

Sacred Rhythms by Ruth Haley Barton; Ch.1 - Longing for More

An Invitation to Spiritual Transformation

The reason we are not able to see God is the faintness of our desire.

Meister Eckhart

One of the things that still surprises me this far along in life is how and when and with what power my longing stirs. Certain times are fairly predictable—times when I am tired from travel and missing home and family, seasons when I have been overly busy and long to be with God for God's own sake, certain moments in the holiday season when I hunger for a deeper experience of the meaning of things. To some extent I have grown accustomed to these longings and know what to do with them. But there are other times when longing ambushes me with a ferocity that seems all out of proportion to what is going on at the moment; it catches me up short with the awareness that something here warrants my attention. Although the experience of longing and desire is often bittersweet, it reminds me that I am alive in ways that I want to be alive.

A few years ago our daughter Bethany was celebrating her fifteenth birthday. It was September of her first year in high school, and all she wanted was to have a party with fifty of her closest friends. (That was *after* she had gone over the guest list with a fine-toothed comb and whittled it down from seventy-five!) While it was a little daunting to think about hosting the first party of the year for fifty new high-schoolers, it was what she wanted, so our whole family rallied to the occasion. Bethany's older sister, Charity (who was a senior at the time) corralled some of her friends to organize and do the judging for a karaoke competition. Very cool. I fixed and served the food. My husband, Chris, patrolled the premises to make sure visitors carrying unwanted substances didn't find their way to the party. Younger sister Haley just tried to stay out of the way.

At one point in the evening, I became alert to the fact that something important was going on, something that was connected with the deepest longings of my heart. As kids were going through the food line and fixing their hamburgers and hot dogs, they were all very polite, but there was one young man whose expression of appreciation was so genuine that I stopped what I was doing and paid attention. He said, "Thanks for letting us do this, Mrs. Barton. This is so much fun!"

I looked up from serving, met his eyes and said, "You're welcome. We really enjoy having you!"

He paused mid-ketchup, returned my gaze and said with incredulity, "Really?" as though he was completely unaccustomed to being enjoyed.

The young man's unguarded response combined disbelief and wonderment so sweetly that I was flooded with awareness and suddenly saw my life in a way I had never seen it before. Something inside me stood at attention and said, *This is my life. This is what it's like to be all the way here now rather than always longing for something else. This is my life as it is meant to be lived in God.*

That moment passed as quickly as it came, one of many that made it a delightful evening. Our whole family had banded together to do something special for one of us, and it felt good. When it was all over, we collapsed in our family room, utterly exhausted, and reflected on the evening. We laughed about the karaoke contest and commented on who could sing and who couldn't. We took a leisurely look at the gifts Bethany had received. We talked about what a good time everyone seemed to have and how polite and appreciative they had been. And the thought came anew: *This is my best self. This is who I want to be more and more, by God's grace. These are the moments I will remember on my deathbed and say, "That was what I was meant for."*

Then it ambushed me—my longing, that is. A prayer welled up from the depths of my being, a prayer so full of desire that it was barely articulate: "O God, give me more moments like this—moments when I am fully present to you and to others in love. Moments when I am connected with what is purest and most authentic within me and able to respond to your presence in that place. I want to live my life in such a way that there is more of this!"

There are other moments, as well, when longing stirs. There was the perilous summer when I turned forty. As the actual birthday approached and the party was being planned, I realized that I did not want a party where people stood around holding a drink and making small talk. This time it was the longing for love that took me by surprise. When I really listened, I realized that what I most wanted was to give and receive love—really—on that day. I wanted to be with friends and family. I wanted to have time. I wanted to share from the heart and know that we had seen each other and heard each other and put into words how much we mattered to each other. How surprising to notice that underneath the noise and activity of my "adult" life, such simple and tender longings stirred.

And so that's what we did. We canceled the party, and instead I had opportunities to spend time individually with those most precious to me throughout the day: breakfast, lunch, dinner and everything in between! What a wonderful day it was—a day full of love given and received.

Then there are the times when I am aware of my brokenness, and a longing for real, fundamental change groans within me. In one season of my life I experienced a betrayal so deep that for quite some time I was almost paralyzed in relating to anyone outside of my most intimate circle of family and friends. While I had the normal feelings of anger and outrage, sadness and grief, there was an even deeper longing—the longing to be healed. I was aware that I had turned inward, had closed my heart. Distrust and suspicion had made me hard-edged and withdrawn, and I found myself crying out to God to do something within me that I could not do for myself. Something that would enable me, once again, to be given over to God and to others with the kind of trust and abandon I had known before the betrayal.

Regardless of the pain I had experienced, I did not want to live forever in a hardened and broken state. For the first time, the Jesus Prayer—uttered by the blind and the broken in Christ's day—began to pray itself in me unbidden: *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner*. I knew that whatever needed to be done in me, God would have to do, for I was incapable of fixing myself.

