

Order of Service  
*Seek and You Will Find*  
December 6, 2009

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**Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting (after John O'Donoghue)**

We gather this day  
In the name of Silence,  
Womb of the Word,  
In the name of Stillness  
Home of Belonging,  
In the name of the Solitude  
Of the Soul and the Earth.  
Let us worship together.

**Meditation and Prayer (after John O'Donoghue)**

May you listen to your longing to be free.  
May you listen to your longing to know your way.  
May you listen to your longing to learn your truth.  
May you listen to your longing to know what matters most.  
May you listen to your longing to know your longing.

Amen.

**Readings**

*Book of Luke, 11.1*

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of the disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." Jesus said to them, When you pray, say:

Father-Mother, hallowed by your name.

May your dominion come.

Give us each day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins,

For we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.

And Jesus said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to serve.' And your friend answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though your friend will not get up and give you anything, because of being a friend, at least because of your persistence, the friend will get up and give whatever is needed.

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then...know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father-Mother give ...Spirit to those who ask!"

“Impassioned Clay,” by Ralph N. Helverson

Deep in ourselves resides the religious impulse.

Out of the passions of our clay it rises.

We have religion when we stop deluding ourselves

That we are self-sufficient, self-sustaining, or self-derived.

We have religion when we hold some hope beyond the present,

Some self-respect beyond our failures.

We have religion when our hearts are capable of leaping up at beauty,

When our nerves are edged by some dream in the heart.

We have religion when we have an abiding gratitude

For all that we have received.

We have religion when we look upon people

With all their failings

And still find in them good;

When we look beyond people to the grandeur in nature

And to the purpose in our own heart.

We have religion when we have done all that we can,

And then in confidence entrust ourselves to the life

That is larger than ourselves.

**Sermon** Seek and You Will Find

Rev. Bruce Davis (2007)

If you want something, ask for it. That doesn't mean the object of your desire will plop magically into your lap from the far heavens. Yet failing to make the request for what you want will leave you lacking for sure. Failing to be clear about your needs, you will rarely find your needs met in satisfying ways.

A friend of mine, John, tells this story from earlier in his life. He was a workshop leader in the human potential movement of the seventies and eighties. He was a popular group leader, and in the setting of an active workshop his gentle assertiveness and interpersonal effectiveness became a positive example for many of us who were his students. However, when it came to interpersonal relationships outside of the workshop setting he was shy and awkward.

John had just completed a large weekend seminar. It was the first time he'd worked with this particular co-leader, a woman about his same age who matched his vitality and dynamism hour after hour all weekend. They danced their leadership, with easy exchanges back and forth, modeling the quality of communication that they were teaching.

Late Sunday afternoon, when the conference was over and the participants had all left the hall, John realized that throughout the weekend he'd been wanting to get to know his co-leader socially. It was his plan to ask her out for Sunday dinner to begin an exploration of what he hoped might become a significant relationship. As they were gathering their papers, chatting comfortably, John turned to her, ready to ask her to dinner. At the moment he was about to ask, he saw a grimace on her face. He interpreted that facial expression this way: "Surely she wouldn't want to go out to dinner with a frog like me. She knows I'm about to ask her and she's struggling with how to say 'No!'" These self-sabotaging thoughts furrowed his own brow.

So he didn't ask. They finished cleaning up their stuff and they went their own separate directions.

Ten years later they met again. She was married, and John was between significant relationships. Reflecting on that weekend of work a decade before, John acknowledged that he had been really attracted to her but that when he was about to ask her to dinner she frowned. She replied that she was having some digestive disturbance, possibly from the lunch, and that that's why she'd been frowning. She also indicated that *she* was about to ask the same thing when she noticed John's furrowed brow and assumed he had no interest in dinner with her. The laugh they shared at their situation

was laced with the sadness of missed opportunity. How would their worlds have been different if they had, in that moment, *asked* for what they wanted?

There is great power in a clear request that is backed up by an authentic and deeply felt desire or need. *Intention* is the word that is often used these days to describe a want whose fulfillment is important to us. Intention means that in addition to a simple desire, we have some deeper commitment to the fulfillment of that desire. Whether or not we've come up with a plan of action, intention has power in it beyond the simple state of wanting.

The spiritual teacher Deepak Chopra suggests that intention, once it is deeply experienced and acknowledged, has infinite organizing potential of our life. Experiencing the intention in our mind and heart, we acknowledge to the universe as deeply and clearly as we can, what it is that we need. That silent acknowledgement is the "ask." Just as the butter will sit at the other end of the table until you ask, so the intention remains just a thought until there is a movement within that claims our commitment to that which we intend.

What happens next? Chopra indicates that once we have launched our intention into the stillness our job is to be patient and to observe. If we become overly goal-oriented toward the achievement of our intention in concrete ways that we understand and control, we may actually reduce the power of that intention. How, then, will our life respond to this intention? We have no idea. What is sure is that the intention will manifest in surprising ways. In fact, if we are not alert, we may fail to recognize the gifts that come out of that intention.

