

A New Spiritual Quest
A Message by James R. Newby
Text: II Corinthians 4:16-18

We are living in a most interesting time. It is a time of transition and change when everything is open to question, even the most basic spiritual pillars undergirding Western Civilization. In short, the well-defined patterns of life which have sustained generations, no longer hold the meaning that they once did.

I have felt, and I have witnessed experientially a new spirituality developing. New spiritual possibilities are being sought. Millions of pilgrims have set out on an inward spiritual quest which, they hope, will help to define their lives and give them new meaning. What this new generation of restless seekers hopes to find is inner peace amidst the conflict and anxiety that fills their lives; a new hope amidst the despair that has for too long defined their journeys; clarity amidst the confusion of media messages, and a passion for life which will sustain them in all that they do. It is a spiritual drama which is being enacted within all of us. “Out in front of us,” wrote Thomas Kelly, “is the drama of people and of nations, seething, struggling, laboring, dying. Upon this tragic drama our eyes are all set in anxious watchfulness and in prayer. But

within the silences of the souls of persons an eternal drama is ever being enacted, in these days as well as in others. And on the outcome of this inner drama rests, ultimately, the outer pageant of history.”

The “inner drama” of which the Quaker Thomas Kelly has so beautifully written is forever unfolding. In many ways he echoes the words of St. Augustine who wrote following the destruction of Rome: “All earthly cities are vulnerable. People build them and people destroy them. At the same time there is the *City of God* which people did not build and cannot destroy, and which is everlasting.”

As the new spiritual inner quest emerges out of the chaos in which so many are living, certain basic themes are becoming prevalent. The three that I will share this morning do not encompass the entirety of what is occurring on this new spiritual journey, but I believe that they are primary:

First is the quest for a personal relationship with God. At the core of the new spirituality is the desire to connect with the Infinite, or, to know and be known by God. There is a tremendous spiritual hunger today for an experience with a God who is personal, not remote; who moves us emotionally and not merely intellectually, and whose spirit can be a constant source of strength in a material world which is ever changing.

The plea to “Make God Personal” is one that is being made in ever greater intensity. People want to know God *experientially*.

Christian history and in particular, Quaker history, is filled with reformation and renewal experiences which begin with a movement back to the basics of a personal and direct experience with the Living God. Overemphasis on ritual, debate over peripheral issues, and the cumbersome work of institutional Christianity, have all contributed to the inner quest for a *personal spirituality*.

***Secondly, there is the quest for simplicity.* If the ups and downs of a capitalistic culture has taught us anything that is for the good, it is that we need to simplify our lives. The material and spiritual clutter which has encumbered so many, is being replaced with an emphasis on simple living, and this emphasis is intensified when one’s world view is expanded.**

One does not have to travel very far to realize how the trappings of North American wealth keeps us insulated from the other three-fourths of the world. A brief plane ride to Haiti or Belize will open one’s spiritual eyes to conditions that are difficult to imagine anyone living in. Open sewers, from which the stench will never leave you, run throughout Belize City and Port-Au-Prince, with children half-naked,

playing along these canals, spreading disease and hopelessness. To walk these streets, looking into the eyes of the residents, smelling all of the different odors that make up such a culture, having children beg from you from the moment you step into the street, until you go back to your place of residence, is to evoke the spiritual yearning for simplification. I remember one experience when Elizabeth and I were in Mexico City, and a little girl with a crippled leg came up to us, begging for a few pesos. I asked our guide, “Why can’t this little girl get her leg straightened. I know we have the medical technology.” He responded, first, her parents do not have the money for such an operation, and secondly, her mother knows that she can get more money begging from the rich North Americans if her little girl is crippled.” In the words of the familiar bumper sticker, the new spiritual seekers are trying to “live simply so that others can simply live.”

Finally, there is the quest for justice. One cannot have an authentic, transformational experience with God and simplify one’s life so that spiritual growth is given priority, and not have it issue in an all-encompassing concern for justice in the world. “True Godliness,” writes William Penn, “does not separate us from the world, but excites

our endeavors to mend it.” The quest for justice is a part of the mending process.

As one grows spiritually, certain things begin to happen. War becomes abhorrent. The physical and spiritual hunger of the poor and destitute will make your own hearts ache. What is happening in Yemen, Syria and other war-torn and third world countries around the world will haunt your thoughts in the day and your dreams at night. Each time that a cruelty is done to another—each time that someone is put down, called names or bullied to increase the worldly favor of another—your own being will cry out in empathy. *To grow spiritually is to see the world and humanity as God sees the world and humanity.*

The ways of the world encourage individualism, but growth in the spirit of Christ will accentuate the interconnectedness of all people and the care we should have for one another. This care for one another will lead us to not only *respond* to the needs of others, but to *anticipate* those needs as well. This is what it means to be on the quest for justice.

There is, indeed, an inner spiritual drama being enacted within millions of spiritual seekers today. This drama is marked by *a quest for a personal relationship with God, the quest for simplicity, and the quest for justice.* It is a drama which is unfolding within the hearts of countless

lives—lives which are awakening to new possibilities for growth and understanding in what the true meaning of life is. In the words of the Apostle Paul, “We do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day...We look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”