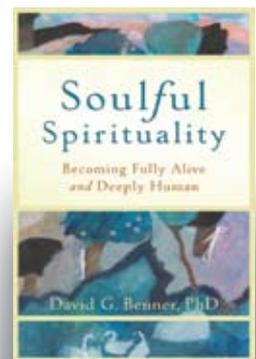


becoming *fully*

ALL

David G. Benner has been very productive in his semi-retirement. His latest book, *Soulful Spirituality: Becoming Fully Alive and Deeply Human*, addresses many important topics, including the neglect of the body in many approaches to spirituality. How could we resist inviting David to the table for another frank conversation?



GWM: *The title of your new book is Soulful Spirituality. What is soulful spirituality and why is it important for Christians?*

DGB: The reason I wrote this book is that being a good Christian clearly does not automatically make one a good human being. I am struck by the fact that spirituality—even our own unique Christian spirituality—does not always make people more deeply human and whole. Honesty forces me to conclude that the spiritual path can lead to an escape from a robust commitment to reality, the repression or dissociation of sexuality, disconnection from the emotions, alienation from the body, and increasing distance from one's unconscious depths. Too easily spiritual practices lead to increasing identification with those of one's own religious tribe and an ever-weakening sense of solidarity with all humankind. Too often it involves a narcissistic me-and-God relationship that insulates us from, rather than sensitizes us to, the problems of our world. Too frequently it is associated with a focus on beliefs rather than being and directs us away from life rather than toward a genuinely deeper, fuller, and more vital life.

GWM: *Please don't spare anyone's feelings. But did you discover any good news?*

DGB: The good news is that our spirituality can uniquely move us toward the full and abundant life that Jesus promised. For humans, that life will always involve being human and becoming, therefore, deeply and fully human.

GWM: *You aren't proposing a new spirituality, are you?*

DGB: God forbid. What I call soulful spirituality is not a distinct spirituality or a unique spiritual path but a way of walking any spiritual path. Think of what it means to speak of a soulless organization. By that we usually mean one that is not good for humans. The same is true of soulless ways of following the spiritual path. St. Irenaeus said that the glory of God is the human person fully alive. That's what Christian spirituality should involve. What I call soulful spirituality is the way of walking and living the Christian spiritual path that makes this happen.

GWM: *What are the first five words that pop into your mind when you think of a person "fully alive"?*



DAVID G. BENNER

IN CONVERSATION

with

GARY W. MOON

WE

DGB: You know me well enough to know that limiting myself to five words will be impossible, so let me try five thoughts.

GWM: *People can change, you know, David.*

DGB: The fully alive person is *vital* (led by passions, not just reason, accommodation, or expediency), *grounded* (in the body and present life realities), *connected* (to the earth, to other people, to one's culture, to the world at large, to God), *aware* (present and awake), and *becoming* (open to continuing growth, transformation and enlightenment).

GWM: *Thank you. That is a very helpful summary. David, you mention in a very poetic way that the Judeo-Christian creation story reminds us that we are both "dust" and "breath," and you make the interesting reflection that holding dust and breath together is not easy—either literally or figuratively. It strikes me that at its heart your book Soulful Spirituality is about the importance of living life in a way that honors both our material and spiritual realities. Is that right?*

DGB: I think that is a fair summary. Our spirituality is not simply how we relate to God, but also how we relate to our bodies. But rather than speaking of living in a way that honors both our material and spiritual realities, I would say that the challenge is to recognize that the spiritual and material realities are already unified—this is affirmed in creation and reaffirmed in the Incarnation. It is we who are disunified, and this is why we need a spirituality that grounds us in our bodies. Healthy—or what I call soulful—

spirituality is a way of living all of our spirit-embodied lives before the face of God. Doing so is the route to becoming what we were meant to be—deeply human, but aligned with God.

GWM: *Do you believe that Plato has done Christianity a disservice by elevating the view of the "breath" aspect of the person at the expense of our "dust"?*

DGB: Absolutely. The Platonic disparagement of the body—treating it as merely a container for the infinitely more valuable spirit—is profoundly sub-Christian. To be human is to be embodied spirit. And God said that this is good. God got that either right or wrong. And if the answer to that pair of options is that obviously God got it right, then we need to distance ourselves from the sort of Platonic denigration of the body that evolved into Gnosticism and has plagued the church for two millennia. But, as the church has consistently declared since the second century, it is Gnosticism that is the heresy, not an emphasis on the importance of the body in full-orbed Christian spirituality.