I acknowledged recently a recurrent dream that came up during my life as a physician. Innumerable people were coming too close to the edge of a cliff, representing dire illness and death, and I was able to rescue only a few. This dream itself came out of a desire to help more people than I was able to reach in the context of seeing patients one-at-a-time. I found myself longing for ways to help more people—to get some leverage on keeping

people away from the edge of the symbolic cliff. Out of this longing I began to do group educational visits for patients with high blood pressure and other chronic illnesses, but even this felt like a drop in the bucket.

Over time, amid feelings of never reaching enough people, that longing turned into an intention. Deep within I told myself that there must be ways to help more people. What had begun as a longing had become a commitment. Only I had no idea how this intention might manifest. I had asked the universe to provide me with leverage, but I could not know how it would show up.

The intention became realized the clearer I experienced it. I was invited to set up medical education programs on topics like medical ethics and prevention, providing the leverage to invite physician colleagues to expand the holistic impact of their work. That was a good start, but the longing didn't go away. It still wasn't enough.

I was surprised when I got a call from a senior medical leader to apply for a new post: Director of the Department of Prevention. It wasn't an outcome I even thought possible when I first began to ask the universe to respond to my intention for more leverage to help people. Within a year I had begun a major effort to help people stop smoking. In three years 50% of the smokers in a population of 300,000 had quit for good, dropping the rate from 24% to 12%. Of course this is not work that I did. It's work that I led and facilitated. Yet, it's an outcome that came directly from my deep longing to help and from my silent asking for help.

Jesus of Nazareth's words ring clear and true: "So I say to you, 'Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.'"

But it matters what we ask for and it matters how we ask. The clearer we are about the essence of the need and the more focused and committed we are when we acknowledge our intent, the more powerfully does that knock on the door reverberate in the halls of truth.

Finding the core of desire and longing are like peeling the proverbial onion. The poet Rainier Maria Rilke likened it to a rose, folding back petal

after peel to find the very essence of our yearning. In the traditions of the East breaking open the coconut symbolizes our moving beyond the superficial layers, the husk and the shell, revealing first the white meat and ultimately the delicate essence of coconut milk.

One of the great spiritual teachers of the Christian tradition in the second millennium was Ignatius of Loyola. Founder of the Jesuit order, Ignatius became a mystic after years as a courtier. What he experienced, and then taught, was that desire is *always* good. He indicated that desire and longing are the way that the divine invite us more deeply into the fullness of life. Yet, there is a caveat. The responsiveness of spirit depends on the work we have done to identify the deep need within that desire or longing.

Let's say I desire a thousand dollars. That's not a bad thing. I could just ask the universe for that. But what is my intention regarding the money? Let's say that I want some comfort, or that I want to give a gift that will lead to a loved one's comfort. That is a deeper expression of the same need. But is that the essence of my need? Maybe at the core of comfort I want happiness or safety for myself or my loved one. In just this way, Ignatius invites us to dig deeply into our longing before committing ourselves to an intention.

Once we are clear on what, within that desire or longing, would be most deeply fulfilling, it also becomes important *how* we do our asking. The more intimately this intention is experienced and acknowledged, the more powerful will be its manifestation, albeit in ways that are certain to surprise us. Between friends or partners, for example, if the "ask" comes at a moment of peace and quiet, when each has the other's full attention, the request will be delivered and heard clearly and powerfully. The response may come immediately or may be delayed, and the response may come in a surprising form.

Another circumstance of intimacy is just in the peace and quiet within your self. My mother continues to decline in her condition. At a superficial level my desire might be that she get better. But is that my real longing? Peeling back the rose petals, using Rilke's metaphor, I realize that I want her to have a comfortable passing. But, again, is comfort the deepest wish I have for her? How about peace, light, and joy? Now that's getting close to the core

of my longing. And so, in the quietude of my own heart, perhaps at the end of my meditation, I declare my intention and ask the universe for this gift of peace, light, and joy at the end of her life. Then, I let it go, and see in what surprising ways it may become manifest.

Just the other day I was sitting with her alone. She had few words, but her smile was radiant with joy, and she laughed with me out loud. I took her in her wheel chair out into the sunny day. She commented on the beauty, the peace, and the light. “Ask, and it will be given.”

In the peace, harmony, laughter, and love of the heart, at the center of that intimate relationship we have with Self and Life, we acknowledge a core intention. Then we patiently wait to see what comes of it. We are hardwired within to experience this process, and through the interconnected web of the universe we are hardwired also with others. It’s just a natural human process.

And yet, it is also the process of *prayer*. We need not have an image of an anthropomorphic God, and we need not plead our case to the saints as if we were in a court of law. Prayer is simpler than that. Prayer begins in the longing, leads to the intention, and is fulfilled in ways that will surely surprise us.

There’s something quite remarkable about the longing that we feel—maybe even something magical and mysterious. Often when I have felt longing in my life I have attended to the pain, the nostalgia, for what I *don’t* have. It’s the cup half empty, and I attend to the absence. But I’m realizing more and more that there’s something very cool about the experience of longing. Longing takes the shape of that for which we are longing. It’s the cup half full, and I attend to the *presence* of that my longing projects.

Longing for peace, in that intimate, centered place within, I can begin to taste peace. Longing for harmony, I can begin to feel harmony. Longing for laughter, I can tell that it is already beginning to percolate. Longing for love, I sense that quality of love growing in my own heart.

The life we yearn for is at hand. May we remember to ask for it.

Amen.

