

Spirituality: A Facet of Wellness

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Over 2,500 years ago, Plato said, "The part can never be well unless the whole is well." And Bill Wilson said, "If you get well right, you should get well all over." Carl Jung described alcoholism as a "spiritual disease which has as its base a drive for wholeness."

Spirituality has to do with the condition of our relationship with God, self, and others. Spirituality is, I believe, a very distinctive and very fulfilling element in a wellness lifestyle. Wellness results from living a life which is motivated by spirituality. We cannot have a relationship with God, self, and others if we do not have some measure of overall wellness. Spirituality constitutes a key element in measuring present levels of wellness. The bottom line of high level wellness is spiritual health.

Wellness results from living a life which is motivated by spirituality.

What is overall wellness? Overall wellness is not a super condition of physical health. Rather, it is a way of living, based on values and beliefs, a way of living which we ourselves create and direct in whatever way we choose.

The terminally ill, the mentally retarded, the permanently disabled can have a high level of wellness. On the one hand, an Olympic gold medal winner who does not get along with any fellow Olympian may not have any measure of wellness. Spiritual health and high level wellness go hand-in-hand.

Some characteristics of wellness:

Wellness is entirely self-created and self-directed. "You alone do it, but you do not do it alone." Recovery from alcoholism also is a process done with others. Finding God is a process done with others. As we recover, we move from solitude to the group and from the group to solitude. For us, spirituality promotes closeness to our union with God through renunciation, a detachment from materialistic values, accepting the daily reversal of life. The one who thinks he/she has lost something in doing this, will actually gain that and much more. The love of God and love of neighbor are joined to the lessening of destructive self-seeking and unproductive self-indulgence.

Wellness can co-exist with chronic illness, disease, and terminal illness. Personal experience indicates that although we put down the drink, we still have the disease.

Wellness is a process; it never ends. One never arrives at the fullness of wellness in this life. Recovery from alcoholism is an ongoing process and not a completed event. Acknowledging defects of character is not the simultaneous elimination of the defects but rather subject matter for the daily 10th-step inventory. Abstinence is not, as we know it, an end but rather a means to an end. The end is that of improved functioning in every area of life. Each of us, alcoholic or not, has his or her manner of relating to God, self and others. This manner of relating includes the body, mind, feelings and behavior. The three-fold relationship can work toward wellness and wholeness and be life-giving and fulfilling. Relationships that are self-defeating and destructive militate against wellness and wholeness. "If you get well right, you should get well all over." The bottom line of high level wellness is spirituality.

A four pronged concept of wellness which to my mind promotes spirituality centers around:

1. Enjoying who we are.
2. Growing into a fuller person.
3. Giving, that is, to be creative and productive for others — ministering to.
4. Receiving, that is, being willing to be ministered to.

The first — **enjoying who we are:**

If we like being who we are, we will have more energy to live our life. If we enjoy our work, we will have more energy from within for doing it. On the other hand, if we do not enjoy being who we are, we will not be motivated to live life to the full.

When we enjoy being who we are, we are motivated to take care of ourselves. When we hate being who we are, we have a tendency to neglect ourselves.

If we enjoy being who we are, we allow ourselves some "alone time." We establish a safe place in our world where we can think and be alone with God. We set aside this time every day as part of our daily schedule to get in touch with God. More importantly, it is in the "alone time" that God speaks to us. We establish a prayer life, a way of living, relating, and communicating with God. Prayer is like breathing — an unconscious habit, that gives us life, life with God.

If we enjoy being who we are, we make every effort to manage our time well. Since time is life, irreversible and irreplaceable, as Alan Lakein, author of "How to Get Control of Your Time and Life" suggests, we should aim for control over our time, a control that is neither too tight, that is, compulsive, restrained, obsessive, nor too loose, that is, apathetic, indifferent, lazy. This kind of control will allow us to get things done and also allows us to be flexible.

