

Spirit Bathing for the Worried and Beleaguered by Patricia Adams Farmer

For all who feel deeply about the world, for all who mourn a planet under siege, for all who care about justice and human dignity and democracy and the welfare of the most vulnerable — these are hard times. Shocking and dispiriting days. I feel it, you feel it.

When is it all going to turn around? It will turn around, I'm convinced, but at a great price of waiting too long. My theory is that we humans are an eleventh-hour species, waiting until it is almost too late to do anything to save ourselves. But we do, history tells. We do. Barely. By the skin of our teeth. While the future remains open with no guarantees, I truly believe that the current moral sickness will break like a fever and we will see better days. And we who care and dare and dream and choose kindness are part of that recovery, even if we can't see the results at present.

But this is little consolation while morality and human decency continue to go south. For example, you may be made of sterner stuff, but when I hear hateful, toxic rhetoric day after day, the words seem to waft out from my TV, settling on my skin, leaving behind a layer of dirt and muck. There is no use trying to deny what's happening or run from it — we can't. There is no use wallowing in despair — we mustn't. What we can and must do is be attentive to our souls in the midst of our work for better days.

This is where "Spirit Bathing" comes in. It is a form of soul care. Spirit Bathing invites the worried and beleaguered into the flowing waters of grace and reassurance. It cleanses and soothes and refreshes our souls with goodness that is still with us, joy that is still in us, and laughter that bubbles up against all efforts to stamp it out.

Spirit Bathing is highly individual in practice, but certain universal forms draw us in. One, of course, is "forest bathing," a term coined by the Japanese, in which the stressed out and urbanized go deep into the trees and discover not only superb air for the lungs, but rest for the soul. When I practice forest bathing, I can truly let go, not trying to better myself, but rather just be myself — myself with the trees: cleansing green, dappled light, the hum of cicada, and the endless varieties of birdsong. That's a Spirit Bath.

Other forms of Spirit Bathing that appeal universally include walking along a beach or a lake or in a garden. The solace of books can revive a dampened spirit, opening the pours to fresh hope and other worlds. Music and art and a hundred different forms of craft and creativity can soothe and heal. Sometimes, just being with joyful people can wash away despair.

Spirit Bathing: Notes from a Minister

Being a minister does not automatically make me an expert in Spirit Bathing. Sometimes it makes it harder. In my vocation, I cannot avoid the horrors; rather, I am drenched in

them because I have to address them, struggle with them, denounce them, all without running off half the congregation. Granted, I do reap a measure of uplift when preparing my sermon each week — probably more than it helps those who listen to said sermon on Sunday morning. At least I am forced to ground myself in the history of a religious text that may not always be to my liking but always stands against greed and firmly on the side of the vulnerable. And, of course, we all celebrate that seminal example of triumph of good over evil in the resurrection. It's good for the soul, all this study and struggle and sermon writing, but not relaxing. Not like a bath. A bath is not work. It's a kind of letting go like in the old bath oil commercial: "Calgon, take me away!"

Traditional prayer, meditation, yoga, and all the ancient and reliable spiritual disciplines are also good for the soul — and necessary, too. Still, when thinking in terms of bathing, the word "discipline" gets in the way. If I want to be "taken away" Calgon style, then I need not only these steady and reliable companions on my spiritual journey, but also more free-style forms of prayer and practice: the spontaneous gladness arising from a variety of experiences and places and things and people.

As expressed in a thousand ways in the Brussats' book *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, the Spirit resides not only in formal religious rituals and spiritual practices, but in everyday life — nature, a cat's eyes, a beautiful painting, a colorful salad, a lover's embrace, a new place. This means that I can Spirit Bathe anywhere, anytime. I can be in my kitchen or kneeling over a flowerbed. I can be at a rock concert for that matter or on top of a grassy hill gazing down at a meadow filled with wildflowers in a riot of colors.

As a process thinker, I see God fully at home in the world, a companion to our joys and sorrows — the "fellow sufferer who understands" (Whitehead). This means that a Spirit Bath can have two meanings: one refers to my own spirit that needs renewal, and one refers to that larger sense of Spirit — bathing in God's presence and the good news that God is in every nook and cranny of the world. Spirit Bathing, then, is the practice of daily re-connection to that deep gladness, a reassurance of the divine presence in the world.

Sometimes, when our own gift of empathy becomes a curse—that is, when we feel as if the world is collapsing right inside of our souls—we can turn on the tap of that Great Empathy and immerse ourselves in the love that sustains and comforts and makes the world more bearable.

I thank writer Elizabeth Gilbert for her term "stubborn gladness" which she gleans from the poet Jack Gilbert. These days, we must stubbornly and relentlessly refuse to let despair take hold. In this way, Spirit Bathing is a form of resistance. My own stubborn gladness often takes place in the kitchen. I love my kitchen, and since childhood, I've loved baking — the mixing, the smell, the tastes, the sharing of joy! But recently, for health reasons, I had to change to a low-carb, sugar-free diet. Leaving behind my beloved baking seemed the end of all comfort and joy until I realized, with the help of the Internet, that if I just shift ingredients, I can still enjoy all my baked goods without all the carbs and sugar and be perfectly happy. In fact, the challenge has become a hobby — the creation of ironically low-carb treats. What fun to defy despair!

When I enter my kitchen for a baking session, I feel like a mad scientist entering a laboratory. I put on my white coat (in this case, a stained and tattered apron). I lay out an array of ingredient possibilities and begin experimenting over and over — trial and error, tasting, throwing out, starting over — until I find what works. When I open the oven and take out a delicious batch of coconut flour chocolate chip cookies (sweetened with monk

fruit), I am immersed in defiant joy, warm and deeply spiritual, but also earthy and delicious. Creative play in my kitchen means leaving behind a wildly messed up counter of broken eggshells and spilled vanilla and a cat licking the butter. Stubborn gladness takes many forms.

And all this messy free-for-all happens while I listen to library books on my iPhone. I do not mean serious, culturally relevant books that would improve my understanding of humanity or world events, but more along the lines of P. G. Wodehouse. While entering the ridiculously funny world of characters like Bertie Wooster and his Butler Jeeves, I am immersed in delight. Sometimes I listen to time-travel books or mysteries or anything wholly disconnected from the here and now. Escapist? You bet. But a necessary excursion in the service of our larger cause of mending the world. Caregivers of the desperately ill need just such an escape.

So, whether it's soaking my soul among trees or playing with alternative flours and alternative sugars and alternative universes, I bathe myself in soothing delights as part of my daily practice of soul care. When I emerge from the "tub" of letting go, I can take on the world again. But this time, the world won't take me. Soaking in the waters of gladness on a regular basis is a fragrant reminder of the Goodness that never forsakes us. It reminds us why we resist and what our values are. It assures us that we live in a world not only filled with violence and hate, but also stubbornly infused with divine surprise, delicious moments, and a flow of freshness that can sustain us through the worst of times — times just like these.