

The Way Down

A spiritual journey that includes others

Inspiration abounds in spiritual teachings, and if we're not stuck on any one ideology or belief system, we can hear truth from a spectrum of truth-seekers. I was born into a Christian family and later studied a number of religions, but Jesus taught me two things: love God and love each other. This worked well for me, but I needed something else...more. I became a practicing Buddhist in my 30's. I needed the practice of meditation to calm the interior storm. T'ai Chi, dance, and surfing prepped me for meditation and reminded me that my default position is 'happy'. Today my inspiration comes from insight...and from others...and from serving others.

I just returned from visiting my son, who lives, works, and practices his beliefs at a soup kitchen in NYC. His life of service is an inspiration to me, reminding me to keep giving, even when I feel my own limitations...of time, money, energy. And every time I do, I am refreshed, filled, blessed.

One of my favorite teachers of all time (being a spiritual eclectic, I've had many) showed me – after a lifetime of seeking the path up – the path down. Now instead of buying books or going on spiritual retreat seeking another holy grail, I practice a quiet life and just sit. Then I lean into an act of service, whether it's rounding up donations for the food bank or taking reading materials to a shut in...babysitting for a friend, listening to my family, handing all my change to a street beggar, cooking for my grandkids...

See if these words from Pema Chodron (*When Things Fall Apart*) don't inspire you to more service in your community:

“Spiritual awakening is frequently described as a journey to the top of a mountain. We leave our attachments and our worldliness behind and slowly make our way to the top. At the peak we have transcended all pain. The only problem with this metaphor is that we leave all the others behind--our drunken brother, schizophrenic sister, tormented animals and friends. Their suffering continues, unrelieved by our personal escape.

In the process of discovering bodhichitta, the journey goes down, not up. It's as if the mountain pointed toward the center of the earth instead of reaching into the sky. Instead of transcending the suffering of all creatures, we move toward the turbulence and doubt. We jump into it. We slide into it. We tiptoe into it. We move toward it however we can. We explore the reality and unpredictability of insecurity and pain, and we try not to push it away.

If it takes years, if it takes lifetimes, we let it be as it is. At our own pace, without speed or aggression, we move down and down and down. With us more millions of others, our companions in awakening from fear. At the bottom we discover water, the healing water of bodhichitta.

Right down there in the thick of things, we discover the love that will not die.”

Many years ago HH the Dalai Lama gave me this prayer as spiritual practice, a take on that of St. Francis and perfect for this...and every...season:

"May I become at all times, both now and forever
A protector for those without protection
A guide for those who have lost their way
A ship for those with oceans to cross
A bridge for those with rivers to cross
A sanctuary for those in danger
A lamp for those without light
A place of refuge for those without shelter
And a servant to all in need"

Giving to others is a cure for whatever ails, for spiritual doubt or confusion, and a sure path to great joy. May our paths turn into personal practice as we find our way through these turbulent times, helping our neighbors and our global family. May you find the sweetness of living your prayers...and your joy. Blessings, kj

Karen Jeffery is a mother of three, grandmother of six, a full time student at SOU, consultant, writer and volunteer.