

HOLISTIC SPIRITUALITY AND THE CHRISTIAN BROTHERS

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Einstein, the physicist, remarked that we did not need to think more in this age, but we need to think differently: we need a new paradigm for the sciences. Carl Rogers, the psychologist, calls for a new paradigm in the human sciences. Fr. Matthew Fox, O.P., a theologian, calls for a new paradigm in theology. Much has been gained to this end by looking to the American Indian and to the Orient. The new paradigm sees life holistically: as unified, interrelated, interdependent — a rhythmic, cyclical, dynamic harmony between polarities (*yin* and *yang*). Jesus was born in a culture of a similar perspective. From the late Plato and through Augustine, however, thinking in the West evolved to be dualistic; and with the writings of Descartes and Newton the separation of body and mind and spirit became absolute. The body and all of nature (including women) were denigrated as being nothing but machines to be manipulated and eventually dominated and brutalized. In the language of the Orient, the West exaggerated *yang* and diminished *yin*. An imbalance and disharmony was had.

What does that have to do with spirituality and the Christian Brothers? My contention is that our spirituality suffers from this inheritance. It is overly intellectual, and in its denigration of the body (and therefore nature) is incomplete and inadequate. One needs simply to remember the lives of the saints as portrayed by hagiographers of dualistic thought. Saints were praised for not having seen the windows of the church, so great was their asceticism. Confessors to women were touted as never having looked a woman in the eyes. With the elevation of the intellect, spirituality suffered from a lack of grounding—was a thing more of image. Perfection was the image that was used. But perfection is an abstraction, an illusion. Illusions cannot be lived by human beings: and when it is tried and the illusion becomes apparent, depression, disillusionment occurs. Nothing in nature is perfect: but in nature harmony exists. The Indo-European root, *hal*, gives us the words whole, hale, hearty, holy, health and hello. A saint is *sano*: whole. Wholeness is about harmony—a dynamic functioning of parts in a system: it is not about perfection.

What are some of the practical applications that might be offered to Brothers about living a whole life? It has been my observation that much of what we did in formation and our lives previously were the right things done for the wrong reasons. The difference is in the attitude with which life is lived; we need to think differently. The difference comes with adjustment. Fritz Perls, founder of Gestalt Therapy suggested that we «Lose our minds and come to our senses!» With the marriage of the body and the mind, we have an organismic wisdom—a whole knowing. «If the Lord speaks today, harden not your hearts». Much of the new direction in Humanistic Psychology and its psychotherapy has to do with an emphasis on the body. This is a result of the general fact that people do not listen to their bodies. They have bodies, but they are not their bodies.

People would sooner have their symptoms diagnosed as a physical ailment than one of the mind—the mind is really me; the body is not, and therefore there seems to be less shame involved. Re-owning our bodies (and all of nature) puts us in touch with the Cosmos which is made of the same stuff. «The Kingdom of Heaven is within». It is in our bodies that we live in the moment, can hear the stirrings of the spirit, have the accumulated wisdom of our predecessors. Alexander Lowen, the founder of Bio-energetics, writes that faith is rooted in the body. How else does one know? Where else is revelation made apparent? One need only to read Meister Eckhart or Julian of Norwich to see that the mystics were practical and of the earth. With the collusion of the Church and Science: the spirit belongs to the Church; the body and materiality belong to science—we relegated the spiritual life to the intellect and lost touch with the rich mystical tradition of Christianity up to the 14th century.

Therefore, the following samples are suggested by way of thinking and living our spiritual lives differently. Fasting from foods cleanses the body which eats its own poisons; thereby creating a cleaner receptacle for the whisperings of the Spirit. Chanting resonates—includes the body-mind. Chanting in a foreign language diminishes the tendency of the vernacular to address the intellect. Talking dulls our senses; reflect on sermons one has heard. The body-mind is opened, made receptive by sound such as Gregorian chant (which has on occasion been the vehicle of conversion for individuals). The body was designed for movement; sitting still needs to be varied or atrophy sets in. In prayer this suggests that we have alternatives to stalls or pews which

physically and psychologically tend to imprison the souls. Movement opens the potential of the person to hear within. Note how this emphasis shifts from the tendency to put the source of truth outside: in catechisms and pulpits. Conversion rarely comes from exhortations. For every action there is an equal and opposite re-action. Force of oratory has short lived and often adversarial effects.

