

Readings: Isaiah 40: 1-11; Mark 1:1-8

In the year 2000, while I was an Interim Minister at Cedar Hills United Church of Christ, I began what I called a five-year Vision Quest. My vision guides were the faculty of the University of Creation Spirituality, founded by Matthew Fox, where I was a student for five years.

At that time I recognized that I needed a spiritual practice that would nurture healthy habits that I wanted in my life, namely:

believing in my gifts and rejoicing in the gifts of others;

eating good food and thoughts;

focusing my energies;

setting an expectation of quality work that was within my abilities;

making the effort to acquire the materials, information, and skills that I need to do the work that I was called to do.

I was searching for a spiritual practice that would enable me to wholeheartedly engage the passions of my life, which are my family, my music, my desire to make the world a better place.

Last week I shared with tools that I received during one of the week long Intensives that were a part of my Vision Quest, from artist and community activist, Lily Yeh. Those tools were; Self-protection and self-care, beauty, and good will.

Lily Yeh taught the morning academic class that week. In the afternoon was the arts-as-meditation class, and I chose to take a class on Native American Rituals taught by Sister Jose Hobday, a woman with Seneca and Iroquois ancestors and a Sister in the Franciscan Order.

This morning I want to share with you the tools that I Sister Jose Hobday gave to me on my Vision Quest. Before doing that, I want to assure you that I am in fact reading the Scriptures for Advent and I believe with all my heart that what I am sharing with you about Lily Yeh and Sister Hobday is excellent Advent material.

How do we prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord? For the coming of the Messiah? For the arrival of the Prince of Peace? How do we pray in such a way that our daily experience is transformed into a pathway of compassion and freedom?

To prepare for the coming of the Christ Child is to empty ourselves of our fears and doubts and rest in grace. It is, as Rumi says, time to clear our room of all the clutter, so that Christ may be born within us. Advent is a time an excellent time for contemplative prayer. Let me tell you what Sister Jose Hobday shared with the class about prayer.

Sister Jose often recalls a significant event in her own life in which she was literally forced to let God in.

When she was around the age of 12, at her Colorado home awaiting the arrival of a friend, Jo, as she was called then, became impatient and complaining. Tired of his daughter's attitude, her father told her to pack a book, an apple, and a blanket, and join him in the car. He drove her to a desert area and left her there with instructions to shape up before the day was over.

Young Jo promptly threw her apple, book and blanket into a canyon and stomped around until she realized she wasn't getting anywhere. She retrieved her belongings and sat under a tree where she ate the apple.

Gradually, her anger lifted and she took a more objective look at her behavior. As she grew more peaceful, she became aware of the presence of God with her at that moment, in that place, and of the beauty of the world around her. When her father came back later that day, he found his prodigal daughter with a changed heart.

Sister Jose Hobday frequently returned to her desert experience as a refuge and reminder of God's overpowering love and the happiness one finds in solitary prayer.

Sister Jose said that prayer is "... a conscious, willing invitation, an alert welcoming of God into anything we do."

"Anything that transports us – a sunset, a flower, a child" can be a prayer if we don't hold back or cut the link to God for fear of fanaticism or extremism.

"God is beauty, love, life, goodness. You have the glimpse of God in the experience."

The hardest part of opening ourselves to the natural flow of prayer and prayerful moments, Sister Jose believes, "is waking up" to the reality of the spiritual, "to stay awake and not be lulled into spiritual complacency."

I learned from Sister Jose Hobday, how rituals help us to stay awake, keep our lamps trimmed and burning, prepare the way of the Lord, and all that other good advent stuff. Rituals help us return to what we need to remember to stay awake and be alive.

I have already shared with you the Strawberry Ritual* and will share Praying the Seven Directions at our Prayer time this morning. The three rituals I want to share with you now all have to do with how to begin the day.

Throw yourself a corn path

Take a handful of yellow cornmeal and throw it out on some ground in front of your home first thing in the morning. This is meant to be a conscious act of waking up.

When you leave your home that morning you will walk over the yellow corn meal which means you will be walking with the creativity that the color yellow signifies. Have a creative day!

In the evening you throw white corn meal out by your back door to guide you on your dream journey that night.

