

Bless The Lord, O My Soul
Psalm 104
September 24, 2017
Rev. Tom VandeStadt

Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy. Abraham Joshua Heschel

There is a crucial and central place in ourselves that is able to blossom only if connected to the presence of a huge net of other beings and entangled with the give-and-take of those relationships... This inner center is where we are most deeply alive because it is the "livingness," the aliveness as such, which stirs inside us.

Andreas Weber

Bless the Lord, O my soul.

What does it mean? Bless the Lord, O my soul.

What does it mean, not just intellectually, but experientially?

Not in the sense of asking, what is the correct definition of the word, bless?

And the word, soul?

And the title, the Lord?

That's not what I mean.

I'm not looking for left-hemisphere of the brain intellectual definitions. I'm not asking, how do you define soul, but rather, how do you experience your soul?

How do you experience blessing? What does it feel like, look like, sound like, taste like when you are blessing?

And who or what is your soul moved to bless when your soul is blessing the Lord? Maybe you like the title, "the Lord." Maybe you don't and never use it. But what is this reality to which the title, "The Lord," refers? How do you experience this reality? What is your relationship to this reality?

Bless the Lord, O my soul. What does it mean?

Or as Jimi Hendrix famously asked, are you experienced? Have you ever been experienced? Well, I have.

Let me share an experience I had this summer.

In June, I camped for a week on the Rio Grande Gorge in northern New Mexico, and I hiked every day in the mountains outside of Taos. Some of the trails up there are steep and strenuous, and they do wonders grounding me in my body, clearing my mind and opening my heart.

After camping and hiking for a week, I drove northwest of Taos to a ranch in the mountains where I participated in a 7-day silent meditation retreat with about 25 other people. While there, I slept at night in a tent next to a meadow of wild grasses and flowers, in a forest of ponderosa pine and aspen.

Every morning, just before sunrise, the birds woke me up. Not just a few birds gently breaking the silence now and then, but thousands of them whistling and whooping it up loudly in the forest canopy above me. And while it was still mostly dark, I stepped outside the tent into

the cold air and walked beside the meadow toward the ranch dining hall, where fresh hot coffee waited, and where I sat outside with a few other people to watch the sun rise.

On one of those mornings, I stepped outside the tent, walked along the meadow and saw a doe stepping gently around some pine trees. Just as I saw her, she saw me. We both stopped and stood, very still, silent. We looked into each other's eyes.

I don't know how long we stood looking at each other.

It's not that time stopped. Time didn't exist.

But then a thought popped into my mind: What day is this?

Another thought followed: I don't know. I have no idea.

And then another thought: The trees don't know what day it is. The doe doesn't know what day it is. The grass, the squirrels, the birds—they don't know what day it is.

Out here, in wild nature, there is no Monday or Tuesday or Wednesday. The doe doesn't work on weekdays and get the weekend off. The birds don't look at watches telling them when to sound the alarm. There are no names or numbers attached to weeks, months or years. No June, July or August. No 2015, 16 or 17.

Wild nature is free of those human constructs. Free of those ways we measure time, divide time, name time, number time, and incessantly organize and structure our lives by time.

On the edge of that meadow, as the doe and I looked into each other's eyes, I could sense sunlight seeping into the forest, my surroundings becoming brighter, the air getting warmer. But no ticking of the clock. No name or number for this particular sunrise. From those deeply ingrained human constructs of time, I was liberated.

It was simply first light, chilly air, birds, doe, meadow, trees, me.

I felt free, alive, joyful, grateful. I felt deep and expansive, completely at-one with where I was and who was with me. I felt natural. I felt love in my heart for everything, and love in my heart for the source of everything. I felt awe at the mystery and beauty of life. At the experience of aliveness.

I felt blessed.

Or better yet, I experienced myself participating in a blessing. I was both being blessed and offering blessing. I was participating in a blessed moment, one in which everything and everyone was giving and receiving the same blessing. Life and the source of life was one gigantic all-embracing blessing. One gigantic, all embracing act of giving and receiving. In this timeless moment.

How long did I stand there like that? I don't know.

It may have been one or two minutes, or 5 or 10 seconds. But it was powerful. It remained with me. When I close my eyes to meditate now, I can still see the doe and look into her eyes just long enough to remind me of how deeply and powerfully we can experience life sometimes.

Blessed. Blessing. Participating in one gigantic all-embracing blessed moment.

Or, if you prefer the language of our ancient spiritual ancestors: Bless the Lord, O my soul.

That's just one way that I've experienced my understanding of the words: Bless the Lord, O my soul. Some experiences have been less dramatic and powerful. Others far more so.

How I experience blessing the Lord may differ from how you experience blessing the Lord. But there may be some similarities to our experience. Perhaps the experience of being free, alive, joyful, grateful. Deep, expansive and at-one. The experience of boundless love for another, for all others, for the source of everything. The experience of awe or timelessness.

Bless the Lord, O my soul. I do hope these words are more than mere words for you, more than words you read in the Bible or recite in church liturgies without finding much meaning in them.

I hope these words move you to reflect on your life. On not just what you think about life, but how you feel about life, and how your life feels to you. How you experience life with all your senses. How you experience the sacred, the holy, the earth, other creatures, other people. And how you experience your relationships with them. How you experience what you receive from them, and what you give to them. Including the blessing of your soul.

Bless the Lord, O my soul.

What does it mean to you?