

Service As Our Spiritual Teacher

Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

May 28, 2023

I have admired the work and philosophy of Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen for decades. Her book *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal*, first published in 1996, has become a classic, helping an unknown number of people over the past twenty-seven years. Her down-to-earth encouragement for us to see the wholeness in everything was planted in her largely by her grandfather, an Orthodox Rabbi who was also, as she described him, a “flaming mystic.”

In her interviews, Remen describes her grandfather as someone who had a relationship with the world. He lived his life asking the world questions and watching for answers as they appeared. To him, the world was alive; it was a presence some call God. He taught Rachel that she was enough as well as how to celebrate her inherent gifts. He reflected her wholeness back to her and taught her that she, like all people, was a blessing.

When Remen was four years old, her grandfather told her a story that framed the rest of her life and helped her see the importance of recognizing wholeness in everyone. The name of the story is “The Birthday of the World.” It is a Jewish creation story.

In the beginning there was only the holy darkness, the Ein Sof (No End), the source of life.

And then, in the course of history, at a moment in time, this world, the world of a thousand things, emerged from the heart of the holy darkness as a great ray of light.

And then, perhaps because this is a Jewish story, there was an accident, and the vessels containing the light of the world, the wholeness of the world, broke.

And the wholeness of the world, the light of the world, was scattered into a thousand fragments of light, and they fell into all events and all people, where they remain deeply hidden until this very day.

Now, according to my grandfather, the whole human race is a response to this accident.

We are here because we are born with the capacity to find the hidden light in all events and all people, to lift it up and make it visible once again, and thereby to restore the innate wholeness of the world.

It’s a very important story for our times.

And this task is called Tikkun Olam in Hebrew. It’s the restoration of the world, and this is, of course, a collective task.

It involves all people who have ever been born, all people presently alive, all people yet to be born.

We are all healers of the world. And that story opens a sense of possibility.

It’s not about healing the world by making a huge difference. It’s about healing the world that touches you.

According to this creation story, we are all born with a piece of the holy in us, as well as the promise and blueprint of wholeness. This belief is true in our Universalist tradition as well as in the Jewish and other world religions.

Our task is not to believe that we must heal the world; for we cannot. The task is, as Remen says, to *heal the world we touch*. We do this by turning in love and mutual respect to all who are around us and honoring the wholeness within them, even when they don’t see their own wholeness, perhaps especially when the person fails to see or know the wholeness within.

This act of turning and healing the world we touch by seeing its potential and celebrating the unique expression of life’s holiness and wholeness in every aspect of creation is called Tikkun Olam. From Remen’s perspective, Tikkun Olam is synonymous with service. I believe that true service is as much about *how* you view and treat the world and the people around you as it is about *what* you do. True service is an attitude and an action. It is a recognition that all we do can be service. Everything.

How we greet one another, show delight to see another person, or put down our phone to be fully

Service As Our Spiritual Teacher

May 28, 2023 *page 2*

present when someone tells us about their day, all of that is service. Delivering groceries from the food pantry, cooking a meal for your family, sending a note to someone to say that you care are all service. Our life can be our prayer.

To be in service to the world and those around you is an act of collective liberation. It is a subversive way to resist the capitalistic tendency toward greed and an antidote to the Western addiction to perfectionism. It is the medicine for the soul sickness of believing we are not enough.

When we see and honor the wholeness in another, we are being a blessing, and we are blessed. We serve one another by being that blessing for each other and celebrating the blessing that each person is to the world.

Who has been a blessing in your life?

Who sees your wholeness and in so doing serves your highest expression?

Who do you choose to bless? Whose wholeness do you see, and for whom is it more challenging for you to see their wholeness?

This way of seeing the world as a blessing, seeing the world and its every part as whole and full of potential, is wisdom. We all have wisdom within us. At our best, we all know that others are a blessing. At our very highest we know that we are a blessing too. And we choose to serve and connect with and from that place of wholeness.

We can choose to bless others by seeing their wholeness. We can choose to serve. We can choose to be wise.

It's in every one of us

to be wise

to find our heart.

Open up both your eyes,

We can all know everything.

Without ever knowing why,

It's in every one of us

By and by

(others join in singing)

Join along if you like and as we do so, let's join

together in a circle around the sanctuary, maybe even holding hands as we listen to the words.

(after circle call people back to their seats)

Amen and blessed be.