

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. I was **sitting on my sister's bed at her home in San Diego** almost a month ago. Mandy wasn't there, she was in Europe, but my husband Jason and I and our kids were spending some of our last days of summer break and of my sabbatical hanging out at their home in Southern California and keeping an eye on their kids and pets.
1. And so from that space, **I was taking a moment of quiet in the midst of the family chaos**. From my sister's bed, I opened my computer and connected virtually with the woman who has been a particular kind of companion to me in recent months, my spiritual director whom I will call Hannah. Sometimes our meetings are in her South Berkeley living room, sometimes they are over FaceTime. **Usually she opens our sessions with an invitation to God to be present with us and we sit in a kind of contemplative silence**, a silence in which I often begin to sense a word or a picture or an idea that feels particularly resonant to my heart, and as I speak that out, a rich conversation usually follows, and I have a sense of the Spirit sweetly present in what is being considered.
 2. That day, sitting on that bed during my last days of Sabbatical, **the word that came to my mind to ponder was "Return"**. On a surface level, that word made perfect sense. I had been away from the work of Haven, away from the days to day connection with all of you, away from emails, and texts and meetings and Sunday services for almost twelve weeks. For nearly twelve weeks my phone had been strangely quiet, my inbox fairly empty. I had kept busy during much of the time (I ended up taking six trips in twelve weeks) but all of those activities and travels were largely disconnected from all of you. **I was preparing to Return to Haven**. It made sense that that word would be on my mind and I considered it with Hannah with a mix of feelings. I looked forward to coming back, **I looked forward to being here with all of you, but I also felt guarded and cautious**; wary and protective of something precious I didn't want to lose.
 3. As we mused about the theme of return and my feelings around it, Hannah reflected back to me a wise observation, as she often does. **"In a sense, it seems like return has been the theme of your whole sabbatical"**. When she spoke the words, they rung of truth; a truth I hadn't been able quite to name myself but framed well what I had experienced over the last twelve weeks of sabbatical life.
- B. Well, **it's been three weeks since I have "returned" to the work of Haven**, and in that time, I've been getting up to speed on what I've missed.
1. **I've been in conversation with Jeanne and Ginny** and other leaders who faithfully cared for this community during my twelve weeks away. I was here a couple of weeks ago, primarily listening to folks in this space sharing some of their observations from the summer. I've gone back and read all the emails that Jeanne sent out each week to get a sense of all the things you all were up to.
 2. And **I've listened back to each of the beautiful teachings that were given during the four services I missed**. I heard Jeanne kicking off the summer talking about **"Liberating Spirituality"** and then that theme continuing in different ways through the messages that came from other powerful speakers; Sylvia sharing some of her journey, Deborah bringing a powerful call to the work of reparations, and Aiden sharing his amazing personal story. Liberating Spirituality seems to have been a thread that has been woven throughout the messages from each of these distinctive voices, and so it feels fitting that today we might close out this summer series as I share some of my own observance of where I found *Liberating Spirituality* in the season of sabbatical. My hope in sharing them

is not simply to report my own experiences over these last months, but also to invite each of us to consider, **how might we experience freedom, how might we experience liberation through the act of returning? What does a liberating return look like?**

