

# Spiral Staircase

## August 17, 2008

As many of you know, I grew up in Madison, Indiana, and from early school days on, I knew that one of Madison's claims to fame was the JFD Lanier Home. It is a state memorial, a tribute to a financier who bailed out the state in a hard financial time. When we were in school, our classes often got to visit the Lanier Home, and I remember being totally taken with the spiral staircase that's one of the centerpieces of the home.

It was only when I was in college and working for the Chamber of Commerce in Madison at the Tourist Center there that I learned the real significance of that staircase. That house and two or three others in Madison were designed and built by a famous architect of the early to mid 1800's whose name was Francis Costigan. The real miracle of that staircase is that it is entirely self-supporting. It gains absolutely no support from the walls around it.

I recall as a child standing at the bottom and gazing up at the seemingly endless rings that spiral upward. I also recall standing at the top and seeing those spirals going down. That staircase really made quite an impression on me!

That's probably part of the reason that a book by Karen Armstrong caught my attention a few years ago. It is her autobiography/memoir, and it's entitled *The Spiral Staircase, My Climb Out of Darkness*. In the book, she shares pieces of her life journey, from entering a convent when she was quite young to become a nun, to leaving the convent, to her post-graduate schooling, and more.

Alongside the story of her life changes, there is the story of her spiritual journey—a journey that takes her farther away from God sometimes, and draws her closer to God at others. In the midst of her writing, she shares a story about being in a class where the professor was discussing a T.S. Eliot poem entitled "Ash Wednesday." She said that the poem was totally accurate in the way it expressed her own state of connection with God and with the world, and she had a deep emotional connection with the poem, saying, "There was a complete and satisfying fit between my inner and outer worlds."

In an even more meaningful way, the professor that day pointed out that the experience of spiritual progress and illumination was represented by the symbol of a spiral staircase. That's exactly what the poet was doing in the poem. Although repeating "I do not hope to turn again," he does just that, slowly ascending to one new insight after another. That resonated so with Karen Armstrong because that was just what she herself had been experiencing.

I wonder if the idea of a spiral staircase isn't really representative for all of us of the way life goes. We often expect things to progress in an orderly fashion, moving from step 1 to step 2, opening door A, and then door B. We think life is going to be that predictable,

even linear, and yet more times than not, it doesn't work out that way.

We're forever making a turn this way, or that, but never standing totally still. Life is always evolving and turning in one way or another. To think in terms of a spiral staircase, there's always upward or downward movement; it's never on the same plane, always stepping up or down.

That seems to be so much the way life is. It's funny that even our DNA—the essence of who we are—is actually represented visually in the shape of a spiral, much more nebulous and uncertain than a straight line with its beginning and end!

The reality is that life is about changing and evolving, even sometimes dissolving; it's just not a neat, compact experience. In fact, James Redfield has said, "Life is really about a spiritual unfolding that is personal and enchanting—an unfolding that no science or philosophy or religion has yet fully clarified."

When I say "life" here, I'm really talking about the whole of life—that blending or mixture of body, mind, spirit. It includes our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual lives intermingling and rolled into one, and that's not a simple thing. Life in general is messy, but I've come to believe that, regardless of the direction in which our life spiral is moving, almost all movement is really about something spiritual. That's the heart of the matter.

Earlier, when I mentioned Karen Armstrong's book, I told you the subtitle to it—"My Climb Out of Darkness," and the darkness for her was very much connected to her spiritual journey. The downward spiral she had experienced was really about her spiritual deadness, but the poem by T.S. Eliot had reawakened her soul, her very being. There was a turning on her spiral staircase.

It might be interesting for each of us to reflect on our own spiral staircases. Where are we along that journey? Are we in a place where we feel closer to God and connected to those around us, or do we feel more isolated, more distant, more disconnected from that source of loving goodness that we call God?

