

"What Would You Do If You Held the Key?"

Rev. Annie Holmes

Imagine yourself walking down a long, moldy, dusty corridor. You are in a huge castle. You have fought many monsters and dragons to get inside this huge fortress. You are bloody and bruised, you have fought battles before and with your sword in hand you are ready to fight more, if needs be. You've come too far by now to turn back. You have risked too much, there is no turning back. All at once the corridor ends and you realize you must turn right or left, you must make a decision and you don't have a clue which is the correct way to turn. In your puzzlement you look down and wiping the sweat from your face you see a key. There is no one around, the key looks important and there it is so available. And then you know, you must reach down and take it. You can do no other. But what do you do now, now that you hold the key? What good is it? What does it open, and once it is opened, what lies behind the door?

This was Michael's dream. I met Michael when he was studying to be a professor of anthropology. He was in his early 40's at the time, married 10 years, with two young sons. He had everything he had ever wanted in life. But one day on his way to the University as he was driving in his car and listening to the news, he heard of a car crash on the freeway where a woman and her two young sons were killed. His hands began to shake, he started to sob uncontrollably. Soon his hands were shaking so hard he had to pull over. He put his head down on the steering wheel and for longer than he could remember he cried. He later told me he cried for his mother who had died recently and he felt he did not get a chance to say good-bye. He cried for his first failed marriage, something of which he was still very ashamed.

He cried for those people who had died in a fire near his home the month before. He cried for pets that he had loved who had died, he cried for the pain of the second World War, he cried for pain in the world, he cried because it felt so darned wonderful to cry. When it was all over, and he never could say how long that was, he realized that he was late for class, he had missed his luncheon appointment and, that he simply had to go somewhere and talk to someone. So, he drove to church and I just happened to be in the office. With puffy cheeks and swollen eyes he staggered into my office and blurted out the whole incident. Just the thought of those children and their mother dead on the freeway had opened up in Michael the flood gates of the pain and anger and disappointments in his life that he had so carefully tucked away.

As we talked he kept shaking his head and laughing softly. He was supposed to be in a place in his life where he had it all. His wife was wonderful, his kids were great, his career was on the fast track. What was going on? Then he told me about the dream he had with the keys and the castle. All in all, Michael just kept shaking his head as he paced back and forth and wondering what it all meant. We talked about trivial things that afternoon. But made other appointments later in the month. I brought up the suggestion of a spiritual discipline to Michael later in our meetings. He laughed at first. He was a confirmed humanist. He didn't even believe in a soul. He felt taking on anything more in his already busy life wouldn't be fair to all that he had made commitments to already.

I gave him a copy of the book "In Celebration of Discipline" by Richard Foster and told him to come back and we would talk about it more fully. Being a good student, he read the book cover to cover and decided that he did indeed want to be able to find where the key fit in his life. He admitted that he had hurts, pains, regrets, disappointments and fears like everyone else. His psyche had decided that it was time to let open the flood gates and release what he had been holding so tightly for years. I assured him he already had the key and the trick to a healthy, whole, happy balanced life was to begin to unlock the energy of wisdom and knowledge that had brought him this far in his life and would give him the strength to unlock all those parts of him that had held him down. He did not agree that a spiritual discipline was the answer, but he agreed to try meditation, 10 -15 minutes three times a week for one month and then report back to me what had happened.

After a month Michael was a different man. I noticed right away as he did not pace as he was talking to me. He looked me straight in the eyes and calmly held his hands on his lap as we talked. He looked like someone who had hit upon something profound, and even without a belief in a soul per se, he had discovered an inner man waiting to be freed. The key of meditation had opened the cast iron gate that had held him for so long. He was anxious to continue. That was 10 years ago. He has since tried all the disciplines that ancient religions have professed would bring you happiness. But he has told me recently that meditation will be the foundation of exploration into the deep inner self of his consciousness.

He began a mediation circle in the church and lead meditation workshops at the University. Will this happen for you? Are you looking for a keyhole in which to use your key to unlock the treasures that are buried within you? Will you be as changed as Michael? I cannot say, but I can say that this same metamorphosis has happened to me.

What I'm asking you to consider today, is to set aside 10 -15 minutes each day for 3 or 4 times a week to get in touch with the inner you. I'm suggesting that you look at disciplines as the key to unlock the treasures that come from sitting quietly or giving freely. I'm not asking you to sit in a room and stare at a wall for 4 years, or climb a mountain and seek a guru, or any of the extremes that we associate with anything having to do with creating a spiritual discipline.