- II. Now the theme of returning is one that appears throughout our Sacred Texts. **The Bible is full of stories of people journeying off and then returning.**
- A. In the Hebrew Bible, much of the work of the prophets is the work of the Divine calling their people to return to them.
1. **“Return to me...”** says the voice of God in Zachariah 1, **“and I will return to you.”**
 2. In Isaiah, God calls their people to return from rebellion to restoration with their Creator. **“I have made you, you are my servant; Israel, I will not forget you. I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you.”**
 3. And again in some of the last words of the Hebrew Bible, Malachi speaks for the Divine saying again **“Return to Me and I will return to You.”**
 4. Of course in the narrative arc of the Hebrew Bible, **return plays an important role.** Remember Deborah telling us the story of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob traveling to Egypt when there’s famine in the land of Canaan; and then centuries later after they’ve multiplied and then become enslaved by the Egyptians, **Yahweh calls Moses to work with the Divine to deliver the Hebrew people from under Pharaoh’s thumb and return them to their promised land.** Centuries later, when the people of Yahweh are not living into the purposes of the Divine, they experience separation; they are taken away from their Promised Land and carried off to exile in Babylon. And then decades later, **the people of Judah are invited to return to the land and be restored.**
 5. I think there’s a theological argument to be made that **Jesus’ whole ministry is part of this dual returning.** He’s calling people to return to the Divine presence and also demonstrating through his own contact and intimacy, his words and his actions that bring healing and life, that God is here, right now, returning to you. **Jesus is enacting that Divine promise, “return to me and I will return to you.”**
- B. **But not all acts of returning are liberating, even in the Bible.** Think about Jesus returning to the synagogue of his youth, but that time there to preach as a rabbi ushering in God’s liberation. That return didn’t go so well; they wanted to throw him off a cliff, causing Jesus to declare “No prophet is accepted in his home town.”
- III. When we talk about finding freedom through returning, **it matters who and what you’re returning to.** So today, I want to kick off a mediation on the liberating practice of return. We’re going to do it over the course of three teachings as we transition from summer to fall. Over the next three teachings, I’m going to invite you to consider with me three kinds of returns. Each return is one that I noticed to be an important part of my experience of liberating spirituality during my sabbatical, and I share them as I invite you to consider how these three returns might also be liberating for you. The one we’re going to consider today, I call the **Return to self.**
- A. During the sabbatical, especially the early weeks while the kids were still in school, I had **more space for personal alone time than I’ve had in a long time,** certainly any time in the last sixteen years that I’ve been parenting. I had space for quiet, for reflection just for the sake of reflection (not for the sake of generating content). I had room to listen to myself, and attend to my needs, mentally, emotionally, and physically. I was more intentional about exercise in this season, allowing my workouts to be not just another burdensome task on the to-do list to check off, but a space for noticing my physicality, noticing what parts of my body had become soft, and what parts were becoming stronger as I attended to them.

- B. I took two solo trips in the first month of my sabbatical; two retreats that were just for me and my needs.**
1. One of them, I'll tell you more about next time. It was a trip to Iowa City where I lived for five formative years, to visit my dear friend and pastoral mentor, Adey Wassink. It was a helpful time of reconnection.
 2. **But the second trip, that was the trip that was really all about returning to self.** In early June, I had the opportunity to venture out completely alone. This was the silent retreat I referred to a couple of weeks ago. Like Aiden, our guest speaker in July had described, I also spent time during my Sabbatical at the **New Camoldi hermitage retreat center in Big Sur**. It is a special place. For nearly three days, I was alone in beautiful surroundings. I had a modest little cottage to myself on a mountainside facing the ocean. I shared only a few words with anyone else at the center. I listened to the monks chant, and I learned a bit about chanting with them. I meditated along side others in silence on the floor of a beautiful chapel. I took a hike through the stunning landscape and sat for hours on a porch overlooking the ocean, listening to the sound of the tide mixed with the chorus of birds surrounding me. The quiet was strangely absorbing.
- C. And in all of these opportunities for open space, I learned some things.**
1. I came to recognize that **"returning to self" means returning to the part of myself that is at the core of me.** It's not the ego which is on the exterior, but the deeper essence of who I am. Before the sabbatical I spoke to you of the wisdom of the Enneagram, which is a personal typology, and how as an Enneagram 3, I tend to be very focused on what I'm producing, or how I'm performing. That is certainly a part of my self, to attend to my productivity and what I'm putting out there, but it's not the core of who I am. After years of grinding to start this community and be the primary on-call parent, I had lost touch with much of myself that was beneath the surface. Going into the sabbatical I was a bit nervous about what I'd find there. Would there be any depth to connect with?
 2. In fact, I learned **I like myself more than I thought.** I like being with me, which honestly, I'm not sure I could have honestly said that a few months ago.
 3. I learned that even as an extrovert, **I appreciate solitude and space to be introverted.** I realized I really do need them.
 4. I learned in a deeper way than I think I've experienced before that **a return to self is not counter to a return to God.** To turn from the outer ego self and return to my essence, my core, is also to return to the sacred place of spiritual encounter. This is a truth that mystics from across the spiritual spectrum seem to acknowledge. The medieval Catholic Spanish nun Teresa of Avila wrote famously of an Interior Castle, a kind of crystal palace within our own selves that she encouraged her followers to journey into with the hope and expectation that in the inner most chambers one has the clearest encounters with God.
 5. Another Christian mystic from that era named Meister Eckhart said it this way: **"There is a place in the soul that neither time, nor space, nor no created thing can touch."** During these weeks away I had a chance to reconnect, to return to this sacred place, and in that space sense that I was not alone, but that the one who has accompanied me throughout this winding journey of life and ministry remains with me still.
- D. Experiencing this kind of dual return - the return to self and the return to Source, made me think about the life of Jesus in a bit of a different way.**
1. **The gospels tell stories of Jesus withdrawing into the wilderness regularly to be alone, to pray.** When he is baptized at the beginning of his ministry, the story is that the

