

Text: Psalm 25  
Title: A Full-Orbed Spirituality  
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Roger Allen Nelson

The woman who's cut my hair for 20 years is searching for a spirituality that's pragmatic, authentic, and a receptacle big enough for life's loves and losses. A lapsed Catholic, she enjoys the energetic rock-show of an evangelical mega-church, tries new age-y healing practices, and has been down an alcohol-soaked path of marriage, divorce, dating, and remarriage. She wants friends, realistic answers, and things to go her way, but she's exhausted by the search, simultaneously bored and overwhelmed by the spiritual smorgasbord of modern American life, and prays that this next AA retreat will give her what she's looking for....

I think she's like a lot of us – searching for a spirituality that can hold life's joys and sorrows, that resonates with our experience, and that's accessible.

Spirituality seems essential to being human. Every class, creed, and culture know some expression of spirituality. Except for the most strident materialist or ardent atheist, the vast majority of people believe in a spiritual reality beyond this physical reality. There's something more than just atoms, genes, and evolutionary patterns.

And human history points to a deep longing for an experience of that other reality. The story of our collective religious impulses is a long-universal story. My barber is not alone in her desire for connection to the spiritual, to a Higher Power, a god, a love....

Dear friends, the Psalms are a songbook of human spirituality. They're songs of praise and lament, blues and ballads, regal anthems of joy and desperate lonely cries. They're songs of protest and melodies of love. They give expression to the whole range of human experience and emotion, and they bear witness to an engagement with God.

But we – my barber, for example – often want something more exciting, more engaging, and more mindful of the complexities and general cussedness of the contemporary world. Reading, singing, or sitting with the Psalms requires a discipline, a patience, and an openness to a certain aesthetic.

Martin Luther counters with this line:

*The Psalter is the book of all saints; and everyone, in whatever situation he may be, finds in that situation psalms and words that fit his case, that suit him as if they were put there just for his sake, so that he could not put it better himself, or find or wish for anything better.*

Clearly a child of his sexist times, Luther sees the Psalms as a record or mouthpiece of human spirituality. They offer a full-orbed spirituality for the fullness of human experience. And that's quite a claim.

Which brings us to Psalm 25.

Psalm 25 is an acrostic.

The first letter of the first word of each verse follows the order of the Hebrew alphabet. For a largely limited or illiterate people, it served as a memorization tool. It helped get this song on people's lips and in their hearts. And, it was also meant to suggest the fullness of life:

from A to Z,  
from alpha to omega,  
from aleph to tau....

This psalm is meant not for a little segment of life, the spiritual part, but for the whole thing, for all of life. And therefore, the psalmist offers his or her whole self. The opening line "In you, Lord, my God, I put my trust," is probably better translated, "To you, Lord, I lift up my soul..."

What's lost in translation is the sense or image of our arms outstretched, lifting up. Think of the birth of Simba in the "Lion King." The psalm images us lifting up the fullness of our lives, our identities, our hopes and fears, our very selves to God.

Psalm 25 is not an invitation to self-help. It doesn't cut corners like the student who only wants to know what will be on the test. It's not written by one who thinks he or she knows better, or is looking for a technique for success.

Rather, the ground, the first move, the beginning place of the psalmist's spirituality is surrender. It's offering up our lives....

When I've encountered young people with alcohol or addiction issues, I've known pretty quickly that I was in over my head, so I'd try to hook them up with therapists or addiction counselors. However, I've also taken a few to their first AA or NA meetings.

For a couple kids it worked, for others – not so much. What sticks out is knowing that they weren't ready to do the work when they'd report that they weren't as bad as those people, or that they thought they'd do recovery on their own.

Those that stayed gave up power. They admitted they were powerless and decided to trust the program. They turned to recovering addicts, they got sponsors, and they said, "I'll do whatever you tell me to do..."

Psalm 25 has that spirit. In offering up the fullness of our lives to God we set aside, or mitigate against, our tendency to think we know better. The psalmist asks, without precondition,

*Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are my God and Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.*

Cultivating a full-orbed-biblical-spirituality begins with offering up our hearts to God and then asks to be taught.

Thomas Boogaart, retired Old Testament professor and resident mystic at Western Seminary, writes this:

*The human heart is permeable and heavily influenced by the various powers in our world, although we tend to think the heart is autonomous and its own master. The heart is more like a cloud shape-shifting in the air currents than a rock washed up on the lakeshore. The heart is open to the influence of the Spirit who comes and dwells there, but is also open to the influence of other spirits, for example, other people ranging from parents, to teachers, to pastors, to the proverbial “Joneses” with whom we want to keep up. The heart is also open to the influence of the culture around us—culture’s values and rituals have heart-shaping power....*

And that is to say that developing this spirituality is a long, slow, process. All sorts of forces are shaping our permeable and porous hearts. And the humility required to open our hearts to God’s instruction can just feel like too much. Others do the same and end up at differing places of interpretation or practice, so why bother? Why try? Why put in the effort? Why keep trying?

We get comfortable,  
we get set in our ways,  
we get bored,  
we get overwhelmed,  
we get jaded,  
we get cynical,  
we get busy,  
we get....

Again, I think Psalm 25 is instructive. Listen again to this line:

*Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old.*

Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love.

The psalmist offers up his or her heart to be taught, because of the God’s “great mercy and love.” In Hebrew those two words are *raham* and *hesed*....

*Raham* (compassion or mercy) is linked to the Hebrew word for “womb.” God’s mercy is tied closely to the concept of “womb love,” the love a mother feels for her yet-to-be-born child. It’s a mercy that comes from the womb of God.

*Hesed* is God’s covenantal love. It gets translated as unfailing love, loyal love, lovingkindness, faithful love. A love that never fails, runs out, or walks away.

Dear friends, the reason the psalmist pursues a full-orbed spirituality is the *raham* and *hesed* of God. The requests – take me and teach me – are only possible because of God’s great mercy and unfailing love.

Whoever we are,  
wherever we are,  
whatever we're facing,  
may we know the depth and breadth of that mercy and love,  
may our spirituality be rooted in the same,  
and may it be matched by a measure of humility.

When I was in floundering in college with no sense of purpose or place, the Christian faith and the culture built around that faith seemed like a wall that I didn't understand, couldn't scale, and didn't want anything to do with. And yet, I was longing for a spirituality that worked, that was authentic and accessible, and that was big enough to hold life's loves and losses.

My father gave me a book by the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, it included a prayer. I carried that prayer around for years and like Psalm 25 it was the ground for whatever spirituality sustained me. It's my prayer for my barber, and for all of us. Shall we pray.

*My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

Amen.