

Thinking about Tabitha

The raising of Tabitha in the story from Acts is a difficult one open to many interpretations, one of which I would like to propose based on the thought of several theologians including Cynthia Bourgeault, but also conversations I have had with those in our Lectio Divina group, as well as my own experience.

In the story, the disciple Peter is diligently working to carry out his mission as Jesus expected him to do, and we who hear the testimony of Tabitha's raising are to remain ever mindful that God is always and forever active in our lives and in ways that defy human expectations. Like Tabitha, we are to listen for God's voice however it may appear to us, that we may be healed of our outer but also our inner wounds and pains, which left untended can lead to spiritual death. Most importantly, to undergo inner healing is to be restored to wholeness and to be whole is to bring to fruition our inner most essence.

Theologians identify our inner most essence by many names: the inner body, the term St Paul uses, the hidden wholeness, which is Thomas Merton's phrase, and also the soul body. In the book *How to Lead* that some of you are reading, the author Susan Beaumont references all of these terms to discuss what soul means at both the personal and institutional level. Whatever term best speaks to you to describe our inner essence, the crucial point, says Bourgeault, is that it is imperishably real, accessible to us right now as a vitalizing force, and that death is simply its final realization.

How our inner essence is formed is through what theologians and also depth psychologists refer to as the two arcs of life. The first arc is the explosive life force that propels you through birth, childhood, youth, and out into the world of physical activity; however, around mid-adulthood, this energy begins to recede, never to be replenished. At 68 I am quite aware of this arc's wane. But, just as this arc starts to decline another begins, this time an inner and rising arc – an arc that charts all we have learned from our life experiences and created not from physical but from spiritual energy.

Such a view of aging up-ends our usual downward and declining perception of this stage of life. Instead, it is actually in the latter stages of our life that the flowering of our inner most self can come to fruition. From all our crowded days and years of joy and sorrow, from what seems to have been the insignificant if not pointless daily actions and never-ending attention to the treadmill of duties, annoyances, difficulties and failures, **something of immeasurable value has crystallized out**, the rudimentary forms of which were present in all our experiences, our struggles, the work we do or have done, our creative endeavours, our patience, our forgiveness, our love – namely, the crystallizing of our spiritual self – that self that lives beyond physical illness and decline. But there is a paradox here – while our life experiences are the key to crystalizing our inner essence, these same experiences create the wounds and trauma that bury it. It is the healing love of God who can help us to uncover and reveal our inner most self. Like the hidden potential of a fertile bulb from which a beautiful flower can spring, so too with the help of God’s nurturance can our inner most essence emerge to fully flower and bloom – now and ever after.

In the story of Tabitha, we witness the spiritual strength and resources of a woman and a community whose commitment is to live life fully and in wholeness. As a community whose commitment to personal and institutional wholeness is clearly defined by the values and principles of our Covenant – I give my heartfelt thanks for CCG whose appearance in my life has been wonderfully providential.