Spirit descends on him like a dove. The Divine presence is palpable, even visible. And the first thing Jesus does coming out of the water is to withdraw to the wilderness, to wander for forty days on his own. Each of the gospel writers makes note that it is the Spirit's presence that seems to compel Jesus into the wilderness.

2. When I would read these stories about Jesus spending all this time alone in prayer and spiritual practice: **I used to think, wow. What discipline.** What dedication he has. What a guru, he can spend 40 days praying and fasting, even in the midst of temptation. Other places in the gospels we see Jesus withdraw as well, sometimes getting up in the wee hours of the morning to be alone in prayer, sometimes heading out and staying alone with God all night. I'd look at those stories and think, "Respect, Jesus. You're a spiritual leader for a reason, but I don't know if I got that in me."
 3. But having my own fresh experiences of encounter in the quiet made me see those stories slightly differently. Yes, there is still discipline and practice to be respected, but there is also the wisdom of understanding that **the return to self and the return to Source are deeply satisfying in and of themselves.** It's not about doing the duty; it's about **noticing and quenching a deeper thirst.**
 4. **And that makes me wonder...** if there is truth to the story that Jesus had a unique understanding of what it meant to be one with the Divine, having come from God himself, maybe he understood what in a unique way it meant to return to connection with his source. **I wonder if that taste of God's presence that the Scripture calls the Holy Spirit awakened in him a memory of what it was like to be deeply connected to the Divine,** and that memory and that longing to return to self and source compelled him into the wilderness and sustained him through any temptation any tempter would try to throw his way.
 5. For myself, I have noticed how **being centered more deeply in self and Source makes it harder for me to be tempted, for me to be baited.** In recent years, through the era of Trump and covid and life stress, I have felt more reactionary; more prone to distress, more quick-tempered, more unsettled by the headlines in my news feed or the sharp words coming at me from a family member. But after a month or so of more regularly engaging my deeper self, **I started to notice something subtle seem to shift.** I wasn't feeling so easily activated. It wasn't that I was numb to things that were happening. It's just that **they didn't feel so overpowering.** I felt like I could hold them, even circumstances that were deeply painful, as part of a bigger reality in which there is goodness and beauty.
- E. These discoveries about my return to self didn't just happen on their own or as an immediate consequence from taking a break from work. During the sabbatical I was able to identify and engage regularly **particular practices that helped foster this return to self and Spirit.**
1. First and foremost, the gift of **protected time of rest from labor was important.** It turns out, there really is wisdom in the rhythm of Sabbath, not to control us but to free us, to liberate us from the control of work. Coming out of this protected time, I feel more deeply in myself the importance of honoring regular rhythms of work and rest. Going forward, I am naming to myself and to all of you that **I intend to keep a regular weekly Sabbath.** This is something I've tried in the past, but not engaged with a lot of protection or seriousness, often ignoring my Sabbath habit if something came up. But going forward, I feel the importance of prioritizing this for myself so that I can be the person I want to be to all of you when I am present with you.

