

Are You Awake?

Given the title of my talk, I want to make sure this morning that you folks don't misinterpret its intent. I am not suggesting that some of you are preparing to hit the snooze button as soon as I stand up here. Now perhaps you are and that, of course, is your privilege but that is not where this talk is headed and it's certainly not what I am implying.

So where is this talk headed? This morning I have two objectives. One objective is to introduce Joan Chittister, a remarkable woman. She is a Benedictine abbess, popular lecturer, prolific writer, and in the words of the Jewish rabbi Lawrence Kushner, "one of the great spiritual teachers of our generation." She will be our guide as we briefly explore five eternal questions assisted by insights from five religious traditions - Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Islam in that order.

I will illustrate my second objective with a brief Sufi story. Sufis, as you may know, are Muslim ascetics and mystics.

"Tell us what you got from enlightenment," the speaker said. "Did you become divine?"

"No, not divine," the holy one said.

"Did you become a saint?"

"Oh dear, no," the holy one said.

"Then what did you become?" the seeker asked.

The holy one answered, "I became awake."

Thus, my second objective is to examine the question which is both the title of my talk and the thesis of Joan Chittister. You see, for her it is our task to become awake. Now, a brief pause for an editorial comment. I will be using the word "God" several times in this talk. That shouldn't be a big surprise considering we are using a Benedictine abbess as our guide. But I recognize that speaking of God may be uncomfortable for some of us. If so, let me suggest two other ways of stating the same idea. I have borrowed these thoughts from Thomas Berry. First, think of that word as an expression of the ultimate mystery of things. If that is not helpful, think of that word as reflecting something beyond that which we can understand adequately. OK, now back to Chittister.

Again, for her it is our task to become awake; awake to our God, awake to our world, awake to our neighbor, awake to the wisdom that is available to us. Now this suggests, at least to me, two related ideas both of which we will revisit this morning. First, if Chittister is correct that our task is to become truly awake, then we can hardly achieve that condition without consciously considering the kind of person we are attempting to become. Second, and closely related, if we take seriously our responsibility to become awake we humbly assume the implicit responsibility and endless opportunity to make our own contribution to the on-going co-creation of the world. Think of that! We each have a job to do. That's why we need to be awake.

With that background in mind let's take a look at today's first question: "What does it mean to be a spiritual person?" This question gives me an involuntary shudder. Much has been written about this and many are the proposed answers. But let's begin by stating that religion and spirituality are not the same thing but they are commonly confused and misunderstood. For example, we say, "She goes to church every Sunday. She is a very spiritual person." Maybe and maybe not. That's the equivalent of saying, "She is an excellent vocalist. She's been taking lessons for years." Now, despite these lessons, it is still possible that when she sings she

sounds like a strangled alley cat. Perhaps not likely but it is possible. The point is simply that there is typically some connection between taking voice lessons and becoming an accomplished vocalist. But it is not a necessary connection.

Religion and spirituality are like that, too. For Chittister, "Religion has to do with providing us some tools and disciplines to help us develop an awareness of God. Spirituality has to do with transforming the way we live as a result of that awareness." Now to be honest about this, others would state the differences with other words. For example, Rabbi David Wolpe would say, "Spirituality is what you feel...religion is what you do." In a similar vein, Dom Helder Camera has said, "Be careful how you live your life for it is the only Gospel others will read." We could go on and on. But this morning let's stick with Chittister. Again, religion has to do with providing us some tools and disciplines to help us develop an awareness of God. Spirituality has to do with transforming the way we live as a result of that awareness.

Ancient Hindu spiritual masters understood this question and confusion very well. Listen to one of them.

"Once upon a time as the Master lay dying his disciples begged him for their sakes not to go. 'But if I do not go,' the Master said, 'how will you ever see?'

'But what are we seeing now that we will not see when you are gone?' the disciples pressed him.

And the spiritual Master said, 'All I ever did was sit by the river bank handing out river water. After I'm gone, I trust you will notice the river.'

In other words, I trust you will be awake.

The story draws a sharp distinction between religion and spirituality. The disciples wanted someone, something to follow. They wanted a law they could live by, a person who could give them orders, a master who would take responsibility for their guidance and their virtue. The master, on the other hand, wanted them to internalize his spirit, not simply to imitate his actions.

The master's meaning is clear; religion is not about following a minister or making a god out of religious practices. Religion is not simply adherence to a code of law that is an end in itself. In the immortal words of Marcus Borg, "You can believe all the right things and still be a jerk." "Religion will not, of itself, take you to the other side."

Religion is meant to be a bridge to God, a vehicle to understanding. Religion without the spirit it is meant to preserve can and not infrequently does become positively irreligious. As we all know, religion can be a very sinful thing. Spirituality is what takes us beyond religious practice to the purpose of religion which, as some would put it, is the awareness of the sacred in the mundane. Like that thought. The spiritual person is one who breathes in and out the spirit of the God toward which she moves.