So if you want to try this at home, simply place a bowl of yellow corn meal by your front door and a bowl of white corn meal by your back door. So even if there is no sun or moon in the sky you have them on the ground

The second ritual has to do with what you are mindful as you step onto the corn path.

3 steps into the day

Begin with a breath and observe the day one is stepping into. Then take the first step with gratitude, take the second step into the self, the third step into the unknown, the mystery of God's presence.

Blessing of the children before school

Sister Hobday shared with us a ritual that her mother did with the children before school. Her mother would take an eagle feather, which represents our higher calling and would tap on one shoulder and bless the child with beauty, the other shoulder and bless the child with strength, the head and bless the child with wisdom, and finally a gentle "slap" on the face with the eagle feathers, to remind the child to be careful out there.

The final teaching that I want to share with you could be described as a mindfulness practice. It is a way of becoming a storyteller of one's life.

Storytelling

Sister Hobday shared with us the importance of storytelling in Native American spirituality. The way in which she approached it was unexpected, because she did not tell us stories about crow, or raven or fox and how fire was captured. She told us to be good storytellers when telling the story of our own lives and to look for the stories happening around us.

Here are some of her guidelines for being a good storyteller:

When someone asks you how you are or what have you been doing, use your imagination when you answer that question. Believe that you have an interesting story to tell. And there is nothing wrong with a little embellishment.

Reveal who you are in conversation with others. This requires self-reflection, self-knowledge and paying attention to ourselves and the things that come our way.

And perhaps most importantly it calls for healthy self-appreciation. I am a child of God, wonderfully made, and this is how my life reveals that.

Sister Jose suggested a method for developing this ability to reveal ourselves through our story telling. Every three to four hours a day ask yourself what has happened to you in the last three to four hours?

Answer in a way that is interesting to you. Show an interest in yourself and develop an interest in others. Above all else, don't be boring! Tell your story well--always being on the look-out for miracles, for the presence of God. Keep awake for you do not know the hour when the miracle is coming. Prepare the way of love, by loving.

Sister Jose Hobday was a great storyteller, trickster and teacher. I am grateful for the ways in she reminded us that the presence of God is always and all when.

All we have to do is be respectful of just this moment with a heart that is open and eyes that are ready to be amazed. God will take that as an invitation and Jesus will take that as a way that has been prepared, and the Holy Spirit will be dancing all around you in acts of healing, justice and compassion.

This is how Sister Jose Hobday says it: “Jesus is my teacher. He is the master in affirming people and downplaying the negative. Jesus would never go after little people – the suffering, the misunderstood, the put down or cast out. He goes for the heart, never for the jugular!”

After people are convinced of their own goodness, of the love of God that permits deep union in prayer, Sister Jose said, they become aware that Jesus expects “action on a few fronts.”

“You have to make choices. You have to embrace reality, put your arms around all of life. Then you gain the capacity to discern what is healthy, what is unhealthy. Some things you accept, some you live with, some you reject. But such discernment is not possible from people who don't know life.”

When we know life, we will know what to cry out, what story to tell, and how to step into a new morning. And God will make of our simple lives, a nativity scene for the birth of the Christ child within us. May it be so.

***Eating the Strawberry**

This is a ritual that Sister Hobday’s mother did with the children. It takes place when the strawberries are ripe. Each child got a white plate with one strawberry on it. Sister Jose’s mother then took the children through the ritual.

First, look at the berry. Notice that it is shaped like a heart, and it's color is a deep rich red. This is to remind you that your heart is to be juicy, pumping, and alive.

Secondly, notice the seeds of the strawberry are on the outside not the inside like most fruit. This shows that there are many ways to live, and that we should accept and respect the differences

Finally, notice that the stem which was the berry’s connection to the vine and the vine’s connection with the earth. We are to remember our connections with those things that bring us life.

The children were then told to eat the strawberry, stem and all, remembering to eat the stem with some of the berry to remember that sweetness overcomes bitterness.

Praying the Seven Directions

The Seneca pray in seven directions: east, south, west, north and sky, earth, and self. Sister Hobday on several occasions prayed the seven directions for us, each time praying for things appropriate to each direction: East (New birth), South (Plentiful resources), West (death, endings), North (Strength), Sky (Higher Calling), Earth (Foundations), Self (The place where we want to bring all these forces.)