

Along the track

Running on Empty

Have you ever been in the situation where you are running out of petrol, stuck in traffic on a freeway perhaps; running late for an important appointment; or driving on a country road with no towns or petrol stations in sight? Running on empty: How far can you really go? That can make us pretty tense, impatient, prone to making mistakes, taking short cuts.

How far can we run on empty? That's a good question as far as our spiritual dimension goes too – how far can we run on empty? We do something about running out of petrol. If it is true that we are not human beings having a spiritual experience, rather we are spiritual beings having a human experience, what do we do to guard against running on spiritually empty? What am I overlooking in life? What nourishes me? Am I doing enough to provide it? What happens to me if I don't?

Sometimes we have to re-awaken our recognition and understanding of the spiritual dimension of life in order to understand our need to nourish it. The pace and pressures of life, the fact that we live in an increasingly secular society don't give us much time or incentive to explore 'the other dimension'. We can ignore it but we are the lesser for it. Ignoring it can make us like the driver running on empty – impatient, tense, a bit insensitive, prone to making mistakes and taking short cuts, too focused on the one thing. We are diminished by it, not our true selves, what we are meant to be.

Taking steps to discover or remind ourselves what it is that nourishes us spiritually, why and how, will never be wasted. Our search for meaning in life, a sense of purpose and connectedness with each other and the whole of creation extends across creeds and cultures. What triggers this search for our spiritual dimension is, however, very personal and unique.

Each of us is created to be unique, with our own special gifts and talents; we have different needs, different ways of reacting. What triggers our awareness of our spiritual dimension can also be very different. Some people are very visual, some love music, some are very practical, some artistic and creative, some thrive on activity and crowds around them, others love silence and solitude. Some like routine, others find chaos exciting and challenging. For some people their spirituality is triggered and nourished by a particular faith, for others it may be from their relationship with the natural world. Or it may come from a combination of all these – they are not mutually exclusive. One size does not fit all.

In my callow youth, I could not stand Gregorian chant – others around me loved it, were inspired by it. I just got impatient! Perhaps I look on it a bit differently now with a greater appreciation of its history and beauty. What triggers or nourishes our spiritual dimension may also change over time.

We are probably all aware of some of the activities that make us more aware of our spiritual side - the joys of love and friendship, taking time to think about the gifts in our lives, reading, occasions or events that make us think of our own mortality, learning or doing something new, appreciating the wonders of nature, and becoming deeply moved by music or film or art, the passion we employ in the things we love and support. It is important that we don't just stop there. They are more than just a passing thought or an enjoyable experience. All of these are invitations to go deeper, to treasure where we find the sacred in our lives. They may lead us on to explore the treasures of the spiritual and practices to be found in our religious traditions.

Pope Francis recently offered a few more hints to help us get in touch with our spiritual side*.

Stop being negative, he urged. "Needing to talk badly about others indicates low self-esteem. That means, 'I feel so low that instead of picking myself up I have to cut others down,'" the Pope said. "Letting go of negative things quickly is healthy." Instead of talking about others who frustrate us, Pope Francis advises that it's healthy to let negative things pass quickly and quietly.

It's good advice, isn't it! We can spend our lives thinking of *if onlys*, the *why nots*, and *maybe whens*. We look around for someone or some event to blame for a whole host of things. We can, at times, try to justify our own beliefs by putting down those of others, by criticising, judging in a negative way. Being negative about others helps us avoid the truth about ourselves. It's tough being around negative people all the time – they can sap energy, enthusiasm, creativity - their own as well as others.

On the other hand, the Pope advises that we "be giving of yourself to others" rather than withdrawing into oneself, resulting in the risk of stagnation. And as he put it, "stagnant water is the first to be corrupted." A healthy spirituality connects us with others, it is outward looking rather than being overly introspective. Spirituality ought to foster in us qualities such as love, generosity and compassion, honesty with ourselves as well as to others, patience, tolerance, and hope.

Finally, the Pope urges us to a "healthy sense of leisure" so we need to make time for art, literature, and spending time with families — even if work schedules make it difficult. Despite the pressures of consumerism which bring so much anxiety we ought to "proceed calmly" in life, he advises. That engenders "the ability to move with kindness and humility."

Surely that is the hallmark of the person at peace within, a person running on full rather than winging it on empty!

*Pope Francis Argentine weekly "Viva" July 27, 2014

Regards
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