Now we'll turn to Buddhist wisdom in response to our second question, "Is it possible to make up for past mistakes?" We all make mistakes and I would guess that each of us - at one time or another - has wondered how to repair some damage we have caused. Chittister tells of a woman who confessed to having an intense affair and being bored with her steady, faithful, and loving husband. She was in agony. She could not leave her marriage but she also could not relinquish the other person.

Chittister advised her to make no hasty decision. Decisions made under pressure are seldom really decisions, They are more like desperate reactions. Eventually the time between appointments with Chittister lengthened and then stopped entirely.

When the woman did return to see Chittister again, months later, a new agony had replaced the old one. "The secret relationship had finally petered off into a distant but amicable friendship. The marriage never suffered from the woman's own private upheaval and was, she reported, even better than before. But now guilt ate away at her like fine acid...To tell her husband, to confess, she felt would only forever destroy the trust between them. Not to tell him left her alone carrying a burden she could never put down. Now, she said, she simply could not live with herself, unburden herself of the betrayal for which she was secretly punishing herself...It was one thing to resolve the affair, it had become entirely another to resolve the guilt that dogged at her heels ever since. The affair was over but the price to be paid for it had just begun to dawn."

"How do we fix, without doing even more damage, what in some cases never even looked broken?" How does one repair damage that no one else even knows has been done? The key is repair. Repair is not replacement. What's done is done. It can never be undone. Don't mourn mistakes of the past. Accept the newness of beginning again. Be awake to the present. Live in the present.

If we stumble, and who doesn't stumble occasionally, "our one obligation is to get up and start over." The Buddhists remind us that if the damage we have done is not satisfied in this life, it can be satisfied in the next.

We need to learn the fine art of starting over in life. Whatever we have been we can change. Whatever we want to become as a person we may. What we become in the end is the sum of what we have learned from everything we have done in the past. Life shapes us as we go. It is always possible to make up for past mistakes. "How else can we explain that so many great saints... began as great sinners?" At least a few of these were real doozies.

Now we'll turn to Jewish wisdom to help us in responding to our third question. "Why was I born?" I need to pause here for just a moment. I simply cannot wrap my mind around the life of Mary Louise. Joan Chittister had a problem here, too. She tells of first meeting Mary Louise. She was shocked... "the tragedy of it, the futility of it." I am not so much shocked as I am nonplussed. As one for whom physical exercise has been a defining part of my entire life I find the example of Mary Louise bordering on the incomprehensible. I can barely grasp the enormity of her situation. I cannot honestly relate to it. I can only marvel at the life she led.

Mary Louise had been in a wheelchair since the age of four. She couldn't stand. She couldn't even sit up on her own without a steel body brace. She couldn't move more than one thumb. Think of it. One thumb! She used that one thumb to operate her chair. She couldn't turn her head. But she did know how to live.

She danced, went to movies, dined out with friends, wrote letters, gave spiritual direction to people who thought they had problems until they met her, she traveled, she took regular vacations, and earned a degree in English literature. She lived all her life with people feeding her, bathing her, bedding her, and dressing her. But she died fully alive and her life was celebrated by people who packed the chapel - friends, clients, and people who had helped her

through life but who over the years had found it difficult to remember the wheelchair. I cannot begin to comprehend or explain.

Mary Louise demonstrated that while she could never take life for granted, she did have choices in her life. "Being born is not about choice." Living well is about choice. We have no say in where we are born but the choices we make as life unfolds determine the quality of the life we live. It is what we do with what we have, not where, when, or how we are born that determine the quality of the life we live. It is what we do with what we have, not our social status, our income, our physical endowments that make the difference. "There are many obstacles to physical development. There are no obstacles to human development."

"Why was I born?" For Chittister the answer is simple. You were born to finish what God has left undone. That may or may not satisfy us but a noted Jewish scholar puts it this way. "If someone comes to you and asks your help, you shall not turn him off with pious words, saying 'Have faith and take your troubles to God.' You shall act as if there were no God, as if there were only one person in all the world who could help this person - only yourself." "That's why you were born. Are you awake to the person in need?"

Now our fourth question: "What does Christian theology and its emphasis on love have to say about the question, "What is the purpose of life?" Here is another true story. I cannot imagine a more fitting response to the question, "What is the purpose of life" than the response illustrated by this brief story. For me, without a word being spoken this singular act says it all.

It was a cold, damp fall day on the shore of Lake Erie. The soup kitchen was always over-full on those kinds of days. Over-full with the hungry and chilled. The Sister at the counter that day didn't know the well-dressed man in the long, black overcoat that well. He had been there before - with left-overs from an office party, with an envelope containing a check, with pitching in to help fill the pantry shelves. This day he came with several hams and, seeing the size of the crowd, he stayed to fill plates in the serving line.

