

## **Reflection and Action**

The Rev. Rabiya Lila Forest

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### **READING**

from *Compassion in Action* by Ram Dass and Mirabai Bush

We may need to think about service in a completely new way if we are to find an opportunity to do something we love. Our first thought may be to use our most expert skill, the thing we do best in our daily work, such as repairing cars, massaging aching bodies, practicing civil rights law, or negotiating international peace. But sometimes we need to look at our other talents and skills. We often think of these as hobbies – as Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter probably did, having put in a tongue-and-groove floor in their attic in Plains – but these activities may be just what we need to perform truly effective service. Maybe we can heal the world through arranging flowers, writing poetry, or baking bread in a shelter. Why not? The “serious” methods that have been tried – from the war on poverty to the war in the Gulf – haven’t ended the pain; often they seem to have created more. We need to free our minds if we are to find new paths through the dark forest of suffering. We need experimentation and playfulness in the face of difficulty; no matter how paradoxical that may seem. As Tibetan Buddhist teacher Tarthang Tulku says, “We already know how to enjoy ourselves. When we are enjoying ourselves, we are productive and creative. It’s just a matter of bringing that enjoyment into everything we do.”

### **PRESENTATION\**

Our task this morning is to explore just how to reflect on ourselves, our lives, our world, whatever it is we have faith in, and how to complete that reflection in action.

Let’s start with the reflection part. What do we mean by reflection? Traditionally, that has meant meditation and prayer. And those certainly are kinds of reflection. But we can expand our understanding to include several things. This morning’s meditation is one example of a reflection: getting in touch with what is most meaningful for us, remembering that that is what our lives are about, remembering what it is we want to do with our lives.

Another kind of reflection is what is often referred to as self-examination, an excellent practice to do at the end of the day. How did my day go today? Did I think, speak, and act in accordance with my values and aspirations? When didn’t I? What were the circumstances under which I violated what I wish to live by? What can I do to ensure that I do it differently next time? Where can I turn to ask for strength, guidance, and help in changing this pattern of thinking, speaking, or acting? How can I bring more compassion and caring into my everyday interactions with others? This is a good time to offer up our shortcomings and weaknesses, and to be grateful that we have uncovered this dark corner in our psyches for the benefit of all beings.

Another form of reflection which is particularly helpful and restorative is to offer oneself during a period of meditation as a vehicle for the Highest Good, or Divine Will, or whatever you would call the pattern for the positive and conscious evolution of life on this planet. One way to do this, is a way that I have adopted, and which I do as often as I can at sunset, which, along with

sunrise, is a particularly powerful time to pray or focus consciousness. It goes like this: settle into a comfortable sitting position, in a chair or a cushion, and breathe in and out with the awareness on the heart center. When you feel centered and present, allow the crown of the head to feel open, and as you breathe in, imagine a stream of strong white light entering there and moving into the heart center. On the outbreath, send that light out through your open hands and your heart. You can do this wordlessly, or add any phrase that fits. I like to alternate between the wordless version, the phrase “Thy Will be done” on the inbreath, and “In all the Earth” on the outbreath, and a second phrase “Use us for the purpose” on the inbreath and “That Thy Wisdom chooseth” on the outbreath. Or you can make up your own.

If there are prayers or poems that put words to your heart’s longing, you can use those as reflections. Or just sitting silently and listening to whatever comes.

So then, if we have adopted some regular form of reflection, how do we then put it into action? We’ve heard a few ideas this morning: Keep the faith, baby. Heed the call. Bring enjoyment into everything you do. Come build a land where brothers and sisters create peace. Many voices with many exhortations.

But I’d like to share a couple of ideas that might not have occurred to you as forms of reflection in action. The first is to use your imaginative faculties in an active way. If you say a prayer or an affirmation, feel it through your whole being, not just as a string of words you say, but feelings, pictures, scenarios. If you do the sunset concentration, be open to receiving new understandings of just how divine wisdom, or the Spirit of Guidance, or the Spirit of Life, does want to use you. Get into the feeling of truly offering yourself to be used for the highest purposes.

If you have concern for some situation in the world, such as the places where there is war, or the suffering in the wake of the tsunami, use your imagination to see the alleviation of suffering, the end of hostility, the demonstration of compassion on the part of those who are there to harm or to help. Be creative and bold in your imagining.

Once you get started with this, I’m sure you can find very interesting ways to use your imagination in visioning a better world.

Now let’s take a look at the area of actual physical action, the use of hands and feet and computers and signs and tools and such. We often think of action arising out of reflection as being such things as signing petitions, sending letters to the editor or to elected officials. Standing on the corner with signs. Taking part in demonstrations and vigils. Going to committee meetings, planning events. All of these can be useful, especially if we get enjoyment and satisfaction from doing them. Or not. If you find yourself going through the motions of some of these actions without a sense of their efficacy or your enjoyment in doing them, maybe it’s time to take another look. Maybe it’s time to widen the scope of activity, as Ram Dass and Mirabai Bush suggest, to arranging flowers, writing poetry, baking bread. This is where listening to the heart and employing our creativity are very important.

The I Ching, that great Taoist book of wisdom, speaks in several places of times when the wise one draws within rather than taking outward action. Words are used such as “she veils her light

yet still shines”, or “if a person encounters a hindrance...he must not try to force advance but most pause and take thought. However nothing should put him off his course; he must ...constantly keep the goal in sight.”

Or as it's stated in another very powerful spiritual discipline “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.” And reflection is a great source of wisdom, both to know the difference and to find the means of change.

It's popular in our age to scoff at those who would withdraw to a cave rather than take what we think of as action. But what do we know about the power and efficacy of the reflection that is happening in those caves? Or monasteries? Or meditation corners in homes? I believe that there are beings so spiritually advanced that the power of their prayer and meditation can bring about greater change in the world than all the demonstrations and strategizing in committees.

Not that those forms are wrong either. Each of us must find the ways in which we can truly make a difference, whether through inner action or outer.

The forces of evil are very strong in our world now. They are the forces of entrenched privilege that seeks to protect what it has and holds, and the force of fear that is afraid of change and the unknown. Many of these ways are the predominant ones in a giant global pattern, and much as we may feel the desire to face it as David faced Goliath, it may be wiser to follow the advice of the I Ching and look within, or closer to home, for effective means and venues of action. The struggle for health care in our state, for example, or the movement to abolish capital punishment. Even though that latter was not successful this time, perhaps next time. Sometimes forces and energies line up in ways we may not be aware of, so that one time is a good time and another time isn't.

What matters is that we keep the faith, and be of good cheer. That doesn't mean being Pollyannas. It's important for us to allow ourselves to be aware of and feel the pain and suffering in the world, because we are all part of one world. But we must not allow that to sink us into a trough of depression. For every person suffering on this planet, there's another in great joy or deep peace. For every broken heart, there's a heart soaring. For every home in which there is brutality, alienation, abuse, there's another where family members cherish and support each other. For every storm of tears, there are gales of laughter. All of it is life, all of it is us. So may we be curious, inventive, and creative in our seeking of forms of reflection that nourish and inspire us, and forms of action, inner and outer, which fulfill our deepest wish to make a difference. Amen.