

About the Heart by Brother David Steindl-Rast

Dear Brother David,

I'd like to bring up a question that has been on my mind for some time. It has to do with what we call the heart. The heart is a great symbol in spiritual life and in Christianity especially. But the fact is that I don't know what the heart is. When people talk about the heart they seem to do so in a number of ways. In a general sense, it seems to refer to the feelings; at other times, to love and devotion. It also refers to courage and faithfulness (as when a fighter is said to have heart). And sometimes it refers to one's basic attitude toward life (as when we say, he had a change of heart).

Probably there are other meanings, and probably they are all interrelated. But with some of them, I feel left out. I tend to think of the heart in terms of courage, and faith in terms of faithfulness. I don't find in myself those emotions and feelings, especially love and devotion, which seem so intimately associated both with the heart and religion. So the question comes down to this: What is the heart? And do I need to develop that, or should I leave it alone, and follow my own path (centered more on intellect and will)? And if I should need that, how in practice do I develop the heart?

Brother David responds:

There are questions which ought to be answered with a strong voice, but the question you have asked me today should be answered in a whisper. If we speak at all about the heart, we must speak softly and sparingly. And yet, this is not a topic we could simply leave alone. Concern for the heart means concern for the sacred secret of our innermost being. Your question zeros in on the crucial task of our spiritual life, on our "need to develop the heart," as you call it. "With utmost concern take care of your heart," says the Bible (Proverbs 4:23), and this is simply the biblical expression for what we call spiritual practice.

Since most of us in the West have roots in the biblical tradition, intellectual honesty demands that we try to understand at least its key concepts, and "heart" is certainly one of them. We have a right, moreover, to search for the authentic meaning of these key concepts. As we set out on this search we make two surprising discoveries: For one thing, spiritual practice really exists in biblical tradition (there is more to it than Sunday school, Hebrew camp, or catechism classes would have ever made us suspect); and while the biblical approach is distinctly different, the practical goal is far more similar to that of other paths than doctrinal differences might have let us to believe. Both discoveries hinge in a special way on the key word "heart."

Your question, "What is the heart?" provides a fine starting point. Surely the heart isn't merely a symbol for our emotional life. Using a colloquial expression, we might say of an overemotional fellow that he has "the heart of a whale, but the brain of a mosquito." Well, that's not the way the Bible uses the term. In biblical language, "heart" means our whole being, not one or another part of it; rather the center, the source, the taproot of our being. With St. Augustine we could say, "Give me a lover, and s/he will know what I mean!" When you say to someone, "I will give you my heart," you do not mean part of yourself, not even the best part. You mean your whole being.

We cannot even say that the bodily heart becomes here a symbol for a purely spiritual concept. "Heart" stands for an insight which is conceived before we ever begin to think conceptually. It stands for the fact that I can gather myself together and give myself away in that give-and-take which we call life. And, since I not only have a body but am some-body, this ingathering and outpouring finds expression in my pulsating heart. Located at the center of my body, at the intersection of its horizontal and its vertical axes, halfway between sex organs and brain, my heart constantly takes in and sends out the blood which keeps my body alive. As long as the heart is alive, it constantly sends forth and takes in.

Out-pouring and ingathering, journey and home, are inseparably united in its dynamic reality. We can learn to understand some of the mystery of the heart - our own mystery - by looking at the image of home and journey. Only with reference to a home is our journey truly a journey: otherwise we would merely be drifting. "Home is where we start from," says T.S. Eliot in Four Quartets . Yet, quoting from the same poem,

"What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning."

We may call this place home or we may call it heart. As point of reference it constitutes the decisive difference between an explorer and a drifter. The explorer is characterized by courage (a word that stems from the same linguistic root as heart), while the drifter has lost heart. Home and journey together constitute the creative polarity of the heart, the two dimensions we must cultivate if we want to "develop the heart."

But "how, in practice, do we go about it?" you ask. What we have just now considered may have brought us one step closer to an answer. We shall have to do both: find our true home and venture out. But we shall accomplish neither, unless we accomplish both.

To understand in what sense the heart is to be a home, we must realize that the prototype of the home in biblical tradition is not the sturdy house, but the "sukkah," the booth or tabernacle built of green branches. On the Feast of Sukkoth (or Tabernacles) a poor Jewish family may build one of these booths on a fire-escape between tenement houses in New York City and there celebrate the joyous memory of the time when the Chosen People on their journey through the wilderness knew what a home was. It was then that the sides were so loosely constructed that one could see through to the neighbor's booth, and the roof was open enough to let one see the stars in the desert night; this is still the traditional way of building the sukkah. Awareness of the Mystery above and of the neighbor next door (supporting, or in need of support) - this double awareness constitutes in biblical tradition the place of the home, the heart. To face the aloneness we feel when we look up to the stars, and to face the needs of those near us, these two together make us in practice develop the heart by bringing us home where we belong. Yet, let us not forget that this is a sojourner's shelter.

The journey, on the other hand, is always a journey home: “...the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started...” However, until we arrive we are always venturing out into the unknown. We have no assurance. We must find our own path; no other can be substituted. We need courage. Rabbi Levi Yitzhak, one of the Hassidic Saints, beautifully expressed this courage of the sojourner when he prayed; “Lord of the World...I do not beg you to reveal to me the secret of your ways - I could not bear it. But show me one thing; show it to me more clearly and more deeply; show me what this, that which is happening at this very moment, means to me, what it demands of me, what you, Lord of the World, are telling me by way of it.”

“Show me what it means to me!” This is the prayer of the heart on its dark journey. As the eye perceives light and the ear perceives sound, so the heart is the organ that perceives meaning. But this presupposes the courage to listen to the message and to rise to what it demands of me - the courage to say “Yes.”

You might have been wondering where love would come in. This, now, is the point. Love is the unconditional “yes” of the heart. Or better still, as e.e. cummings put it, “What yes is to if, love is to yes.” The “yes” of love is all-embracing. If we said “yes” to the journey without saying “yes” to the home, our courage might deteriorate into faithless recklessness. But if we said “yes” to the home only, not also to the journey, our faithfulness might shrivel into narrow timidity. Only the all-embracing “yes” of love closes the arc between the poles of the heart, thus welding together faithfulness and courage. We learn to say the “yes” of faithfulness by being faithful, and the “yes” of courage by overcoming our fears one by one. It takes a lifetime and death is the final test. To say “yes” with one’s whole heart, that is spiritual practice according to biblical tradition — at least this is one way of putting it.

You can see for yourself how close this comes in practice to the goal of other spiritual paths: Zen, Yoga, even to a Yaqui way of knowledge. In the Christian tradition the “yes” of the heart is said with a view to the One Who is called “God’s ‘Yes’” (2 Cor. 1:20). He was born on a journey and spent his life trying to bring the whole world home to where he lived; at the intersection of God’s “yes” to us and our “yes” to God and neighbor. This intersection is reflected in the two beams of the cross on which he died. His heart was opened by a soldier’s lance, and it stood open while many passed by on their journey.

Peace to you!

(Or shall I wish you “con-cord” which literally means harmony of hearts?)

Your brother David

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and the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”