Priorities and simplicity

Two very important aspects of spirituality are setting priorities and maintaining simplicity. We must decide which parts of life are more important than others and apportion our energies accordingly. There are innumerable activities and opportunities available in our complex world and some are much more worthwhile than others. We simplify our lives, devoting energy to activities which fit our spiritual values and letting go of those which are without value for us. It is not that we pull out of everyday life. It is simply that we try to live within it more selectively. We practice our principles in all our affairs.

If we enjoy being who we are, our self-esteem rate is high. Four conditions necessary for good self-esteem are:

— The first condition for good self-esteem: consider our uniqueness and work toward feeling special. Develop a flair, a certain style. Our attitude toward ourselves and toward others are interwoven strands of the same psychological reality and one reflects the other. A deeper and more understanding view of ourselves will lead to growth and personal development more than all the harsh indictments we make of ourselves. We should treat ourselves as we would a loved child. If we love ourselves deeply enough, we can accept our own humanity and frailty. This will open the door that connects us to peace and balance, to loving ourselves just because we exist.

— The second condition for good self-esteem: consider our power. Power is directly related to choices. If we don't choose, if we procrastinate, we lessen our self-esteem. The best way to change the way we feel is to change the way we act. This concept is pivotal to personal freedom. Freedom means not being controlled by something outside of ourselves. It means self-control, not pointless self-indulgence, nor pointless self-denial. A sense of power comes from feeling we've got control over our life, that we are strong enough and secure enough to change the things we don't like.

— The third condition for good self-esteem is to have a sense of connectedness, a sense of belonging, of being wanted, feeling that we really count. Do we have "chicken soup" people in our life? Do we have people who bring us chicken soup when we have a cold? Do we have people who will come with the jumper cables when we are stuck? Do we have someone who will put an arm around us and say, "What's the matter with you?" If we have people in our life whose world is better because we are a part of it, then we have a sense of

connectedness — of belonging.

— The fourth condition for self-esteem is to have a model, someone we can look up to and know what we would like to be like. We all have good people in our lives but in the rush we sometimes do not recognize them nor look closely enough to realize how their goodness also offers us a sign of what we can yet become. Those people are the givers of hope. Perhaps it is the sick person we know whose human capacity to fight back against hardship and pain, makes the dignity of this good person stand out. The person whose renewed life is conquering old difficulties gives the refreshing message of what a real man or woman can be. The wonder of these models are everywhere. Have we looked for one in our lives, the one who can hold out the gifts of hope and promise to us?

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To enjoy being who we are is very important to a balanced spiritual life; a positive self-concept forms a part of the foundation from which spiritual growth begins. How absurd it is for us to dislike ourselves when God Himself loves us so much. We should take our cues from Him. Seeing ourselves from His point of view, respecting our potentials, appreciating the gift of others in our life, enlarges our self-respect.

And so we ask, do we like being who we are? This is the first measure of how alive/well we are.

The second concept of wellness which promotes spirituality is growing into a fuller person. Anything alive has the inner urge to grow. If an apple seed is alive, it will grow given favorable conditions. If it has no inner tendency to sprout, it is dead. If our mind is alive, we will want to know more. If our hearts are alive, we will want to love more. If our will is alive, we will want to commit ourselves to something bigger than ourselves.

When we stop learning, our mind begins to die. When we stop growing in love, our heart begins to shrivel. When we stop making commitments and being faithful, our will weakens and withers. As soon as we stop changing we start dying.

Do we have a commitment to openness, to getting unstuck, not being locked into patterns. Openness includes our basic attitude toward our own personalities. Openness is a way of making our own growth possible, of looking at life and coming up with a response that is new and appropriate, even if it is not perfect. We are filled with unsuspected resources, but only openness and a willingness to change make it possible for us ever to see or bring these to the surface.

Growing into a fuller person hinges on knowing what we really want, need, love, value. If we don't know what we really want, we don't know where to put our energies. If we wait for the ideal job or ministry or living situation to pass in review, we'll forever be wishy-washy, indecisive, and lack zest. Father Theodore Hesburgh of Notre Dame once hypothetically asked, "What would be important to us, if we suffered a sudden great calamity or disaster? Where would we want to be and with whom would we want to be? Thinking about this might allow us to discover something about what we build our lives on."