As he got ready to leave he noticed one of the guests sitting at the end of a table with his legs pressed against the heating element. His open-toed summer sandals were soaking wet. In one quick motion the man in the overcoat and silk scarf bent down, removed his shoes and socks and gave them to the Sister. He quickly walked out in his bare feet. "Wait," the Sister called, running after him holding his shoes and socks. "You can't go...without these. It's cold out there." The man kept walking and called back, "I know, that's why I left them."

In one wordless act all the words in the gospel, all the vocabulary about poverty, generosity, the love for others came together. If religion is what you do, his religion is very clear. What would we have done? Would we have even noticed the man with soaking wet summer open-toed sandals?

The Christian faith is quite clear. The garden we inherit, life as we receive it, like the garden of Adam and Eve is incomplete. Life is simply the responsibility of each of us to make our own contribution to the on-going co-creation of the world. Let's think about that one more time. Life is simply the responsibility of each of us to make our own contribution to the on-going co-creation of the world. Would we have seen this sandal-clad man? Sometimes, of course, we choose not to see. There is, after all, a cost to seeing. If you see you might have to relate to that person - as one human soul to another.

Do we pride ourselves in being self-made women and men? Do we expect others to carry their own weight? To be self-sufficient? I expect many of us do. We are being sorely tested in a society where we refer to medical insurance for babies and daycare for working mothers and food stamps for under-paid families as “welfare for the poor” but then fail to call agricultural subsidies and corporate bailouts and tax breaks for the wealthy “welfare for the rich.”

We came into this world naked and alone. We survived on what others gave us. We still survive on the work of countless others every day of our lives. If the question is “What is the purpose of life?” the answer must be that the purpose of life for each of us is to be a life-giving part of it ourselves. Each of us has work to do in service to others. We are put here to do our part.

Finally, we turn to Islam to help us answer our fifth and final question, “What is important in life?” It is surely no accident that religious literature from every major tradition uses “journey” as a spiritual metaphor for human life. What is life all about? None of us is born finished. What should I be concentrating on? What and whom am I trying to become?

“Youth is important.” It must be. We spend millions of dollars trying at least to preserve its appearance.

“Beauty is important.” As a society we spend vast sums on trying to improve our physical appearance.

“Money is important.” A certain amount is absolutely necessary. Beyond some level, money can become more of a burden than a necessity unless it is creatively used in service to others.

“Relationships are important.” If built on love and trust they are truly life-enhancing. If built on social affectation and public networks they seldom last.

“Security is important.” Everyone deserves a basic level of security. But security can become a dull companion.

“Power and influence are important.” Both are also seductive and ego-enhancing.

Consider this. Making decisions about all the little things we will do with our lives is one thing. Deciding who we want to become as a person as we do these little things is a very different proposition. To put that slightly differently - what we will spend our lives doing is often far less important than what we will end up being. Do we agree with that? Do we ever think about that? It might be helpful to recall the admonition of Forrest Church to the effect that “awakening is not a moment, but an ongoing process.” In other words becoming awake is a journey.

Great spiritual traditions all warn us to distinguish between doing and becoming. I began this talk with a brief Sufi story and now I will conclude with another one. “Once upon a time there was an elder who was respected for his piety and virtue. Whenever anyone asked him how he had become so holy he always responded, ‘I know what is in the Qur’an.’ No matter what misfortune befell him - and many did - sickness, robbery, and near starvation his answer was always the same. ‘I know what is in the Qur’an.’”

“When the old man died” his disciples “raced one another to his hut to find out for themselves what was in his Qur’an. ‘Well, what is it?’ they shouted to the first disciple who reached the hut. The disciple holding the book looked up from it amazed and said with wonder in his voice, ‘What is in this Qur’an are notes on every page, two pressed flowers, and a letter from a friend.’ “

Notes on every page. “Notes in the margins of our scriptures remind us to look again at what we are, at what we are called to be” Do we spend time with any valued source of inspiration and learning?

Two pressed flowers. “Memories of past good days remain in memory and heart long after the event has ended... The holy life cultivates those moments. They are the heartbeat of the universe. They make us glad to be alive...They remind us that whatever the tenor of a given day, we have known beauty once and we can find it again.”

A letter from a friend. Do we write letters anymore? Not emails, letters. Does anyone write letters any more? Do any of us treasure a letter we have received at some point in our life? I do. “...letters from our friends touch us so that we might eventually learn to touch others...Our letters remind us that it is what and whom we have loved that, in the end, shapes the quality of our lives.” Let me repeat that. It is what and whom we have loved that, in the end, shapes the quality of our lives.

What things are really important in your life? The answer depends on what is in your Qur’an. What is in your heart? What kind of person are you trying to become? Are you awake?