GWM: *Help us with what might be another stumbling block for someone struggling with your celebration of our humanity. The Bible uses the word flesh, for example, with a variety of meanings. It reminds us that we are creatures of dust in all its raw and brute physicality. But it can also be used in the sense of being bent and heading in a direction away from God. I'm assuming you are saying we need to be more owning of the fact that we are indeed dust, but not the fact of being oriented away from God.*

The good news is that our spirituality can uniquely move us toward the full and abundant life that Jesus promised. For humans, that life will always involve being human and becoming, therefore, deeply and fully human.

DGB: It has been a long time since I thought about the Pauline concept of the flesh (which I assume is what you are referring to), and you are obviously much more current on this than me. I knew his use of the term had nothing whatsoever to do with the body, but hadn't heard the way of understanding it you offer. However, I like it, and it fits very well with my understanding of his overall thrust. Being human isn't living the life of the flesh; it's honoring our God-given embodiedness.

GWM: *You say that any religion or spirituality that seeks to make us less than, more than, or other than human is dangerous. Say more about that.*

DGB: In all of creation, being and becoming what we most truly are is a challenge only for humans. A tulip knows exactly what it is. It is never tempted by false ways of being. So it is with dogs, rocks, trees, stars, amoebas, electrons and all other things. They all become what they are automatically, but not so for humans. Newborns may bear the potential for mature personhood, but no one is

then can our sexuality, our emotions, our intuition, our creativity, our vitality, and much, much more be woven into the fabric of who we are and who we are becoming as we are led by the Spirit into the truth of true self-in-Christ. Religion easily emphasizes these seemingly more “spiritual” realities over the fundamental reality of our materiality. When it does, it tries to rush us to the level of spirit when what we need is a spirituality that takes us back to our bodies and then allows us to unfold into the fullness of Christ.

It starts by helping people awaken and realize our tendency to go through life as sleepwalkers. Awakening is not a one-time thing. The life in which we become all we were intended to be in Christ will always be characterized by an ongoing series of awakenings.

born fully human. We can chose to walk away from our destiny—as Adam and Eve did in the Garden when they refused to be content with their lot as humans and instead wanted to be as God. I am convinced that at the very core of Christian spirituality is the fulfillment of our humanity. This was why God came to us as a human—to help us come to God as humans and, therefore, to allow us to become fully what we were intended to be.

GWM: *Why do you think God needed humans instead of 7 billion more angels?*

DGB: I can only guess that God must have run out of pins.

GWM: *If you are going to start making semihumorous comments, I won't have much to say here.*

DGB: Sorry to hear you found that only semihumorous. But, more seriously...

GWM: *Thank you.*

DGB: ...I don't think God needs or has ever needed anything. Humans were the outflow of God's love and creativity, and there is no accounting for where that leads in either God or us.

GWM: *Okay, then, what would you say are the markers of a person who is fully human?*

DGB: It starts with fully living and trusting the wisdom of one's body. To be human is to be embodied, and any attempt to minimize or escape this leads to a diminishment of our spirit and, therefore, of the totality of our being. A disconnection from our body will always lead to a fracturing of our spirit and an alienation from our deepest self because God must be met in the truth and realities of our being, and that always starts with the body. Once we are grounded in our body, then and only

GWM: *Do you equate becoming fully human with Jesus' offer of abundant life and eternal life?*

DGB: That's it exactly. We trivialize the gospel when we render eternal life into something for the future. It is the life of the Eternal One that is intended to be ours now—perhaps not fully, but at least as a start.

GWM: *If being fully alive, fully awake, and fully human are far from normal or automatic occurrences, what are some ways a spiritual director/guide might help someone become more fully human?*

DGB: It starts by helping people awaken and realize our tendency to go through life as sleepwalkers. Awakening is not a one-time thing. The life in which we become all we were intended to be in Christ will always be characterized by an ongoing series of awakenings. Learning to be present—in popular contemporary language, *mindful*—is an essential part of this because we can never be more present to God or anyone else than we can be present to the present moment. Those who help us awaken and stay awake also help us embrace and fully live within the realities of our life. They also help us attend to where God is in those present realities and in the ebb and flow of ordinary life, and especially, where the Wholly Other is in the otherness of others. They also help us recover our easily lost capacity for wonder. None of these things is a distinctively Christian practice, so Christian spiritual directors frequently overlook them, focusing instead on distinctive and seemingly more “spiritual” things such as prayer. But I am convinced these sorts of practices are not just deeply spiritual, but also profoundly Christian. They are soulful ways of living the Christian spiritual life, ways that will, therefore, make us more deeply human and fully alive.