Checkbooks and calendars

To get a clear picture of what we thought worth doing or buying, we should look over our checkbook or how we spent our stipend. There we will find a record as cold and as compromising as the north wind. It reveals values, mistakes or perhaps a few regrets. It's a warm trail to follow if we want to learn more about ourselves. Or take a look at our appointment calendars and think how they got filled, what got done, what didn't get done. The reality recorded there holds the story of our lives. Were we too busy, not busy enough or were we, in fact, not as busy as we made it look? The profile of our lives, their purpose, where we went and why, is all revealed in our private calendar. There may be truly more comfort than distress in such a study. But one thing is certain, we will learn far more about ourselves and what we value than we will from any other activity. And if we don't have a calendar? Is it because we have such a phenomenal memory or are we just not involved?

One of the finest qualities of the spiritual life is that it is practical. Its medium is everyday life. The idea is to transform and uplift material living through spiritual inspiration. Our lives will be spiritual as we bring them into line with what we see as the Father's will for us.

Our efforts to grow into a fuller person requires us to ask, "Does my free time re-create me?" Is our free time spent passively watching TV? This may be wreck-creation time. It is not re-creation time. What does a sunrise or sunset do for us? When was the last time we escaped to enjoy the summer sky, sunshine on the water, a walk by the ocean, a view of the skyline? Breaks from work can be ideal opportunities for emotional and spiritual recharging.

Whatever gains come from working around the clock, are usually outweighed by the loss of energy and patience and by the increase in errors or poor judgment. When break time comes, we should leave the work, go for a walk, read a book, get together with friends, listen to music, visit an art gallery, enjoy some quiet time. This will get us out of the rut, provide a welcome change of pace, stimulate new enthusiasm.

Everyone needs leisure time. We should take it without rationalizing, without explaining the "why" to others, without looking back on the days when we recreated by doing something. To be the person we were fully intended to be, we develop the ability to say "no" to demands that are made on us by others which become a burden and prevent us from re-creating ourselves anew. A "yes" can do untold damage if it is the means of making us too tired or too tense to function effectively in our given work or ministry. If we never say "no" what is our "yes" worth!

The spiritually wise person distinguishes between "wreck-creation" which is destructive and re-creation which is constructive. Destructive "wreck-creation" is time-wasting, energy depleting and has no lasting value. It usually weakens and deteriorates all parts of our personalities. Getting drunk is a prime example of destructive recreation. Constructive re-creation is healthful to our bodies, stimulating to our minds, and consistent with higher values. One of the most constructive forms of recreation is relaxed fellowship with others who are spiritually motivated. In this atmosphere that quality — crucial to balanced spiritual living — humor, can flourish. Laughter is a great tonic for overall personality health. It keeps us from taking ourselves too seriously, it counters the building up of dangerous levels of pride.

Relaxed good times renew and lubricate our personalities, preparing us to take on new challenge in spiritual living.

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And so we ask: Am I growing into a fuller person?

To give, to be creative and productive for others is a third concept which promotes well-being and spirituality. An apple tree tends to produce apples for others by the bushel. Bees tend to make honey far beyond their own needs. Every person alive has inner impulses and a movement toward sterility and death. When we are most alive, we feel the urge to be most generous, to do magnanimous things. As paradoxical as it may seem, giving away is a sign of life and keeping is a touch of death. Our growth in spirituality will demand much giving, but that giving will bring us life.

We have to get involved

We moderns may need assistance in breaking out of our own shells and learning how to reach each other in a genuine way. But reaching out of our shells and touching others with tenderness and concern is of highest importance. It is the truth of intimacy that many may have forgotten or never learned. To what extent are we willing to risk this? To be creative and productive for others demands commitment. We cannot be creative while inert. We have to get involved and this can be risky. But the richest life will be lived by those who take reasonable risks. Do we take intellectual risks? Do we read only those things that regurgitate our own thoughts and outlooks? Do we ever do any physical activity where wisdom and skill are needed? Do we take

emotional risks? Can we find God in new ways, new people, new situations? When a wise Rabbi was asked where God dwells, he quietly answered that God dwells wherever and whenever we let Him in.

