Faith, the Awakened State

Our second reading is literally the last words of Jesus to the disciples before he dies. Jesus is at the Garden of Gethsemane, which is still pretty much as it was then, in Jerusalem. Everyone knew that the Romans were looking for Jesus, so he withdrew to pray, and he asked the disciples to pray with him. But one by one, they fell asleep. In Matthew 26, Jesus returns and says to them, “Are you still sleeping? The hour has come for the Son of Man to be betrayed. Wake up.”

I’ve been reading the latest neuroscience research on the psychology of Spirituality. Professor Lisa Miller at Columbia has a wonderful book, "The Awakened Brain,” that summarizes what we have learned from a data-driven analysis of our personality, which you will find helpful.

But first, we need to ditch some bad ideas we have about the nature of faith that come down to us in the Christian tradition. Collectively, they’ve given us a head fake, and most of us gathered here learned them in Catholic school because of the tradition of miracles in Christian teaching.

Saints do miracles in Catholic piety, so we grew up hearing stories like that of Bernadette Soubirous of Lourdes in France. In 1858, she went to the Grotto at Massabielle and felt a wind coming up from the underground. She took off her shoes. She saw a woman in white robes with a blue sash, yellow roses on her feet, and a rosary in her hand. She presumed it to be a spiritual vision of the Virgin Mary, who told her to bathe and to drink from a fountain. But there was no fountain. So Bernadette began to dig and discovered an underground spring that flows to this day in the Grotto.

3 days later, the vision returned and told her to build a church. Many years later, that church was consecrated. Since then, some 7,000 people have been healed at Lourdes, and people come from all over the world today to be healed there.

Of course, in the Gospel accounts, Jesus does miracles. He turns water into wine. He heals paralyzed people; he feeds thousands from very little; he walked on water; he healed blind people; he raised Lazarus from

the dead. Often, he would say something like ‘your faith has made you whole’, suggesting that faith leads us to supernatural abilities.

The spiritual head fake here is that it suggests that we only call in faith in our lives when we need something extraordinary, a hail Mary pass, a big favor for a test we didn’t have time to study for. If we believe in our intentions hard enough- that we can be cured, that we can defeat this overwhelming enemy, that we can pick the right numbers for the Lotto- then amazing things can happen.

Our research doesn’t support any of this approach to spirituality or faith. And many of you are here this morning because you have more intellectual problems with this approach to spirituality than comfort. I studied philosophy and politics in college, so I am right with the skeptics on questioning this whole approach, but today I’m just asking you to be aware that this is what you were taught about ‘faith’. Put that in brackets- faith as extraordinary, faith that can do supernatural things, faith as hope in something beyond reason.

Good news. Neuroscientists have documented that faith is not an extraordinary ability but a natural capacity we all have. It doesn't supersede the laws of nature; it just works through them transcendently.

You watch it in operation all the time. My daughter was an outstanding gymnast as a child, state-level good. I'd watch her practice a back flip on the high beam, over and over and over on a beam only two inches off the ground, surrounded by foam cushions. Day after day, week after week, until she felt confident. But there comes the day when you have to hop up on the high beam itself, not two inches off the ground but 4 feet, not with big cushy foam all around you, but pads that help, but man, they hurt if you miss.

I don't care how many times you've done it. I don't care how comfortable you feel. That first time is a whole different deal from practice. You have anxiety you can barely control. Your body doesn't feel quite right. You are dizzier than usual.

I'd watch her close her eyes, go into herself, and what she was doing was tapping into her faith. The power to step out; the guts that come from

trying something new for the very first time; the override button that pushes you through to actually do it, even after you've become afraid. You step out in faith.

Psychologists say that you are in "Quest Orientation"[i]. You are doing something new, something not guaranteed, something probably risky. But you are stepping out. You are discovering.

And the reason we humans love this is because it is one small step in us becoming self-directed, and humans find self-direction intrinsically fulfilling.

I use that simple example because our "Quest Orientation" comes back again and again throughout our whole lives. That is why in spirituality, we say that the life of faith is an adventure. You tap into your spirituality when you are in new terrain, unexplored parts of yourself, facing different challenges from anything you have faced before. And you have to call upon resources within yourself to rise to the occasion. And through that, you can sometimes feel yourself growing in the moment.

You are awakening your capacity for faith, expanding your range of ability. And every time you do that, you are actualizing your potential. You grow. You develop meaning, just a little bit. You develop a sense of purpose for what you are doing with your life right now.

When you are growing, questing in your life- when you are starting a new job, entering college, developing a skill like music or art, when you move to a new town and meet new neighbors- you are full of unexpected surprises, making new connections, finding direction for this chapter of your life.

You have insight; you get intuition. You are inspired. Here is the surprise from technology. We can see all of this light up on an MRI screen. And when these same areas of the brain are not working, when they are deactivated or dysfunctional, people are depressed.