2. So Mondays I won't be answering emails or texts or scheduling appointments. Don't take it personally. If you send me something during that time, it's fine. Just know I won't get back to you that day because I'm trying to protect this Sacred space of rest, and I hope whatever your rhythm is, you might find similar spaces to protect too.
 3. Within that Sabbath space, I find some **time for solitude, alone time to be very helpful**. I recognize I need space to think and feel deeply. Solitude helps source that kind of contemplation. Sometimes that looks like meditation or study or prayer; sometimes it looks like reading a novel or watching a show or playing solitaire on my phone, but all of it is helpful.
 4. I've touched on some of the other practices that have been especially life-giving already, but I'll name them again here in case it's helpful:
 - a) **Journaling** has been a really fruitful practice I've recovered in recent months. I've come to really appreciate a place to externally process without the concern of how someone will hear my processing or whether I need to edit my word choices.
 - b) **Spiritual Direction** has been a gift, as I've regularly had the partnership of a companion whose outside of my daily grind accompany me in discerning the presence of the Divine in my life. I know many of us find therapy to play a similar role in our lives.
 - c) Finding **spaces to be creative** and put my hands and heart toward cultivating something beautiful, whether it's painting my house, or working in the yard, or cooking an interesting meal or playing my guitar and singing, all have those have helped deepen that connection to my inner core.
 - d) And finally regular **physical movement** has become helpful in connecting my mind and spirit to my body, helping me recognize that there are multiple components that make up Leah, and I feel most in touch with my inner self when I attend to and care for all of them.
- F. In all of these things of come to recognize the truth that **I'm not doing anyone any favors by neglecting my own needs**. I think in our culture it's easy to talk about "self-care" in trite ways that often favor capitalism and encourage us to buy our way out of depression or stress. **But the care of self is not something we can outsource to our credit card**. The care of self requires attending to the quiet places within us with compassion and love, and asking, "what do you need? What are you longing for? What wisdom do you have for me today?" **The care of self also means being willing to move with whatever it is we hear**.
1. Friends, if it was in my power, I would give each of you a sabbatical. And while I can't quite make that a reality, **I can extend to you an invitation that I believe is from the heart of God herself: to find your spaces of return to self**. If you resonate with that experience of living out of your ego more than out of your depth, of feeling reactive rather than attentive, **what might be the habits you need to shift?** What might be the practices you could engage to experience your own return to self and to source? I invite you to be considering these questions today and perhaps processing them in our discussion time together.
 2. And I also offer the hope and prayer that Haven might be a place that is one part of that returning for each of us; that in much of what we do, we wouldn't be coming together to gather just for gathering's sake, or out of some sense of duty or obligation, but as we gather, at times we might practice together listening to the call from the heart of our interior castle, and alongside one another journeying within.

- G. **So as we end this time this morning I want to end by inviting us to do some of what I've been describing**, to take some time this morning alongside one another to intentionally return to ourselves and return to the Sacred place of encounter with our Source. Before we move into a time of conversation, I'm going to lead us through an exercise that I hope might be a helpful starting place for some return to self, if that's something you recognize you'd appreciate. So if that's the case, I want to go ahead and invite you into this meditative experience, what one might call embodied prayer.
1. We'll start by drawing **attention to our breath**. Close your eyes if you like or soften the focus of your gaze so you can attend to your breathing. Move with your breath in and out and focus on deepening and slowing the pattern of your breathing.
 2. Now I invite you to **check in with each part of your body**. We'll start with the top of your head. Allow your awareness to focus on any sensations you notice at the top of your head. And now move down a bit lower on your body. Scan the rest of the body checking in at each space.
 3. After you've scanned your whole body **notice where your attention is drawn**. What part of your body seems to call back your noticing?
 4. As you turn your focus back to that part, **listen for an emotion**. Is there a feeling you are associating with that part of your body?
 5. Once you identify a feeling that comes to mind, **listen for a story connected to that feeling** - it can be a sentence, it can be an image, something that helps give context to what the feeling is about.
 6. And now I invite you to consider, how might the Divine, Mama God, the Spirit, Jesus - however it's helpful for you to connect with your Source - how might that voice be speaking to you through this feeling and it's story?

H. Pray and close.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

1. What does "return to self" mean to you? What practices help you feel connected to your deeper self? What new practices might you want to try?
2. Have you had seasons of life where you struggled with that connection? What did that look like?
3. What was the exercise like for you? Did you notice anything helpful?