

“Breathing Under Water: Step 4 A Good Lamp”
Psalm 51:1-12

We have reached Step 4 of the Twelve Steps! So basically, we are a third of the way through the 12 steps. Each step is challenging in its own unique way. This one is challenging because it asks us to bring forth that which is often hidden from us. Step four goes like this, “Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.” This is not about making a list of our mistakes or character flaws so that we could just get rid of them. It is about something much deeper. It is about examining our assumptions and programs for happiness that are often hidden from us. In his book *Breathing Under Water*, Richard Rohr writes (screen), “Moral scrutiny is not to discover how good or bad I am and regain some moral high ground, but it is to begin some honest ‘shadow boxing’ which is at the heart of all spiritual awakening.” This is not so much about guilt as much as it is about awareness. It is about learning to embrace all of ourselves (good and bad). A good example of what that might mean is how our biases and prejudices work. Most people are not aware of their biases until they really examine them. Here is a video about how bias is unconscious: <https://youtu.be/dVp9Z5k0dEE>. (second service: Let’s consider how this might work. If in childhood, all of the examples of leaders were men or all of the examples of nurses were women, then you grow up unaware of that as an assumption and whenever you hear the word nurse or leader you assign it a gender).

All of us have unconscious assumptions and motivations. The problem comes when we go about life unaware of them. As Rohr puts it: “Evil succeeds only by disguising itself as good, necessary, or helpful. No one consciously does evil. The very fact that anyone can do stupid, cruel, or destructive things shows that they are at that moment *unconscious and unaware*.”

Searching our own minds and hearts so that we may become aware of our motivations and actions is a necessary step on the spiritual journey. Some might think that this is new or modern psychobabble, but it is amazing that this wisdom is found in the scriptures. Jesus spent a lot of time teaching about the importance of truly seeing and not being blind. Psalm 51 which is our scripture for today is about being humble and open before God with all of our shadow stuff. The power of this Psalm for me is that it invokes God’s help. We truly cannot see our hidden stuff without the grace and help of God. Here are a few lessons from Psalm 51 about becoming aware of our shadow stuff:

1. **It is not about guilt:** Guilt does not transform us. In fact, most of the time, it traps us and makes us feel helpless. The call of Psalm 51 is not a personal call to feel guilty and ashamed of ourselves for our failings. We always have to remember that the Psalms were not individual prayers. They were the prayers of the people of God as they worshipped together. Psalm 51 most likely was used by the people of ancient Israel after their return from the exile. After they were taken over by the Babylonians and had to leave their homes, when they returned in 536 BCE, they were still carrying a lot of the pain of their experience in exile. A lot of hidden fear and resentment had to come to the surface for God to heal it. The people knew that they had a second chance at life, but needed to let go of the pain and

brokenness of the past. They could not come before God to worship and experience renewal until they were able to release whatever resentment, fear or hate that were holding them back. The focal point of this psalm is not the sin of the psalm writer, but the goodness of God. It is not about all the guilt they were carrying. It is about the new opportunities for renewal that God was offering them.

2. **It is not about Perfection:** Rohr writes, “Your shadow self is not your evil self. It is just that part of you that you do not want to see, your unacceptable self by reason of nature, nurture, and choice. the goal is actually not the perfect avoidance of sin, which is not possible anyway (1 John 1:8-9; Romans 5:12), but the *struggle itself*, and the encounter and wisdom that comes from it. Law and failure create the foil which creates the conflict, which leads to a very different kind of victory than any of us expected. Not perfect moral victory, not moral superiority, but just *luminosity of awareness and compassion for the world*, which becomes our real moral victory.”
3. **It is about God’s redeeming Love:** Becoming aware of our shadow stuff is about becoming humble enough to seek God’s help continually. The image of hyssop in the Psalm is invoked here to emphasize the importance of God’s commitment to the people of Israel and God’s love for them. Hyssop is a small bushy plant that is mentioned several times in the Bible in association with God’s covenant with the people of Israel. The use of a bunch of hyssop as a brush daubing the lintels of the Hebrew homes with blood from the sacrificed lamb at the first Passover (Exodus 12:22), seems to have established the tradition for most other references. Hyssop was plant used in purification sprinkling rites by the ancient Hebrews associated with the covenant. Hyssop is a reminder that the focus is on the covenant. It is not on our actions. The covenant is something that God established with the people out of love. A *covenant*, in contrast to a contract, is a one-way agreement whereby the covenanter is the only party bound by the promise. Israel broke many covenants with God but God never broke any covenants with them. With God’s grace, we are able to take this step without getting stuck in guilt and shame. With God’s grace, we are able to have a good lamp that sheds light on our shadow stuff.

In a 2015 graduation speech, Parker Palmer talked about the importance of embracing our shadow as a way to wholeness:

<https://youtu.be/MaOFkumhcCU>

He said, “As you integrate ignorance and failure into your knowledge and success, do the same with all the alien parts of yourself. Take everything that’s bright and beautiful in you and introduce it to the shadow side of yourself. Let your altruism meet your egotism, let your generosity meet your greed, let your joy meet your grief. Everyone has a shadow... But when you are able to say, ‘I am all of the above, my shadow as well as my light,’ the shadow’s power is put in service of the good. Wholeness is the goal, but wholeness does not mean perfection, it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of your life...As you acknowledge and embrace all that you are, you give yourself a gift that will benefit the rest of us as well. Our world is in desperate need of leaders who live what Socrates called “an examined life.”

In your bulletin/announcements for today, there are questions and exercises (breathing lessons) offered by Richard Rohr to help you with this work. They are especially good if you have never gone to therapy or tried to become aware of your shadow.

I would like to close with a story that often gets a wrong ending. It is about an old Cherokee teaching his grandson about life:

“A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy.” It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.” He continued, “The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: “Which wolf will win?”

You might have heard the story ends like this: The old Cherokee simply replied, “**The one you feed the most my son.**”

In the Cherokee world, however, the story ends this way...

The old Cherokee simply replied, “**If you feed them right, they both win.**” and the story goes on:

“You see, if I only choose to feed the good wolf, the bad one will be hiding around every corner waiting for me to become distracted or weak and jump to get the attention he craves. He will always be angry and always fighting the good wolf. But if I acknowledge him, he is happy and the good wolf is happy and we all win. For the bad wolf has many qualities – tenacity, courage, fearlessness, and strong-willed – that I have need of at times and that the good wolf lacks. But the good wolf has compassion, caring, strength and the ability to recognize what is in the best interest of all.

“You see, son, the good wolf needs the bad wolf at his side. To feed only one would starve the other and they will become uncontrollable. To feed and care for both means they will serve you well and do nothing that is not a part of something greater, something good, something of life. Feed them both and there will be no more internal struggle for your attention. **And when there is no battle inside, you can listen to the voices of deeper knowing that will guide you in choosing what is right in every circumstance.** Peace, my son, is the Cherokee mission in life. A man or a woman who has peace inside has everything. A man or a woman who is pulled apart by the war inside him or her has nothing.”

“How you choose to interact with the opposing forces within you will determine your life. Starve one or the other or guide them both.” Amen.