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Ashes to ashes, stardust to stardust

Donna Schaper | Mar. 5, 2014 Eco Catholic

If you want a spiritual practice, look outside Lent. And not just on Sundays, and please, don?t light a candle. Also ask the donor of your ashes to mark you not just as ashes to ashes, dust to dust, but ashes to ashes, stardust to stardust.

You are going somewhere. You are about to become a star. Carl Sagan?s Cosmos lit us up by reminding us that everybody who ever was is already up there overhead, blinking. Spiritual practice is becoming a star, every day, and not just in Lent.

Usually we become spiritual way too late, even though the opportunity to be spiritual is an ever-ready battery.

Spiritual practices are more like solar energy than anything else. They shine. They are an energy that creates more energy. Like solar, many people think they can?t afford the long-term investment. Thus we stick to electricity or Lent or Sundays or candles.

And of course, these spiritual surrogates are terribly, dangerously wrong. Those who can?t pray or relax or see will find somehow that they wish they had thanked or relaxed or seen. It?s just a question of how the play is going to end, after the surprises of the second act.

A spiritual practice is a deepening of the always and the everyday. It is washing the dishes as though you liked to, or flossing your teeth as though you loved your teeth, rather than just keeping the dentist from guilt-tripping you.

A spiritual practice is also pretty much anything that tussles with the pragmatic and takes pragmatism into something deeper than its obvious and worthy utility. Practice is not the opposite of pragmatic so much as it?s underwear -- what you wear close to your skin. Spiritual practice knows what ashes-to-ashes, stardust-to-stardust means.

Like the only Oscar nominated movie I have seen -- ?Captain Phillips? -- a spiritual practice develops when you identify with your oppressor, whose name is often yours.

I know, I am not the pirate movie type. In fact, when I realized I was watching a pirate movie, I decided not to tell anybody. It was an accident of tuning in on Jet Blue. But when the first-world captain?s eyes met the eyes of his Somali pirates, and I realized that he saw himself in them, saw his downward mobility as theirs, I realized I was watching a movie spiritually. I was watching a man move beyond the pragmatism of saving his ship and himself into something more nearly representing salvation.

Lots of people turn spiritual practices into confections. But they are not confection -- they are defections, when we disrupt the normal absurdities on behalf of the deeper absurdities. In those deeper absurdities, like pirating, truth is lurking, with a patch on its eye. Or a star?s twinkle, high above us.

Everyone sees the writing on the wall. Most of us assume it is addressed to someone else. Everyone knows that we should be grateful for the food on our plates or the teeth in our mouths. Very few of us experience gratitude. Spiritual practices train and trick and prod our unconscious into consciousness. The word ?Duh? comes to mind.

This weekend, I had to go to an Oscar?s potluck. The invitation came with orders: bring a dish that comes out of one of the movies. We were to be clever, erudite and also good cooks.

I was having some social anxiety about my dish. Actually, I was having existential anxiety about my place in the starry universe. I just let the dish carry it. After all, I had only seen one nominated movie. I started throwing something at a pot and all of a sudden I started having fun with it.

I had some red pepper flakes left over from another party, and some leftover vegetable broth. There were those dappled beans that had been in that jar for way too long and the venison in our freezer. All of a sudden, a chili developed that had to find a reason, in the conversation, for existing. A fragment dish, I?ll call it.

From a chore, making the chili turned out to be fun. That is a spiritual practice: a deepening of supper through dinner to dining. I wasn?t the only person at the party wondering if her offering was worthy, existentially or practically. I think I will call it what Captain Phillips wished he had to eat, while starving, on his own way to stardust.

The hostess made a salmon/avocado sculpture that resembled the Oscar statue. She was more a star than I. But we are all stars.

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