We are what we eat. Eating of red meats, sugars, chemically treated foods, mineral-depleted grains dulls the senses and leaves one feeling less than alive. How can one be joyful in the Lord when the body is clogged and not free to be spontaneous. Spontaneity is from the body. In this spontaneity is playfulness, creativity, compassion, free flow of energy—aliveness in the Spirit. This body needs to exercise, to move, to breathe, to obtain adequate oxygen (aerobic effect), and to open up the free flow of muscles and emotions. With the typical routine of the average Brother—as with most professionals—we become sedentary and preoccupied with thought. While we are intellectualizing, we are not capable of focusing on and not present to our inner (kinesthetic) senses. To this extent we lose out on the moment, and the opportunities for awareness—and it is awareness that frees us from the restrictions of life conditioning and our environment. Because of the body-mind-spirit connection (touch the one and you touch the other), what we do to our bodies is done to our mind and spirit, and vice-versa. How we think and how we formulate our attitudes is incorporated into our nervous system and musculature. Our character is written into our bodies. Through the use of many possible body-mind modalities such as Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique, Rolfing and massage, we may find the more natural and graceful way our body-minds may be in the world. Trauma of earlier life and rigidity of character can be freed, often together with counseling, creating an open temple for the divine presence. Massage may be thought of as an exterior meditation. The Chinese have a meditation form in *tai chi*. Might we not do something similar?

The modern physicist is dialoguing today with the mystic and theologian. They are noting the unity of being at the atomic level. In the new age, we are at a crisis of survival as a human race. We, as Brothers, see ourselves in crisis in terms of a Congregation—will we survive? The Chinese characters for crisis are composed of two words: *danger* and *opportunity*. We are being thrust into a challenge. If we do not creatively accept the challenge we will surely not survive on any level—including the religious life. Many are hungering for rich spirituality with their whole being. «As the hart pants after water; so my soul pants for Thee, O Lord». In misguided ways, youth look to alcohol and drugs. Jung called alcoholism a «lowgrade spiritual disease». Perhaps we could look to this notion as we study the problem of alcoholism within religious orders.

The suggestion is being made here that true spirituality will be enhanced by the perspective that sees the unity of the cosmos—that sees an Incarnate spirituality. «The Word was made flesh». As Francis knew, the birds and beasts, sun and moon and all of creation are our Brothers and Sisters. It was Francis who apologized to «Brother Ass» for abusing it, on the eve of his death. It was Francis who called Death, Brother; knowing that death is an integral part of life. Our spirituality will, then, make us ecologists who speak for the rights of those creatures which have no voice in a society that vaunts the intellect and the wealthy. When the Earth and the feminine (*yin*) are diminished, then we are all diminished. Do we, as Brothers, adequately own our feminine component? Holistic thinking is not linear thinking, but cyclical; it sees the interconnectedness of all events. We cannot be unconcerned about the proliferation of nuclear weapons or the suppression of people's rights. Death is not the end of the line, for us, but the cyclical dimension of life with its continuous comings and goings. Poverty will mean simplicity when we own our bodies; bodies know that they need but the basics of food, exercise, rest, and human connection—not the illusions of images. Obedience comes from the word *ob-audire*; to listen. Listening requires being «yin» or soft to our inner and outer worlds. Holistic spirituality knows that we do not end at our skins, and that when we are most alone (celibate) we are most one with all. It has long been said that grace builds on nature. In a changing world—a new age—perhaps more of the young will see and be attracted to whole men who practice in the world such spirituality as this.

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