GWM: *David, in your book, you use a wonderful story from Henri Nouwen's life through which Nouwen learned that it*



was not the mind but the heart that makes us most fundamentally human. I love this as a corrective, especially when so many accepted attempts to get away from the “dust” and “breath” dilemma have led people to retreat to “thoughts,” “practices,” or hyperspirituality. But why say it is the heart that makes us most fundamentally human instead of saying a dynamic, “fully alive,” and “fully aware” interplay of all the aspects of the person—heart, thoughts, body, soul, and spirit—makes us fully human?

DGB: I absolutely agree with you. I told this Nouwen story because his emphasis on the heart moves us toward the answer to the question of what makes us most fundamentally human, but I actually like the way you frame it better. In fact, what you describe is the foundation of the book I am presently writing on what I am calling the journey of the awakening self.

GWM: I can't believe you are making such a shameless attempt to get another book promotion interview in Conversations.

DGB: Well, I am only human.

But, as I was saying, in order for us to live fully the life of the spirit, we must fully live the life of the soul (which I understand in terms to be the reflective space between us and the events of our lives), and in order for us to live fully the life of the soul, we must fully live the life of the mind, and—yes, you anticipated this—in order for us to live fully the life of the mind, we must fully live our embodied life. Being human offers us this unique combination of these levels of consciousness and frame-

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works for organizing our self, and full-orbed humanity—expressed in a Spirit-centered life—demands that all the constituent dimensions of self be gather up and woven together. Transcendence begins with integration. We must embrace and integrate one level of existence before we can ever transcend it.

GWM: Very interesting. I suspect that what you just referenced, embracing and integrating before transcending, may be a stumbling block to some who begin reading your book

without getting this point. If I'm hearing you correctly, you are arguing for a spiritual path that both embraces the body, for example, but also transcends the body.

DGB: Yes. But I'm also reminding that nothing can be transcended—our shadow, our history, our family, our symptoms, or our body—until it is accepted as part of our reality, our story. This is the great foundational principle of human psychospiritual development.

GWM: You mention that you have never been motivated to be a saint, but being fully human has been one of your deepest longings for most of your life. Why do you not view saints—at least the best of the best—as those who have become fully human?

DGB: The reason is that, in my mind, so few of those we think of as saints actually display this full-orbed humanity. Often, they are abysmally poor examples of human beings. They may be holy, but are frequently far from whole. Typically, with notable exceptions, they sought to become God-like without realizing that they could only do this by becoming fully human. For decades, my special interest has been the mystics, but sadly, this is often especially true of them. Generally, I don't find the best examples of Christians who are fully human amongst those most quickly identified as the saints. I find them in ordinary Christians who have not compromised being human as they seek to be spiritual.

GWM: Is the Incarnation the best example of becoming fully human?

DGB: Without question, Jesus shows us what it is to be fully human as no other person in human history has.

GWM: How can the ego be an opponent to our becoming fully human?

DGB: This is a tremendously important question. There is an enormous amount of confusion on the part of spiritual writers about the role of the ego in the spiritual life, and that is why I devote a whole chapter of the book to the role of the ego in the spiritual journey.

Jung helpfully suggests that the primary task of the first half of life is the development of ego, and the challenge of the second half is relativizing and transcending it. We should never try to eliminate ego. In fact, the spiritual journey often requires a strengthening of the ego before a person is capable of its realignment in relationship to a self-transcendent reality (God) that becomes the new center of the self. St. Paul gives us an overview of what that realignment looks like in Galatians 2:20, when he says “I have been crucified with Christ, and I now live not with my own life, but with the life of Christ who lives in me.” In this statement he says that his life no longer revolves around his ego but around a larger center within himself that he describes as “Christ who lives in me.” This is the relativization of the ego, in which it moves from the star role to that of a supporting actor, or from the role of CEO to that of COO (Chief Operating

