, be aware: right Here is the only space we can occupy in Now. Experience the seat beneath you, the air on your face, others around you. Experience Here.

Finally, be aware: all you have to do Now, and Here, is to Be. Now and Here. Just, for the next few moments, in silence, Be.

SILENCE ring bell

You have just engaged in a brief spiritual practice. What if for a few minutes several times a week we became aware of those three things— Now, Here, and Being—the present moment, the present place, and the simple reality of our existence? That would be a spiritual practice. We could even do it at any time—not withdrawing from what's around us in any way, simply allowing Nowness, Hereness, and Being to register in our consciousness as we watch TV, attend a meeting, push a child on a swing.

I suspect most of us engage in *potential* spiritual practices without realizing that's what they could be. Things to which we pay *attention*, and do with *intention*. Practicing a musical instrument; walking; listening to someone we love. I get teased about cutting kitchen scraps into small pieces because smaller pieces turn into compost faster. I don't really need to, but I *enjoy* the crunch of the knife through broccoli stems, the smell of cut lemon rinds. So I say, only partly as a joke, that it's a spiritual discipline! Maybe regular Sunday morning worship is a regular

practice for you. Or reading nightly bedtime stories with a child. Writing a check to aid the victims of every natural disaster.

One of my mentors, Tilden Edwards, says: the point of spiritual discipline is to bring an attitude of awareness, depth, and intention to our daily living. So we're aware of the deeper level of our life. So we aren't just sleepwalking through life. In that sense, spiritual discipline *is* results-oriented. How we live is transformed. I believe that everyday activities, when we undertake them with attention and intention, can be small spiritual practices and perhaps lead us to more focused and extensive practice. But we don't develop a rich spiritual life by *only* noticing. Regular practice takes us deeper, and over time makes us more aware and focused in our daily life.

Robert Morris' prayer life began—literally—by accident. He'd tried and tried, but his prayer life kept falling apart, as my daughter's pile of blocks would do if she didn't "work hard on it." But when he stubbed his toe and hollered, "*O God!*" he realized, in stages, that he was—in a not particularly spiritual fashion—praying. O God what? "O God...bless." And then: "*Bless my aching toe. Bless my ruffled spirits. Bless my frazzled body. Bless me in my heedless rush.*" Then he realized: "...the search for a daily prayer discipline had finally found the place to set up practice—right in the heartland of daily frustration itself." How many times my spiritual director says to me, when I speak of a frustration or dilemma, "Have you prayed about that?" Do I look at my difficulty in the context of my relationship with the Great Mystery at the heart of life?

What made Robert Morris notice the possibility of prayer in his profane words? I'm pretty sure it was his history of many *attempts* to pray on a regular basis. Without them, he would probably have said a few more choice words and gone on with the frantic activity that had caused him to stub his toe. But his mind was oriented toward prayer by years of *apparently* failed attempts to establish a practice. And so he grasped the spiritual import of those words: "O God."

Every mystic or serious spiritual guide tells us that we do not "achieve" "peak" moments of profound mystical insight and connection. They are stumbled upon, like Morris'—or discovered, or *given* to us—and there they just *are*. You know how it is—you're engaged in some activity and you happen to look up and see the sky a mass of miraculous shades of sunset, and something in you stops—and says YES—to everything that made that sky and your noticing it possible. And some of those moments we never forget. So why bother with the spiritual practice, if we're going to get these moments of deep connection with something greater than ourselves anyway?

For answer, I end with a conversation between Bo Lozoff and Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach. The rabbi says, "Full experiences of God can never be planned or achieved. They are spontaneous moments of grace, almost accidental." Lozoff asks, "Rabbi, if God-realization is just accidental, why do we work so hard doing all these spiritual practices?" The rabbi replies, "To be as accident-prone as possible." [It's a Meaningful Life—It Just Takes Practice, by Bo Lozoff]

May you be as grace-fully and blessedly accident-prone as you wish to be.
May you, in as many moments of your life as possible,
experience Now, experience Here, and fully Be.