Rather. I am thinking more of asking you to consider taking one of these disciplines and seeing it as on the same par as brushing your teeth, or doing your exercises, or cleaning your house. Each of those disciplines is a freeing agent. Spiritual disciplines are freeing agents also. If you brush your teeth you won't lose them and you will be free from decay, if you exercise you will be free of extra pounds. If you clean your house you are free from germs and dirt that cause illness. If you drive the speed limit you don't need to watch for police. All the disciplines you have already assumed in your life have given you freedom, not more confinement. Which unfortunately we have associated with the word discipline. We imagine being beaten, being hollered at, scolded and abused. The discipline of an adult is the path to freedom.

If you take on a spiritual discipline you will be free from confusion, chaos and embarrassment that you could not handle what life dealt out to you. That is all, 10 -15 minutes 3 or 4 times a week.

Spiritual disciplines are practices that we do in order to bring about harmony, balance and peace in our lives. Joy is the keynote of all disciplines. The purpose of the discipline is liberation of the self and from the stifling slavery of fear and powerlessness. The primary requirement is a longing after self-awareness. The desire for a spiritual discipline is in itself a gift.

When talking about the soul or spirit we must be aware of what we are speaking.

Spirituality is very much a buzz word of today. But spirituality is also very much in the eye of the beholder. The word spirit comes from the Latin spiritus, the Greek used pneuma, the Hebrew, ruach, the Chinese, Chi and Japanese, Ki, or that which gives life.

There are three areas of spirituality or the conversation you may have with your soul; physical well-being, mental well-being and a quest for depth and wisdom. Not all paths are equal, helpful or true. We need to make our way carefully with our eyes open, ever as much as our hearts.

There are two difficulties to practicing a spiritual discipline:

1. The difficulty of finding a practice or simply not knowing how to begin.

2. The fear of the process because of a lack of mentors and models and teachers.

I am starting a 7 week session in the Fall, and the sign-up sheet is in the back of church where, if you would like to explore the 4 directions and the directions of the heavens, the earth and within yourself and you wish to now proceed with making a connection with spirit or your deeper self, at this time in your life, this class could be your key.

Because we become slaves to our own ingrown habits, starting down the path of a new and different discipline could seem scary and maybe ridiculous to us in the beginning. But, as we discuss them and play with them a little in our lives, we will find that the disciplines are a vehicle by themselves. They are acts used to awaken our spiritual attention. But it is important to remember that law-bound disciplines breath death. When disciplines degenerate into law, they are used to manipulate and control people.

Leo Tolstoy once said "People often think of changing humanity, nobody thinks of changing themselves." Spiritual disciplines are about changing ourselves.

We are all travelers in life. We are people on a journey, where on each twist and turn we find and discover, observe and perceive a deeper reality. Because we live in a world of constant noise, hurry and crowds, in order to get in touch with a deeper reality we need to be very disciplined about how we fulfill that task.

There are inner disciplines like: meditation, fasting and study.
There are outer disciplines like: service, simplicity, solitude and giving.
And there are large group disciplines like: confession, and celebration.

First, the inner disciplines.

Meditation. Breathing, detaching and attaching again. Meditation is giving yourself permission for holy leisure. Not psychological manipulation, rather taking quiet time to listen to your inner wisdom. I am asking you to think about 10-15 minutes 3 or 4 times a week. That is all. Remember, place - posture - palms up - peace.

Fasting. Not political maneuvering. Not self-mortification. Not starvation. Rather a beginning to let the body free itself from toxins. Fasting could help us keep a balance. Fasting could alert that spiritual side within you that you are ready to listen in a new way. You could begin by skipping one meal a day. Or not eating for a 24 hour period using fruit juices for nourishment.

It is important to remember when you are fasting that you also take time to

rest. As the fasting continues you will find your sense of concentration will be heightened. But extended fasts must never be attempted without a Doctor's approval and a spiritual counselor's guidance. Why do you feel that you are grabbing all the food you can? Why do we stuff our faces with foods that taste good, or wine or other alcohol that we know in the end is not going to take care of the angry hurt that is there. And still we pursue unhealthy behaviors simply because we have convinced ourselves that there can be no other way to live. Nonsense. As we let go of some foods and some unhealthy behaviors, there will be space and time for new behaviors and new information.

Study

A person could begin a period of study with books, but hopefully the areas of study could include: nature, other people, ourselves, institutions and cultures. Studying opens the mind, and helps to reveal the truths of the ages. Study produces insight which produces joy. Study helps individuals concentrate, reflect and be aware of the application of humility in one's life. What should one study? That depends on what you wish to learn.

The Outward Disciplines

Simplicity.

