Columns
Horizons
Spirituality

Synchronized fireflies (Unsplash/Tony Phan)

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This past June, I was able to witness the synchronous fireflies in the Great Smoky Mountains. (Learn more about the fireflies here). As I delighted in the dance and light show, I started singing to the fireflies, “This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine.” I created verses just for these fireflies. This led me to reflect on my own light. Am I letting it shine? What is my light anyways?

Jesus said that we are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). I like to imagine that the Great Light that is God shines through each soul-prism to create a unique spectrum of light that is us. He also said that it is silly to hide our light and that it is meant to shine and give light to others (Matthew 5:15). I believe Jesus said this because we too often hide our light. But why would we do this?

I, like many of you, had experiences growing up that led me to some conclusions about who I am, how I should look and act, whether others are trustworthy, etc. Some of the messages I heard were spoken. However, many were my young mind’s attempt to make sense of the world and determine how to navigate it safely. This is a natural and good process we all go through. Some call it the development of the ego that helps us live in this material world. Thomas Merton called it the false self because many of the ideas and identities created are false and hide the truth of who we really are. They can hide our light.

I believe that the purpose of the spiritual journey is to re-member our true self, our light. This is what Jesus spoke of when he told us that we must lose ourselves (false self) to find ourselves (true self) (Mark 8:35). He warned us that we would profit nothing if we win in the eyes of the systems of the world and in the process lose our souls (Matthew 16:26). I imagine this is one reason Jesus went off alone to prayer – to remember who he was – to reconnect to his essence in God and his purpose.

What is the true self? Like any big truth, it is hard to define. Many great authors and mystics have written entire chapters and books to try to describe the true self. Richard Rohr’s Immortal Diamond comes to mind where he says that the true self is like the soul but bigger. At this point in my life, I would describe my true self as God within me, my divinity. My true self lives in oneness with the Source of All Being while also living within this body. This true self embodies the Fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). I am always my true self, but I can’t always see it, blocked by all the untruths I believe about myself, others, and God.

On my own journey of self-discovery, I am slowly uncovering this light, remembering who I am in my essence. I get glimpses of connecting with my true self that feel like coming home, like peace and freedom. It also feels like love, ease, and flow. It is knowing that I am exactly who I am supposed to be and exactly where I am supposed to be. The path requires me to unlearn and take off the masks I wear to keep myself acceptable to others. These masks have helped me fit in and feel a sense of safety in my relationships, but they keep me from experiencing true belonging. I have learned that belonging is not something I need to find because it already exists within me. As Jesus put it, we are all children of God. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. It is always available to us, even when we cannot see or feel it.

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This journey is not easy. The false self thinks it is protecting me – and in some ways, it has. It often throws fear and anxiety in my path. I have found that it is important to accept and love my ego, my human self. I think this is a huge point. It is not about denying my humanity but allowing my humanity and divinity to coexist in synchrony.

It is about love, our true essence. When I begin to love all the parts of me, I begin to touch and live from my inner Light. Those parts I have suppressed, denied, or hated because of the messages I heard from the outside world are only waiting to be seen and loved. And in this way, they can teach me as they transform into the light they always were.

I remember the freedom, lightness, and energy I felt when I chose to let go of some of the expectations I had internalized. Over many years I had heard messages about how I should look and dress. Daily I would spend significant time, energy, and emotion over whether my appearance would be acceptable to others. I was pretending to be someone or something that did not feel natural to me. I was

suppressing my light. Once I realized what was happening and decided to express my inner self freely through my appearance, a huge weight was lifted, and energy was freed. I love the me that has emerged. This did not change others' expectations, but I freed my true self - my mix of human and divine - to shine even in the presence of judgment.

Many practices have helped me uncover my Light. These practices include mindfulness, meditation, centering prayer, spiritual guidance, companionship, therapy, and journaling. Anything that helps me see reality as it is, break free from the chains of judgment and expectations, and embrace the beautiful soul that I am is helpful in this journey.

The journey in is the journey out. Self-discovery is not a selfish, isolated journey. The journey inward ultimately leads us outward. This is one of the gifts of the social gospel of Jesus. It teaches us who we are and how to recognize and love that light in each other, in all of creation. When we realize that we are not separate, we desire to create a community where all know and can live from their true loving self. This is the Reign of God on Earth - Heaven on Earth -it starts with embracing all of me and letting my light shine!

May we remember who we are. Remember, we are the Beloved of God —we belong. Our light comes from the Greatest of Lights and is, at its essence, love. This is the good news!