Father John Powers in *Coping With a Gentle God* says:

"To love our neighbor in heart, mind, soul and strength, we must feel in our hearts an attitude of love, know in our minds the worth of others, share in our spirit a kinship with all, and express in our touch, care for our brothers and sisters. Authentic love is a doing. It is a giving of yourself in tactile and concrete way. To touch a child in pain, to caress a person in need of a sense of security, this is doing from love."

What place does touching have in our life? Can we give and receive a hug? If the word touching makes us feel uneasy, then we may think of ourselves as loving, caring, feeling, persons and we may try to express this only through words, kind deeds, supportive acts, but we have missed one of the basic ways to communicate these to those we live with or love. The "hands off" policy is a good one for subways, buses, and elevators but is a terrible one for family, relatives, and close friends. One of our basic needs is "skin nourishment." Whom do you know who doesn't feel better after a back rub, neck rub, temple rub, or loving hug? Touch is the medium of human bonding. Like glue it holds together families, couples, teams, and friends. Touch is a language. It can speak of violence and disrespect or it can speak of care and affection. Christ used the language of touch as a language of love. An embrace, a kiss of peace, a simple handshake, done with confidence carries more words of love than a volume of books.

And so we ask: Am I giving, being creative, productive for others?

The fourth concept of wellness to promote spirituality centers around receiving — **being willing to be ministered to.**

Whatever is alive has a tendency not only to give but also to receive, to take what is offered to it by others. A live acorn will take in nourishment from the soil, air, and sun. By receiving, it undergoes change toward fuller life. A teacher who is influenced by the students becomes a better teacher. Parents who are willing to be changed by their children stay alive as parents. Husband and wife not only have the urge to give love to the other; to be alive they must also receive what the other offers. A dead body is no longer influenced by the people around it. It receives nothing from them, undergoes nothing because of them. Life would make that body open to receive from others.

Every day by just being present to one another, people heal one another.

Do we have a connectedness network? Do we have someone in our life who is our confidant? Someone who is our intellectual stimulator? Someone who generates fun, a sense of newness and adventure? Do we have someone with whom we can do pure, joyous, non-productive goofing around? Someone with whom we can play, laugh, let go, be silly, uninhibited, care-free, exhilarated, and happy? To have such a presence in our life is God's gift to us. It frees us from the struggle of "going it alone" at great cost to ourselves and to others. Every day by just being present to one another, people heal one another. As God is the healing presence in Reconciliation and Anointing, we can attempt to imitate Him in our connectedness network. We are all joined to the others in our lives by gossamer threads as Sidney Simon calls them. Validation, given and received will weave a steel cable around the gossamer threads. For the sake of a strong spirituality, weave a cable around the gossamer threads that join us to those we love and to those who love us. We may never do it perfectly but we never do the really important thing in life perfectly. But let us do it in a fresh and unrehearsed way, from a generous if somewhat flawed heart.

And so we ask: Am I willing to receive from others? To be ministered to?

Taking stock of where we are in our overall wellness process will help us realize that our growth in spirituality may be subtle but it must be real. When relationship with God, self, and others becomes important enough to

us, we begin to work at it. We devote energy and attention to our spiritual lives. A weak wish for things to get better is not enough to break old habits. A powerful hunger to know and to do God's will can motivate us to be aggressive in building new ways of living, to grapple with the values and virtues involved in changing.

Each of us is a gift of God. When we give a gift to a meaningful person in our lives, we hope they will like and appreciate the gift we give them. God is like this, too. He wants us to like and appreciate the gift we are, despite our shortcomings. The gift of ourselves as persons involves physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. If we do not take care of these needs realistically with God's help, we will experience an unwellness, if you will. How true, then, for each of us are the words of Bill Wilson, "If you get well right, you should get well all over!"

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