



The Essence of the Faith Call: The Heart of the Matter & Your Experience

Tom Reid, Consultant, Mediator, Coach
The Reid Group
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If a person came up to you and said: “Don’t give me a lot of words, but in a paragraph or a sentence, can you sum up the essence of what this Christian faith is all about,” what would your response be?

If asked, my response would be:

- You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind
- You shall love your neighbor as yourself

The call to love God, neighbor and self, and all creation, is at the heart of the Christian faith.

This has not always been my understanding. Throughout Catholic school training I frequently heard the message that if I were serious about my faith, I would go to the seminary or monastery, take up a celibate life and become a priest. Coming from a large family, I wanted the option to marry. And so I did. After teaching religion in a Catholic high school in Chicago and initiating a retreat program for the students from my and neighboring schools I experienced a call to a full life of ministry. I entered graduate school in divinity. In my first semester of graduate school the call to ministry grew in intensity. At first this was confusing—had I made a mistake in marrying? Should I have become a priest or monk? As I continued with my studies and personal practice, certain scriptural passages came to mind:

- Love one another as I have loved you
- When I was hungry, you fed me...Lord, when did we see you hungry? As long as you did this...you did it for me.
- Anyone who says they love God whom they haven’t seen and doesn’t love their neighbor who they have seen is a hypocrite.

When I slow down, reflect upon these words it becomes so clear to me that the faith life is inextricably bound up with relationships. Living into the experience of being married,

continuing my studies and practice in spirituality, I increasingly to see the importance, the centrality of relationship and relationships at the heart of the spiritual journey.

I sum up this journey of understanding in the following way. I had the good fortune to make a couple of retreats at Gethsemane, the Trappist monastery in Kentucky. Over the Guest House is the inscription: God Alone. This is a great example of the emphasis on the vertical dimension of spirituality, the individual and God. This was the emphasis with which I was raised. Reflecting upon the invitation of the Great Commandment, and my experience of relationships, brings in the horizontal dimension of the faith call. Integrating the vertical and horizontal dimensions constitutes a healthy and whole spirituality.

Does an emphasis on relationship and relationships make sense to you? Many of us would say yes intellectually. So – what is your current experience of these relationships? How are you doing in these areas of relationship?

- Relationship to the present moment
- Relationship with self
- Relationship with others: Near & Far Neighbors
- Relationship with nature & all creation
- Relationship with the Holy One

Chances are that patterns we develop in one area of our life carry over to the other areas of our life. I invite you to take a few moments and reflect upon your experience of the various relationship areas.

Relationship with the Present Moment

Where is your attention? For many of us our attention is more often in the past or in the future. The chatterbox mind can often cause our thoughts to race from one thought to another or the internal dialogue of self-talk can be so loud that we are not present to ourselves, our experience or the person or people we are living or working with. Finally, in the present moment, are you more aware of your hopes or your fears, your possibilities or your limitations? The present moment is the only moment we have. The sacredness of this moment is captured for me, in the phrase the “sacrament of the moment.”

Relationship with Self

How well do you know yourself, your strengths and weaknesses, your light and your shadow? How are you taking care of yourself physically with exercise, diet, nutrition, sleep, and recreation? What is your typical daily, weekly, monthly, and annual schedule like?

How are you taking care of yourself mentally? What is the nature of your self-talk: is it positive and life-giving, or negative and life-limiting? If you could record your self-talk, would you want the speaker as a friend? Do you make consistent time for reading and reflection? How are you taking care of yourself emotionally? Are you aware of your feelings or do you tend to ignore them? Do you make time to listen and learn from them?

Relationship with Others: Near Neighbors

A friend has said “You never really know someone until you live or work with them.” For this reflection let’s call these people the near neighbors. In the arena of spirituality the true indicator of our unfolding can be found by paying attention to the particulars of our relationships. I often say that it is easier to love humanity in general, it is just particular people I have challenges with – usually these are the people I live with, work with or am related to! How about you?

How would you characterize the patterns in your relationships with others? What do you do with differences, frustrations, irritations? Are you able to confront with respect? Are you able to engage in difficult conversations, conversations that discuss the heart of the matter?

Relationship with Others: Far Neighbors

Who are far neighbors for you? How do you cultivate and maintain an awareness of and connection to the human family? For me, far neighbors are all the brothers and sisters who make up the human family. Beyond the categories of foreigner, Palestinian, Arab, Asian, etc, is a human being, with basic needs and wants. A few of the ways I have developed my awareness and connection with the broader human family has been through travel, (e.g. I was part of a delegation to El Salvador), multiple experiences of having students from other countries live with us, daily visit to the hungersite.com and prayer (e.g. May all beings be free of suffering and the root of suffering, May all beings find happiness and the root of happiness). How mindful are we of the victims of the typhoon in Myanmar, the survivors of the earthquake in China and our fellow Americans dealing with flooding in the Midwest?

Relationship with Nature & All Creation

Are you aware of nature? Do you make time for a relationship with nature? What have you learned from this relationship area? What from these learnings give insight into growth and development in the spiritual life?

What is your relationship to the earth? To all creation? In my experience some of the lessons from this relation include seasons, cycles, patience, the gradual process of growth and development.

Relationship with the Holy One

Whoever or however you conceive of God or the Holy One, how would you describe your experience of that relationship right now? Is it dark and distant or warm and close? Would you characterize it more as an experience of presence or absence? Do you experience the Holy One more through your intellect, as a concept or through your

emotions as a being you are in a relationship with? Through a consistent practice of spiritual reading and prayer, I experience an increasing lived connection with the Creator in my daily life.

Which of these areas of relationship takes the most effort for you? Which is the easiest, or comes most naturally?

In my experience people often rate relationship with nature and the Holy One as the easiest, and relationship with self and others as the most difficult. Personally, I find relating with others and nature to be the hardest. Others, because my relationships with people require constant work to have a relationship based on trust and respect. I am continually challenged to slow down, check out my assumptions, clarify my expectations and be open to differences. Nature, because I can easily ignore it in the “busyness” of life. I have learned that I need to consciously set aside time for my relationship with nature.

I usually rate as easiest my relationship with self and the Holy One. This is not because I “have it altogether.” These are “easy” because, over many years, I have developed personal practices that help me make quality time for and tend to these relationships.

For me, the following words from the John Denver song “Spring” have always served as a fitting summary for the important lessons nature teaches us about the seasons of relationships and spiritual development.

Open up your eyes and see the brand new day
The clear blue sky and brightly shining sun
Open up your ears and hear the breezes say
Everything that is cold and gray is gone
Open up your hands and feel the rain come on down
Face the wind and smell the flowers sweet perfume
Open up your mind and let the light shine in
The earth has been reborn and life goes on.

Do you care what’s happening around you
Do your senses know the changes when they come
Can you see yourself reflected in the seasons
Can you understand the need to carry on

Riding on the tapestry of all there is to see
So many ways and Oh so many things
Rejoicing in the differences no one just like me
Yet as different as we are we’re still the same.

When assessing the condition of the relationship areas, people tend to use oversimplified categories of good or bad. The relationship area of nature and the words from John Denver’s song remind us that a relationship is not static. Rather, it is a living, changing

reality that can better be described through the pattern and rhythm of seasons. Negotiating these four relationships is not a head trip—these relationships go through seasons. What season are you in right now in each of these areas? Where are you in relation to your relationships?