Now let me assure you that the purpose of this morning's message is not to give pointers on how to be going upward on our staircase, but rather to make us aware that we are each on a sort of spiral staircase that isn't all that predictable, certain or clear cut. Kilian McDonnel, a monk at St. John's abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, has a good way of summarizing life by saying, "The spiritual life is a combination of three things: treasures, baggage and garbage."

We all have those strengths and riches that give life identity and integrity, and we all have those things more external than internal, that we carry around but which are not essential for the journey. And we all have stuff that we just need to get rid of. Therein lies the messiness. What do we do with all this?

I have to admit to you that this has always been a struggle for me, because I've always felt inadequate when it comes to following all the "rules" about spiritual disciplines. I know there are those who adhere strictly to the belief that we must rise early each morning and

spend an hour or better in scripture reading, prayer and meditation if we're to be someone with a vibrant spiritual life. I applaud and honor you if you're able to do that; I'm not, and have never been. I fall asleep while reading or meditating, and wind up feeling guilty.

I may be dead wrong, but I have convinced myself that God isn't the one saying that's how we have to do this spiritual thing; it's other people who try to define what's right and proper. If it works and ignites someone's spirit, that's great, but I believe each of us has to find our own path, our own way to tap into that aliveness, that spirit in our lives, and not feel guilty because we're not doing it "right."

I really like something that Dr. Larry Dossey wrote in his book, *Prayer is Good Medicine*. He said that people often asked him if they should pray. His response was simply, "When you *really* need to do so, the question answers itself." Prayer, he said, is as natural as walking. When we need to pray, we will. Trying to formalize it just makes it more complicated than it needs to be.

To put that in our context, our spiritual lives are just naturally who we are; we are the ones who often make them so complicated. You see, I really believe that you and I are spiritual beings trying to have a human experience; it's not the other way around, but we often try to make it so. Psychologist and theologian Sam Keen has a good way of describing the ways in which we constantly put obstructions between us and our spiritual lives. He calls it "**spiritual stuttering**." I like that, and think it's an apt description of how so many of us struggle.

I really find assurance in the Bible passage we have for today. It's the very first of what is called the Beatitudes, and our version from The Message reads like this: "**You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you, there is more of God and God's rule.**" Other versions say it in a bit different way—more like "blessed are the poor in spirit..."

Basically, I think it's saying that God has more to work with when we're at the bottom of our spiral staircase. When we hit bottom, we're most open to hearing what God and/or others might be saying to us, of the direction in which they may be pointing us. Going up and down that staircase is a part of life, and it's in the movement that God can break in and connect with us.

Actually, what I really wanted to use as the Bible passage is not officially in our Bible. Rather, it is a segment of the Gospel of Thomas that was discovered with the Dead Sea Scrolls in the mid to late 1940's. This unofficial gospel is a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus.

While this saying is talking about the kingdom of God, I really think it refers to our spiritual lives, when it says: "It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, 'Look, here it is,' or 'Look, there it is.' **Rather, God's kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it.**" Our very lives—our spiritual lives—are spread out before us; we just do not see.

In his book *How Do We Know When It's God?* Indianapolis native Dan Wakefield quotes words of a

theology professor—Wendy Wright, of Creighton University in Omaha. He says that they are part of her spiritual autobiography, and he said it resonates in his soul and sounds like his story. When I read those words, I realized that they sound a lot like my story, too. Maybe even yours.

Wendy Wright said, "**How dark the seeing. How fragmentary. Mostly it consists of learning to free fall. Learning to trust the constant somersaulting. Learning to live with spiritual vertigo. Learning to love the darkness. Learning to trust the brief glimpses. Learning that blindness is its own seeing. Learning that the falling is in itself beautiful. That at the bottom of the well of my heart, I free fall into You.**"

That's very much the way it is for me. How about you?

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that, wherever we are on our staircase, whether we're in the dark or the light, going up or going down, free falling or somersaulting, we know that at the heart of it all, it's God and God's loving goodness.

Have a good Sunday and go in peace. Amen.