Naming Our Desire in Christ's Presence

When was the last time you felt it—your own longing, that is? Your longing for love, your longing for God, your longing to live *your* life as it is meant to be lived in God? When was the last time you felt a longing for healing and fundamental change groaning within you?

Do not rush past this question; it may be the most important question you ever ask. But this is hard, I know. In religious circles we are much more accustomed to silencing our desire, distancing ourselves from it, because we are suspicious and afraid of its power. *Isn't there something better I should be doing with my time?* we ask ourselves. *Something a little less dangerous and unpredictable? Something more selfless and spiritual?* And besides, desire is such a volatile thing. Are not my desires shot through with human deception and sinful urges? What if they overtake me and propel me down a path I ought not travel? Worse yet, what if I touch that place of longing and desire within me and let myself really feel how deep it goes, only to discover that those desires cannot be met? What will I do with myself then? How will I live with desire that is awake and alive rather than asleep and repressed?

These are some of the deepest questions of the human soul, and they defy any attempt at simplistic answers. In the midst of my own discomfort with such penetrating questions, I have found it surprising but also reassuring to enter into the biblical story and discover that Jesus himself routinely asked people questions that helped them to get in touch with their desire and name it in his presence. He often brought focus and clarity to his interactions with those who were spiritually hungry by asking them, “What do you want? What do you want me to do for you?” Such questions had the power to elicit deeply honest reflection in the person to whom they were addressed, and opened the way for Christ to lead them into deeper levels of spiritual truth and healing.

In the story of Jesus' encounter with blind Bartimaeus on the Jericho road, for instance, the question about desire is the pivot point. We don't know how long Bartimaeus had been spending his days begging by the side of the road, but on this particular day Bartimaeus heard that Jesus was passing by, and he had a sense of new spiritual possibility. Perhaps Jesus could do something for him that no one else had been able to do. Perhaps Jesus could do what he had been hoping for and dreaming of for so long.

But it was noisy and crowded in the city that day, and it would be hard to get anyone's attention, let alone someone as busy and important as this popular young teacher, who was always, it seemed, surrounded by disciples and questioners. In order to get Jesus' attention above the din of the crowd, Bartimaeus had to reach deep within, touch that place of fundamental human need and desire, and cry out from that place. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

And Jesus heard him that day, above all the other voices that were clamoring for his attention. The honesty, the desperation, the humanness of the cry was completely arresting. The people around him were embarrassed by such an honest expression of need and tried to silence him, but Bartimaeus's soul cry so captured Jesus' attention that it stopped him in his tracks. He stood still in the middle of the road and summoned Bartimaeus to himself. As they stood face to face, Jesus asked the question that required Bartimaeus to name his desire: “What do you want me to do for you?”

Now if I had been in Bartimaeus's shoes, I might have gotten a little impatient with a question whose answer was so obvious. “What do you mean, ‘What do you want me to do

for you?' Isn't it obvious? And besides, this is getting a little personal, don't you think? We don't know each other *that* well!"

But on another level, the level where the spiritual journey is unfolding, it is a question that penetrates to the very core of our being. And it *is* very, very personal. It brings us face to face with our humanness, our vulnerability, our need. If we let it, such a question strips away the layers of pretense and superficiality to expose what is truest within us. And that is a very tender place indeed.

Your desire for more of God than you have right now, your longing for love, your need for deeper levels of spiritual transformation than you have experienced so far is the truest thing about you. You might think that your woundedness or your sinfulness is the truest thing about you or that your giftedness or your personality type or your job title or your identity as husband or wife, mother or father, somehow defines you. But in reality, it is your desire for God and your capacity to reach for more of God than you have right now that is the deepest essence of who you are. There is a place within each one of us that is spiritual in nature, the place where God's Spirit witnesses with our spirit about our truest identity. Here God's Spirit dwells with our spirit, and here our truest desires make themselves known. From this place we cry out to God for deeper union with him and with others.

Desire as the Beginning of the Spiritual Journey

When we pay attention to our longing and allow questions about our longing to strip away the outer layers of self-definition, we are tapping into the deepest dynamic of the spiritual life. The stirring of spiritual desire indicates that God's Spirit is already at work within us, drawing us to himself. We love God because he first loved us. We long for God because he first longed for us. We reach for God because he first reached for us. Nothing in the spiritual life originates with us. It all originates with God.

So it is that the spiritual life begins in this most unlikely place. It begins with the longing that stirs way down deep, underneath the noise, the activity, the drivenness of our life. But it is not always comfortable to acknowledge such longing, and the direction that such an admission takes us is different for all of us.

When James and John (and later on their mother) answered Jesus' question about desire by asking that they be granted positions of prominence in Jesus' kingdom—one on his right and one on his left—it exposed false ambition that was detrimental to them and to the community of disciples. Similarly, there are desires within us that work against the life of the Spirit within us—desires rooted in selfish ambition, pride, lust, fear, self-protection and many other unexamined motives. These desires lurk within all of us, and that is why giving any attention at all to desire feels like opening up Pandora's box. But it is even riskier to refuse to acknowledge what's real within us, because whether we acknowledge them or not, these dynamics are at work wielding a subterranean power over us. Their power only gets stronger the longer we repress them. How much safer it is for ourselves and everyone around us if we open up our desires in Jesus' presence and allow him to help us sift through them.

