

Life As Our Spiritual Teacher

Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

May 7, 2023

Wherever you go, there you are.

This aphorism derives from a stanza in a devotional book written by Thomas à Kempis in Latin in the 1400s. The book was entitled *The Imitation of Christ*, and the stanza goes like this: "...run where you will; for wherever you go, you take yourself with you, and you will always find yourself."¹

Wherever you go, there you are.

More recently, it was the foundation of Jon Kabat-Zinn's book, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*, published in 1994.

He wrote:

When it comes right down to it, wherever you go, there you are. Whatever you wind up doing, that's what you've wound up doing. Whatever you are thinking right now, that's what's on your mind. Whatever has happened to you, it has already happened. The important question is, how are you going to handle it? In other words, "Now what?"²

Life is our greatest spiritual teacher. This is good news.

That is not to say there are not hardships in life. Of course, there are. None of us escape them. Some people have tragedies that are beyond our imagination. Yet even if such extreme things don't happen to us, we all experience hardships in life, such as unrequited love, loss of physical capacities, or dreams that didn't come to pass. We are also given countless opportunities to experience great joy, wonder, and even awe. Life

1 <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2020/11/22/where-you-go/#:~:text=Wherever%20you%20go%2C%20there%20you%20are.%E2%80%9D&text=In%20conclusion%2C%20a%20precursor%20appeared,State%20University%20in%20Hazleton%2C%20Pennsylvania.>

2 Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (New York: Hachette Books, January 5, 2005).

offers us chances every day to grow, to learn, and to deepen. We like to think that we're open and growing, and yet, are we? Or are we habituated, reactive, and blind to our own stagnation? (This is often the human condition.)

What have you learned today? When did you last admit you were wrong or change your mind about something you were sure was true? How have you changed over the last year or two?

Last week I had the delightful and illuminating experience of Zooming with a friend from middle and high school. We hadn't talked in more than thirty years. We laughed harder in that hour than I have in a long time. I realized that in many ways I am the same person that I was then. "You used to cry thinking you were not pretty." She said to me, "Do you remember the first time we drank together?" And she said, "You were such a hard worker." I also realized how much I had changed, from no longer lying on the floor zipping my skintight Jordache jeans, to things much deeper and more complex.

Regardless of what has happened or will happen in our lives, life is our greatest spiritual teacher. Our teacher doesn't require us to have or spend a lot of money or travel to exotic places, and it is surely not to be found in one human spiritual teacher.

Some of you may have learned from great spiritual teachers and traveled to faraway places. These may have been amazing experiences, though we know the higher our expectations of such trips, the less likely they are to meet the expectations. I traveled to Israel and Palestine while in seminary, hoping to find and reconcile with the religion of my childhood. I was so hopeful. While there, I got lost in crowds of people and became more disappointed and disillusioned. My work in contemplative practices on a meditation cushion combined with the work we do in justice, such as with our Afghan guests, have done more to help me understand spirituality than any trip.

There is nothing inherently wrong with great

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expeditions and pilgrimages. They are beautiful, as long as we realize that most important is the body, mind, and spirit of the one who is taking the trip. In other words, we are the vessel. We must be open to what life is teaching us.

You may be thinking right about now, "I know, life is our greatest spiritual teacher."

I ask you then, what is life teaching you? What are your lessons...right now and over the past few years? What are your lifetime lessons?

These are big questions and important ones for us to spend time considering. If we don't, we run the risk of being on automatic pilot. We will live more like a robot than a human. "You won't be living life, you'll be living mind," says Michael Singer in his classic book *The Untethered Soul*.³ "Life is the greatest spiritual teacher."⁴

What do we mean when we say "spiritual"? There are many ways to answer that question. Let's start by acknowledging that religion and spirituality are different. Religion is hopefully a pathway to spirituality, but in and of itself, religion is not spirituality.

Spirituality means living with purpose, but not just any purpose—spirituality means living with authentic, beautiful purpose. Purpose without authenticity and beauty is simply function. Purpose with authenticity and beauty fills us with emotions like gratitude, belonging, and passion. It is meaningful, humbling, awe inspiring. Our purpose will almost certainly change over the course of our lives, but its beauty remains.

Beauty can be tender such as how we feel around a young child or upon discovering a shoot of new garden growth. Beauty can be brave such as showing up for another person when they are messy, unflattering, and real. Beauty can be bold and angry, taking unpopular positions, moving us out of our comfort zone, and standing up for things we believe in.

Beauty is a sure sign of truth. Math is beautiful,

3 Michael A. Singer, Author and Peter Berkrot, Narrator, *The Untethered Soul* (Old Saybrook, CT: Tantor Audio, 2011, ©2007 Shanti Publications, Inc.).

4 Singer and Berkrot, *The Untethered Soul*.

music is beautiful, truth telling is beautiful. It may also be hard, challenging, or infuriating, but it is beautiful. Howard Thurman calls this the sound of the genuine.

Another sign of spirituality is awe. In his book *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*, Dacher Keltner reveals the importance of awe. "Awe is a feeling we have when we encounter something larger than ourselves, something vast and mysterious. In such moments you may find yourself opening to a sense of awe, a long-overlooked emotion that can inspire wonder, a deep sense of connection, and belonging to something larger than ourselves."⁵

Often we think of peak experiences when we think of awe, but Keltner's research shows that we can also experience awe in everyday experiences. He has categorized these experiences into what he calls "the eight wonders of life."

First, people experience awe in relation to moral beauty. Consider the inspiration you feel when you see videos of first responders in a disaster or a child who stands up for a classmate being bullied. We also experience awe in collective effervescence, such as political rallies, or taking a group hike. We experience awe in nature, in music, in visual art, in the end of life, and in epiphanies. All of these things remind us that "we are part of many things that are much larger than the self."⁶

When we experience awe, we remember we are not the center of the universe. We are a small but critical component of the interconnected web of life. When we experience awe, says Keltner, we are more likely to be able to "quiet that interior nagging voice of the neurotic."⁷

When we are aware of our small but mighty

5 *The Steeple Newsletter*, May 3, 2023.

6 Dacher Keltner, *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*, (New York: Penguin Audio, Audible Audiobook – Unabridged (Author, Narrator)), January 3, 2023.

7 Keltner, *Awe*.

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self, absolutely essential and nonessential at the same time, we lose interest in the automation of life. We awaken from our robotic trance and are better tuned to hear what Annie Lighthart called in our reading this morning, the second music. We realize that it's all here. *Life is our greatest spiritual teacher.*

Everyone is invited to join a program put on by our Exploring Elderhood Together on Thursday, May 18, from 1 to 2:30pm in the Lower Meetinghouse. There FRS member Mark Hodgson will lead a discussion and exploration of Keltner's book.

Life is our greatest spiritual teacher, even when the teaching is hard to swallow or when we wish something else was being offered.

What is your life offering you? What is life teaching you? How do you choose to respond?

Amen and blessed be.