

Spiritual Hunger



Mother Teresa, responding to a question about her impressions of the United States, said that we are poorer here than even the “poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta.” She said that Americans are spiritually poor, worse by far than the worst material poverty.

A Tibetan lama escaped Tibet by walking to India over the Himalayan mountains in snow and ice, wearing peasant clothing to avoid being noticed by the occupying Chinese forces. He witnessed his countrymen and fellow monks being humiliated, tortured, and killed. He lost his home, his monastery, and his culture. Living in a refuge camp in Northern India, he saw thousands more Tibetan exiles die from tuberculosis and other infectious diseases. However, on his first teaching trip to the West when he was driven around Europe, tears ran down his cheeks. Why? Because of the suffering he perceived in the hearts and minds of the Europeans. In Katmandu, Nepal, one of the poorest countries in the world, a young couple and the husband’s two brothers shared a long, narrow room with a cement floor and sheet-rock walls over the garage of a wealthy American ex-patriot. Compared to the conditions of their village, this home was luxurious. Two weeks before in that room, the wife lost her baby in childbirth, a common occurrence in a place where pre-natal care often consists of tying a train ticket to the abdomen of the mother to speed the baby’s passage into the world. While visiting the country, I was invited to join a family celebration of a feast day for Durga, a Hindu goddess. They draped a garland of marigolds around my neck, daubed a crimson caste mark between my eyebrows, and offered me the best of their food. Holiday foods are great treats in a place where every day each of two meals is dalbat (white rice with a tablespoon or two of lentils). Their eyes shone as they watched me enjoy their feast. I had never seen such simple, uncomplicated joy in adults. It was the first time I understood what Mother Teresa meant.

Spiritual malaise

I started treating eating disorders in the late 1970s when there was little scientific literature on the topic, save Hilde Bruch’s book on anorexia nervosa. I learned in consultation with other professionals and from my clients, all of us flying by the seats of our pants. Very soon it seemed apparent that the suffering I saw in the people who came to me was not really about their weight, their eating, or even their family history. I didn’t know what to call what I was seeing, so I named it “spiritual malaise.” It reminded me of “non-nutritional marasmus,” the wasting deaths in babies who are fed but not held

or cuddled. I saw it not just in people who were under-eating, but also in those who felt pressured to lose weight to conform to a conventional ideal of beauty or because health care professionals had urged it. My clients, and indeed, my culture, were starving. I have remained curious about what it is for which we hunger.

We can see evidence of this starvation everywhere, not just in our obsession with body image and food. Our food portions grow larger as our ideals of an acceptable body grow smaller. New drugs, both pharmaceutical and recreational, are created to give easy, instant results, even with the risk of serious negative side effects and powerful addiction. Alcohol and cigarettes are marketed to young people for whom “partying” means binge drinking until passing out. We buy storage bins, boxes, and rental space to hold stuff we don’t use. We drive ever-larger cars that use more and more gasoline and park them in three-, four-, or five-car garages. Our homes, cars, closets, and garages can’t get big enough. We collect—dolls, coins, jewelry, shoes, make-up, cars, kitchen gadgets, and knickknacks of all sorts—but never have enough. The media feed us ever more stimulating fare—car chases, murders, loud music, special effects, people doing dangerous things out of greed, average people being made-over with plastic surgery and liposuction. We think nothing of people risking their lives to have weight loss surgery because we all feel the stigma of fatness from the media, medicine, and the government. We prowl the malls and internet looking for more things, more food, more action movies. We travel to exotic locales from Lahaina to Istanbul, yet spend much of our time there shopping in chain stores for t-shirts. We text on our phones while ignoring the people we are actually sitting with. Three quarters of the world’s population starve while we celebrate the promise of the next diet pill. Our leaders and the media often refer to us as “consumers” rather than “people” or “citizens,” and, indeed, we consume the resources of the earth like insatiable termites, as if there were no tomorrow.

Why do we starve spiritually?

Is this hunger the result of the advertising industry, born in the US in the early 20th century, that tells us, hundreds of times a day, directly and indirectly through image and suggestion, that we won’t be happy until we buy the next object or adventure, or until we lose weight? Or is advertising merely the spawn of our materialistic, post-industrial age, where the bottom line in business is profit rather than quality of life, and the multi-billion dollar diet industry, like many industries, promises things it can seldom, if ever, deliver? Does the hunger come from the disintegration of our families as we migrate from place to place, leaving our parents, siblings, cousins, and grown children to sit behind individual phones, computers, or TV screens? Does time pressure exacerbate the hunger as parents work long hours to put food on

the table, or as “luckier” ones struggle to buy bigger houses and cars and shuttle kids from soccer practice to ballet, leaving ever less “quality time”? Or maybe it is the implicit promise that we should all feel happy all the time, and we are just a pill, potion, possession, or a few pounds away from realizing that? Whatever the cause, in our culture, nothing is ever enough. “You can never be too thin or too rich,” has become our unconscious driving force, replacing meaning, love, and fulfillment as our goals in life.

In the Buddhist tradition there is a concept, *Duhkha*, which in part means the ordinary suffering we endure when, driven by habit, we constantly look to the next moment for fulfillment, rather than enjoying things as they are in the present moment. We might notice it while we are eating a meal and thinking about the next one, or when we don’t taste the bite in our mouths because we are hurrying to take another. We “can’t wait” to grow up, take our first drink, graduate, get a job, marry, buy a house, have children, get the kids raised, and retire. While wishing our kids would grow out of a difficult phase, we miss many of the precious, fleeting moments of their childhood. We hurry to our next destination, perhaps talking on the phone as we drive, never noticing our surroundings as we whiz by. Or while vacationing, we plan the next diversion or entertainment rather than savoring the one at hand. In short, in our endless craving for more, we seldom truly partake of or savor the experience of the moment.

How do we nourish ourselves spiritually?

Some of us have deliberately left the treadmill to lead simpler, more fulfilling lives. Some of us are not willing to join the media, government, and health professions in demonizing fat. It’s not easy in a time and place where most of our neighbors, co-workers, friends, and kids’ friends are still running after elusive satisfaction, and millions are dieting to reach some kind of happiness that will never come from weight loss, even if they could achieve and maintain it.

Neuroscience tells us what the religious traditions have known for millennia—that it takes deliberate, repetitive practice, doing something over and over again, to create different habits or patterns of behavior, thinking, and feeling. Regardless of what the practice is—prayer, contemplation, meditation, sacred reading (*lectio divina*), being in nature, tai chi, yoga, to name a few—taking quiet time each day in solitude enables us to stop identifying with the endless cravings of our culture and habits, to know instead our essence, the ground of our being, “the still small voice within,” however one might name it. It is this that truly nourishes.

We can begin to practice seeing our fellow creatures not as obstacles to compete with, good or bad depending on their body size, but as living beings who like ourselves wish to be happy and free of suffering, worthy of

respect and consideration. We can practice treating others and ourselves with simple kindness, regardless of size. We can begin to notice, appreciate, and find meaning in the little moments that are truly the only life we have.

This very moment, we can look up from this page, take a breath, notice our bodies as they are right now, the surfaces that support us, the clothing and air that touch our skin, our thoughts and feelings as they come and go. We can notice our breath, feeding and nourishing us. We can say, "This is enough. This is good."

Gretchen Rose Newmark, MA, RDN is a dietitian in private practice specializing in eating disorders in Portland, OR. She is trained as a Spiritual Director and also sees people who want to deepen spiritually. She teaches meditation and hatha yoga.