What I want you to know is that faith is a resident capacity of your personality. It is a regular feature of your life, not an exceptional one. It is something you can exercise regularly, and if you do, you get spiritually stronger. You become more integrated internally.

The word our psychologists are using at the moment to describe this is “awake”. You awaken your spiritual self, your transcendent self. You become aware of things that have been around you all along, but you start to put them together.

For many years, I’ve been beguiled by Jesus’s parting words to the disciples. His very last words to them before he dies. The Romans send troops to arrest him. Jesus knows this is likely to happen, so he is in prayer, right outside the City Walls of Jerusalem, in a meditation garden called Gethsemane.

He is praying, really anxious about his situation, and the disciples all fall asleep. So when the Romans come, like me, they have to be awakened to face this crisis. And Jesus' last words are, “Wake up”… Awaken!

There is the plain meaning of the word, ‘We are about to be arrested’. But what is beguiling to me is that it is also something of a spiritual summary of his teaching, a leitmotif that is dramatically embodied here, as in ‘Become Awake’, become aware of what is really happening around you on a deeper level.

No miracles. Just tune in. Activate your faith.

It is so similar to a core teaching in Buddhism about the Bodhisattva. In the process of Enlightenment, you become aware. You become awake. And what happens to you when you become awake is you make connections. You start to get it. You start to see the way out of the cycle of suffering that so many people endure.

Another parallel between Buddhism and Christianity is that both hold a special honor. They recognize and esteem people who don't just disappear into meditation, but who, in making connections with others around them, turn back to help them on their quest to awaken, to activate their faith, to realize their potential, to grow. That is what the Bodhisattva is: the turning back when you are starting to attain Enlightenment, so that it is not just for you, but you help everyone around you recognize the spiritual path to take to find Enlightenment.

Jesus was like that. He was awake. He sacrificed, so to speak; he turned back to help everyone around him rather than become a mystic out in the desert. He was involved in all of the power struggles of our world,

trying to make a difference, without engaging in the same violence and power displays that have defined our world. And it cost him his freedom. It cost him his life. And that is a major reason that we admire his example. His life was inspiring.

And you can be too. There is such a beautiful dignity to being awake. Two days before Christmas, I saw it in action downtown. I had two of my grandsons go see the tree at Rockefeller Center- note to self, bad idea, do not repeat- people jammed so close you couldn't move on 6th Avenue.

We are heading down the stairs to the subway station at 51st Street, right at Radio City Music Hall. Our town is so unfriendly to the disabled. It is embarrassing. I see this Dad coming up the stairs. He is from Bolivia or Ecuador. He has his daughter with him. She can't walk. And she is blind. She's like 9 years old, so really heavy now to carry. He has her on one hip, and over his shoulder, he is carrying a wheelchair.

You can tell this guys doesn't think twice about this incredible effort. I don't think I could even carry both, but he is like a Marine with wounded

in tow, bounding up those stairs. New Yorkers don't exactly make a way for him either.

He's giving his daughter the Christmas experience we all want. That is just what you do if you are a parent and you love your child. And it is so moving to see love in action like that. This guy gets it. He is awake. He is activated, actualizing faith, helping others around him realize their potential. It is so dignified, so touching to see humanity embodied like that.

If you asked him, he would say, ordinary day. But this guy was extraordinary in love, deep in faith, profound in connection to the world around him. He doesn't just forget ahead on his own path, He turns back and helps those who need it right around him. Forget about the fancy presents and tinsel on the tree; this is the personification of the Christmas spirit. This is what it is all about.

There is a lot we can't control in the world. I wish that guy had a better wheelchair. I wish we could cure his daughter's blindness. I wish the greatest city in the world were handicapped accessible. But more than

that, I wish we could bottle his ‘soul force’, that power, that love, that humanity, that faith. It is so beautiful to see in action. They called Gandhi “Mahatma”. It means something like ‘soul force’. He moved nations. And this guy, forging a way up the subway stairs with a child and a chair, showed us what ‘soul force’ looks like every day of the week.

Release that. Activate that. Cultivate that in your life. Awaken to the blessings around you that you are living. May you become aware in compassion. May you connect with others. May you express your gratitude to God, to yourself, to those you live and work with. May you see your love literally bloom in others. May your ordinary faith tap into extraordinary meaning as you channel what is divine in our lives. Amen.

Our first reading from Isaiah uses the image of Israel ‘awakening’ their faith after being destroyed and exiled. For years, they lived in depression from the trauma. And the prophet Isaiah tells them that God is at work in their midst. I read from Isaiah 52. “Awake, awake, Zion, clothe yourself in

spiritual strength. Put on garments of splendor… shake off your dust, for God redeems you for free…How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings and proclaim salvation, who point us towards what God is doing in our midst (v. 7). For we will see God's salvation and we shall see it together.

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[i] Lisa Miller, p. 170.