As disturbing as it is to be exposed in this way, sometimes it is exactly what we need. For then Jesus can gently strip away that which is false and destructive in our desire and fan into flames those desires that are good and true.

Listening to Jesus' response to James and John, you can almost feel his compassion and love for them. "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" (Matthew 20:23). The disciples' ability to be this honest with Jesus about the deeper dynamics stirring within them was a new kind of intimacy that opened the way for him to begin the process of making right that which was not right within them. One can only hope that such a penetrating comment and question served to begin releasing these disciples from desires that were not their truest ones. If they had not been honest with Jesus about what was going on inside, their darker desires would have functioned underground and probably have eventually destroyed their relationships with the other disciples and their ministry.

Opening up our desire in God's presence—even when we're not sure which parts are true and which are false—is humbling, but it gives God a chance to help us sort it all out. There is another possibility as well. Sometimes when we open up our desire in Christ's presence, we find ourselves needing to discern what is our part and what is God's part in this process of living into our heart's deepest desire. When Jesus met the paralyzed man at the Pool of Bethesda, his question about desire was even more pointed. "Do you want to be made well?" he asked (John 5:6). In other words, How bad do you want it? Do you want it bad enough to do something about it?

How Bad Do You Want It?

I have spent a lot of time on the sidelines of youth soccer games and have witnessed all sorts of obnoxiousness on the part of soccer parents. But every so often a bit of truth presents itself in this unlikeliest of places. One day a particularly overbearing father was yelling at two fourth-grade girls who were converging on the ball and trying to win it for their team. In an attempt to be motivating, he screamed (among other things), "How bad do you want it? You've got to really want it!"

Though I was annoyed by such a display of unbridled emotion by an adult at a children's game, I was struck by the truth contained in his statement. The depth of desire has a great deal to do with the outcome of our life. Often, those who accomplish what they set out to do in life are not those who are the most talented or gifted or who have had the best opportunities. Often they are the ones who are most deeply in touch with how badly they want whatever they want; they are the ones who consistently refuse to be deterred by the things that many of us allow to become excuses.

The more authentic our desires, the more they touch upon our identities and also upon the reality of God at the heart of our being. Our most authentic desires spring ultimately from the deep inner wells where the longing for God runs freely.

PHILLIP SHELDRAKE, *BEFRIENDING OUR DESIRES*

The paralytic was full of excuses: "I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." Jesus'

response, in effect, was “Never mind all that. Stand up, take up your mat and walk” (John 5:6-9). Then the paralyzed man reached within himself to that place of deep desire and deep faith and did what he was told. And somehow his willingness to follow his desire opened the way for him to experience Jesus’ healing power.

Jesus’ interactions with the people he came in contact with during his life on earth make it clear that desire, and the willingness to name that desire in Christ’s presence, is a catalytic element of the spiritual life. It is one of the most powerful motivators for a life lived consistently with intentionality and focus. Beyond that, the willingness to open up this tender and sometimes volatile place in Christ’s presence is part of the intimacy we seek. Somehow it creates the possibility for Christ to be with us in a way that meets our truest need. It enables us to rise up from our place by the side of the road so that we can actually get on the path to spiritual transformation and follow Christ.

Practice

Settle into a comfortable position that allows you to remain alert. Breathe deeply in this moment as a way of releasing any tension you might be holding and becoming aware of God’s presence, which is closer than your breath. Allow yourself to enjoy God’s presence in quietness for a few moments.

When you feel ready, imagine yourself in the historical setting of the story of Bartimaeus as it unfolds in Mark 10:46-52, or imagine yourself in your own place of need. Read the story slowly, seeing yourself as the person needing something from Christ and calling out to him from the noisy crowd. How do you approach him or try to get his attention? What words do you use? What emotions do you feel?

Imagine that in response to your cry, Jesus turns to you. Now you are face to face with one another. Allow yourself the full realization that you have Jesus’ complete attention (because you do!) and hear his question addressed to you: “What do you want me to do for you?”

Do not be afraid of emotion; it is important that you let yourself feel how deep your desire goes. You may need to sit with the question and your response for quite some time before you have fully gotten in touch with your heart’s desire or have fully expressed it. Give this question and its answer all the time it needs. You may want to go for a walk with the question, lie in the grass and feel the warmth of the sun, curl up under a blanket, journal your response, engage in writing or artistic expression.

If you choose to journal, it might help to begin with the statement “God, what I most need/want from you right now is . . .” and then let your thoughts flow. Listen for Christ’s response.

Don’t feel as if you have to do anything; simply relish the intimacy and richness that come when we are able to “be with what is” in God’s presence.