

Nourishing Your Spirit

If we accept the responsibility for who we become in our lives, we must pay close attention to how we nourish ourselves — body, mind and spirit. I'd like to share with you a parable from India that vividly addresses this theme.

An old man once called his two sons and told them, 'Sons, I am getting old now and I must decide to which one of you I should entrust my business and properties when I am gone. So I am going to set you a little test. To each of you, I give five coins. There are two empty storerooms at the back of our garden. With the money I give you, I want each of you to fill up a room by the time I come back tomorrow morning.'

The older son thought, 'The old man is getting senile. What can you get for five coins that can fill up an entire room? Rubbish?' And as he was talking to himself, a thought flashed through his mind. He went to see some dustmen and told them, 'I want you to bring all the rubbish from the village tonight and fill up my storeroom and I will give you five coins.' The dustmen thought he was crazy but they had nothing to lose. In fact, they could save some time by not having to take the rubbish all the way to the rubbish tip, and get five coins as well! So they agreed.

The next day the father came back to see what his sons had done with the money he had given them. He went first to the older son who told his father that he would be very pleased with what he had done, for he had managed to fill the entire room. Upon smelling the stench, the father quickly closed the door and went to see the younger son.

The younger son had bought a candle, some incense sticks and a flute and he was sitting in a candlelit room with burning incense, playing the flute. He had filled the room with light, fragrance and sweet music.

I am sure you have guessed to which of the sons the father left his business. More important, though, is what this story tells us about our responsibility for our quality of life. Each of us has been given the precious gift of life and it is up to us what we fill that life with. Will it be aggravations, dissatisfaction, disappointment and despair, or will it be joy, peace, happiness and love? Do we want to be filled or fulfilled?

Many of us feel overwhelmed and overloaded by the various influences vying for our attention. When we talk about achieving a healthy work/life balance, though, we often are looking more at how to get the daily chores done and still fit in some recreational activities. We tend to be stuck in a mode of doing, having or acquiring. We take very little time for simply being and reflecting. In doing so, we risk delegating responsibility for our spiritual diet to our environment. We accept the priorities imposed by our workplace. We allow television to determine a steady intake of violence. We fall into griping about the weather, the boss or the world without realizing what effect the ingestion of these thoughts has on us. Our recreation often comprises the consumption of others' ideas, opinions, choices and experiences, transmitted through TV programs and films. All of this tends to put us into a passive, reactive mode.

The excessive consumption — of food, goods, resources — that currently prevails in the Western world appears not to lead to greater happiness. *The State of the World 2004* report by the Worldwatch Institute found that "Higher levels of obesity and personal debt, chronic time shortages, and a degraded environment are all signs that excessive consumption is diminishing the quality of life for many people... [I]ncreased consumption has not brought Americans happiness. About a third of Americans report being 'very happy,' the same share as in 1957, when Americans were only half as wealthy." In addition, the report cites that the average US American child receives 69 toys per year. Knowing my daughter's Christmas stress and *ennui* in the face of too many presents, I doubt that the inflation of quantity leads to an increase in happiness. I fear the contrary.

Each of us knows what really nourishes us and replenishes our inner resources, our joy account. For me, singing, being in nature, swimming and laughing are activities that bring me back into harmony with myself and nourish my spirit.

As a counterbalance to your "to do" list, I invite you right now to spend five minutes brainstorming a list of your pleasures and delights, activities that nurture you. It can be as simple but wonderful a pleasure as lying in a hammock or soaking your feet in a mountain stream or shaking with a belly laugh. From this catalogue of pleasures, chose one to treat yourself to within the next week. If it's not feasible to do it (as with one of my greatest pleasures — floating on my back in the ocean), let yourself indulge mentally — a time investment of five or ten minutes. Visualize the experience as vividly as possible: see it, hear it, taste it, smell it, let it fill your body. Allow the memory to permeate your being. Embrace it fully, and when you've had your fill, let it go, knowing that it's there as a resource within you that you can tap into at any time. Decide to make joy a part of your life and watch what happens.

To enrich our community by sharing our pleasures and delights, I invite you to send me your favorites and I will list them next time for the benefit of all.