

Several months ago, I was scheduled to speak at a spiritual retreat out of state. I had made the commitment a year in advance, and it had sounded good at the time. But as the date grew closer I wanted to go less and less and was actually hoping to wake up sick with the flu the morning of the trip. I had been traveling a great deal and wanted to stay home with my family. Unfortunately, I woke up that morning perfectly healthy, got cleaned up, drove to the airport, took off in the airplane, feeling more aggravated the closer I got to the retreat center. Resentment and annoyance are not the best dispositions for leading a spiritual retreat on God's grace, but by then I didn't care. I just wanted to be home. I thought, I'll go to the retreat, get it over with, go home, stay home, never accept another speaking engagement for as long as I live, move with my family to Alaska, live off the grid, kill my own food.

I arrived at the retreat center, ate supper, acted like I was happy to be there, got ready to give my first talk, but the lady in charge said someone wanted to sing first. I thought, "Oh, great. Now I'll have to listen to a bad singer." I was in a really cynical mood. This young man went up front to sing and the beauty of it just snuck right up on me. I didn't see it coming. A simple little song about brokenness and grace and healing, sung so beautifully. It was pure gift, like a surprise party.

Have you ever had a moment like that? When you were caught unaware by a delight you hadn't anticipated? Isn't that almost always how delight works? This past summer we took a little family trip. We'd been anticipating it for some time, predicting we'd have all kinds of fun, except we didn't. It wasn't torturous, but neither was it as fun as we'd imagined. But the next month, we were eating out and started laughing about something, I can't remember what it was now, I think it involved Coca-Cola going up someone's nose, but we just kept laughing and laughing and laughing. There was no way we could have planned it.

I know a guy who is one of almost a dozen pastors in this big church. The first week in January all the pastors go on a retreat and plan the worship services for the next year, right down to the music for the choir and the sermon topics. If in July something really big happens, they're sunk. They've got their agenda; they're sticking to it. So every January they make these plans about how they're going to encounter God, then they spend the rest of the year praying God got their memo.

We've been talking about the qualities of the spiritual life: gratitude, reflection, spiritual pacing or being present in the moment, mercy, humility, curiosity, and courage. This morning I want to add *openness to God's presence* to our list. Openness to God's presence wherever, whenever, and in whomever we encounter it.

An encounter with God is a bit like delight. We never know when it might happen. We never know who might bring it to our door. We can never predict the circumstances. We can plan, we can anticipate, but we can never know for certain. It is like Jesus told Nicodemus, “The wind blows it where it wishes. We hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going. So it is with those who live in the Spirit.” (John 3:8)

We do not know where we will find God’s presence. We do not know who might teach us some great truth. We do not know when we will be surprised by some great joy. So be watching, and be ready. Don’t miss it.

Isn’t it interesting that the very first query, the very first question we Quakers ask ourselves when we reflect on our lives has to do with our openness to God’s presence. *Do you strive for the constant realization of God’s presence in your life?* Because that is where everything else starts. That’s our starting point. Recognizing God’s presence, wherever we find it. And we never know where or when that might happen.

That it is why we’re not creedal, because the creeds can point to God, but can never wholly define God.

That it is why we're not Biblical fundamentalists, because the Bible can tell us how others found God, but it can not predict how we will find God.

That it is why we don't practice outward sacraments, because bread and wine and water can remind us of God, but they can not wholly contain God.

You never know how, when, where, or in whom you will encounter God's presence, so do you strive for awareness of God in every situation, in every person, in every stage of life?

You never know when you'll encounter goodness and beauty and joy, so are you open to its presence everywhere with everyone?

I have a buddy named Lyman who's a retired tennis coach and teacher. Loves young people. He's well into his 80's now, but I knew him when he first retired and I was his pastor. Lyman was having a hard time, because he'd always been so engaged in life, always helping kids, then he retired and society said, "You're too old. We don't need you anymore." But Lyman wouldn't go down without a fight. Didn't want to spend the rest of his life standing on the sidelines. So he began volunteering every day, helping serve the noon meal at a homeless shelter in the inner city.

He'd been volunteering there a couple weeks when a young guy named Mike staggered in one day for lunch. The other workers at the shelter told Mike to leave, then explained to Lyman that Mike was a drunk and they didn't want him there. Mike showed up almost every day to get food, and every day they'd boot him out. But Lyman didn't feel right about it. It didn't make sense to him, so one day when they threw Mike out, Lyman went out with him. Mike didn't smell like alcohol and he didn't exhibit any of the other signs of alcoholism. He just staggered and fell into things and sometimes when he spoke it didn't make sense.

By then, Mike had been homeless for some time, and didn't smell very good. His hair was long and matted and filthy. Lyman took him home and gave him a shower, took him to his barber and got him a haircut. It turned out that underneath all the hair and dirt, Mike was a handsome young man. Lyman and his wife, Harriet, fed him several good meals, let him sleep in a soft, warm bed, bought him new clothes, then took him to their doctor, who diagnosed Mike with Huntington's Disease, an incurable neurodegenerative genetic disorder that affects muscle coordination and some cognitive functions. People with Huntington's Disease stagger when they walk, and the disease destroys brain cells which leads to dementia. If you didn't know someone had Huntington's, you might think they were drunk.

Lyman lined up an apartment for Mike, and arranged for a visiting nurse to check on him regularly. Got him signed up for Social Security disability payments. And every day he'd go visit Mike, take him groceries, help him clean his apartment, take him on short walks. This elderly man and this young man, the young man leaning into the older man. They'd walk around the block. Eventually, when the disease got too bad, Lyman arranged for Mike to be moved to a nursing home, and when Mike passed away, several years later, Lyman was at his side. We had Mike's memorial service at the Quaker meetinghouse. Mike didn't have any family, so it was just the Quakers, on a Sunday morning at the meetinghouse. Lyman gave the eulogy. The rest of us sat and listened. Lyman talked about how he'd found the love of God in Mike.

Mike couldn't talk, of course, but if he could have, I suspect he might have talked about how he'd found the love of God in Lyman.

We never know where we will find divine goodness and beauty.

It's like the poet George Herbert wrote: "And here, in dust and dirt, O here, the lilies of God's love appear."

So keep your eyes peeled. Be open for God's presence. Anywhere, in anyone, at anytime. For we never know. We never know. *Do you strive for the constant realization of God's presence?*