Simply speaking, simplicity is freedom. We seem to buy things we do not want, to impress people we do not like. By using the discipline of simplicity we begin to learn to take care of those things we already have. Living more simply can give people a sense of freedom from the anxiety of having to own so many and maybe too many things. We are able to begin to see all of life as a gift. Living simply helps us reduce the tendency toward addictions. And most importantly it may help us begin to reflect on the oppression others live with and in. To begin, clean one drawer, one shelf, one room, one glove compartment, one closet, one cabinet in your kitchen. That's all it takes, one small way of showing ourselves we can be free of clutter and the stress and confusion too much stuff causes in our lives.

Solitude.

Loneliness is inner emptiness. Solitude is inner fulfillment. Solitude is more of a state of heart and mind than whether we are with people or alone. There is a solitude of heart that can be maintained at all times. When we are comfortable with solitude then we do not need fear being with others because they do not control us. Even in the midst of noise and confusion we are settled into a deep inner silence. Freedom to be alone will be an option. The freedom comes not in order to be away from people, but in order to hear yourself better in any situation. In the midst of solitude you can control the noise rather than no noise at all.

You will discover a new balance in yourself of when you may need to speak and when you may need to be silent. Discovering that balance may come through

practices like:

- being still in the early morning just as you wake up, before anyone else is up in the house,
- driving either to or from work or errands with the radio off,
- slipping outside just before you go to bed to breath in the quiet night air,
- keeping a journal,
- disciplining yourself to keeping silent in a situation where you have always felt you would have spoken. The fruit of solitude is compassion and sensitivity toward yourself and others.

Service.

In the discipline of service there is also great liberty. This service is clearly distinguished from "self-righteous" service. True service comes from joy in giving. True service is guarding the reputation of others. In true service it is impossible to distinguish a large service from a small one. True service is free from the need to calculate the results. True service is indiscriminate of its ministry. It ministers simply and faithfully because there is a need, period. In true service there is difference between choosing to serve and choosing to be a servant. True service is not a list of things we must do-rather it could be a way of life. If there something that has to be done here at church, or in your home, there is power for the person performing the act to just do what has to be done, and not count the cost. On the other hand, duty motivated service breaths death. There is something supremely satisfying in cleaning up what you have wrought in your life. And being there to serve others in joy and humility is the beginning of wisdom and love in your life. Service from your inward core breaths life, joy and peace to those around you.

Confession.

Confession is simply the desire to forgive and be forgiven. The forgiveness process is a mystery hidden within each one of our hearts until we have truly been in the place of first being forgiven for something we may have done. It is when we have received forgiveness that I feel we are most able to forgive others. Confession can be transforming. We all have been hurt, we have all hurt someone else. There is nothing so wonderfully transforming or powerful as to forgive and be forgiven. There is the possibility of release and renewal. In confession we remember that we are in this world together and often we are hurt. But being hurt is only part of the process. There is always the possibility of forgiveness, not sweet revenge, but sweeter forgiveness.

Celebration.

Celebration is essential to all the other disciplines. Every discipline must be characterized by carefree joy and a sense of thanksgiving. Celebration comes when the common ventures of life are fulfilled and there is a joy of thanksgiving. When we have learned to let go and feel free ourselves from

pressures and preconceived notions, then it will be easier for us to celebrate every day, every minute. Celebration is a discipline because the task of letting go has to become a part of our lives first. Practice of celebration saves us from taking ourselves too seriously. We will find life healing and refreshing to cultivate a wide appreciation for life and celebrating that life. So, celebrate dinner tonight. Celebrate the first tomato from your garden. Celebrate the call from your children or grandchildren. It doesn't have to be Christmas or Easter or even a birthday to celebrate. It only has to be today, the people around you. Take those glasses full of wine or juice or water and clink in celebration of today, Sunday, July 19, 2009.

Often you will feel alone on your spiritual discipline path. Often there will not be others in your family or at work who understand what it is you are trying to accomplish in your life. But be not afraid. As you pick a discipline and try it on, your life and you will be transformed. Remember too that these disciplines are thousands of years old and are tried and true in their transformative power. Not all disciplines are for everyone. But spiritual disciplines of one kind or another are for everyone. And this is not an exhaustive list, there are many, many more. And at our 7 week class of discovering the joys of the seven directions we will discover more disciplines and how they can work in your life.

Does the soul inform the body? Or does the body inform the soul? The body can be a teacher, a mentor, a certified guide. The body is not a dumbbell we have to carry around for life, not a beast of burden, but rather a ship to carry us places we have only dreamed of going. The body is a launcher of all lifetime experiences. The storer of memories. All disciplines begin and end in conjunction with the body. Do not feel in taking on a spiritual discipline that you need to fight with your body. Rather see it as a friend who will enable you to be more alive to all possibilities. Joy is the keynote of all the disciplines. They are liberating, and a primary requirement for one who longs after self awareness. As you choose one for yourself, remember-be not afraid. There is power and transformative joy in getting to know yourself and your spiritual muscle power better.