



Spirit in Life and Teaching

by MARIE WALL

There often comes a time in our lives when we find ourselves at a crossroads and there is a strong desire to regain our sense of purpose. We may be overwhelmed with all of life's demands and feel the need to slow down and take stock. It may be a time when we feel disconnected from others, and more importantly, ourselves. Many things may be affected – our work, family life, and even our health. It can happen at any age and can be triggered by any event. The task is to find our way, to a more healthful life and to revive our spirit.

Spirit is life energy and it bonds all the elements of a person. It is invisible, yet real and concrete. While spirit is an essential part of human life, it is often accompanied by a great deal of confusion. This confusion stems from the connection between spirit and religion. Knowing what spirit is and how to develop or nurture it helps alleviate the confusion.

To understand the the relationship of spirit and religion, one needs to know that spirit is the “energy” and religion is the “structure”. In recent years there has been a movement away from organized religion, yet there has been a boom in the commodity of spirituality. This growth in spirituality speaks clearly to the need for it in our lives. And while there can be a place for both, spiritual life is central to a healthy well-being. Spirit is the essence of who we are, and our spirit is not disconnected from our body or our actions. Nurturing our spirit, therefore, requires that we engage in activities that are life-giving. Just as food is required to nourish us physically, our spirit needs to be cared for on a routine basis. Caring for our spirit demands that we care for our physical, emotional and mental health.

Consider a period in your life when you felt particularly energetic. During this period were you content with yourself and your relationships? For some people this may come with their dreams and ambitions. For a young family it may be the birth of a new child. It may even be during a time of loss or illness. When we experience contentment with our life circumstances and

ourselves, our life energy or spirit flows freely and is felt deeply. It is true that there are times when it is easier than others, yet each of us can opt to make life-giving rather than death-dealing choices.

We are aware of the expectations that the demands of teaching and home life have, yet we often neglect to take care of our own needs. Constantly taking care of others, without time for rejuvenation, can lead us down a destructive path. While society focuses a lot of attention on caring for our physical health, all aspects of our life must be tended to since our emotional, mental and spiritual health are all interconnected. Paying attention to our spirit will help us know what action we must take.

During times when we may feel empty, isolation or fear may result. Once the isolation and fear end we are able to live healthier, thus restoring our life energy and spirit. Developing better relationships with our co-workers, becoming more physically fit, or confronting problems, helps us to feel better. Caring for our spirit has an added bonus – we now have time and energy for the important things in our lives. With greater energy and better perspective, a teacher's students may also benefit, as would their school. The quality of all interactions improves. When teachers share with me their stories of change, I know it is more than an idea – choosing to care for ourselves leads us to more rewarding relationships with others.

Many of us experience a desire for things to be different, but fear often prevents us from making positive changes, thus depleting our spirit. We may worry that we cannot succeed, or even that we can. We may convince ourselves that we do not have the time, that the effort is not worth it, or that others may not approve. Although we yearn for change, fear stops us in our tracks and demands that we live a familiar, if somewhat unfulfilling lifestyle. We may believe that changes such as a new job or a new relationship will make the difference. In reality, however, it is through listening to our inner voice, our spirit, that will help us live a more fulfilling life.

Choosing to live with spirit is choosing to live an integrated and complete life. Movement towards living this integrated life is choosing to care for ourselves and others. This may appear selfish at first, but if our energy is limited and we are giving from the dregs of our reserves, what we are giving is low quality attention, possibly tainted with resentment or anger. Caring for ourselves leads to rejuvenation, and both the quality and quantity of our interactions will improve.

There is no secret recipe to self-care. It starts with listening to ourselves and acknowledging what we must do. The cost of not listening may be personal discord and eventually even health problems. It is often when a health crisis occurs that the decision to change becomes more important, because it may now become a matter of life or death. Why is it we often wait for this type of crisis in our lives before we choose to change? Parker Palmer (1998) says we can live destructive lives when we unknowingly give our hearts to institutions and allow it to overwhelm our lives. It is when we tend to our spirit and find solidness on which to stand “the ground of one’s own being” that our life becomes more satisfying.

Is your self-care and your attitude giving you the spirit you desire? If so, great! If on the other hand you feel changes are needed in your life, take the first step. Make a choice for yourself, and consequently your family and students. Ask yourself: “What activities will be life-giving? Is this what I need to be doing right now?” Listen to yourself – you are your best guide.

I have found that nurturing my spirit often gives me energy to deal with other areas of my life, including work, family and community. I do this by spending time in nature, sharing with friends and taking time for reading and reflection. Periodically, I will make a concerted effort to rejuvenate my spirit by participating in a workshop and refocusing. Last year I joined a group of people who traveled to Conne River for a Vision Quest workshop. We spent three days on a lake with the Chief of Conne River where he shared with us some native traditions. We had time to talk and be “quiet”. Remembering this experience has helped keep my life in perspective. Consider what you need to enhance your life energy and take action.

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