

thirst
swollen-throated
cotton-mouthed
mind-writhing
thirst

Such thirst is the nobility of our souls, says Thomas Traherne, 17th century English poet, clergyman, theologian. Insatiability is the nobility of our souls. *For we have a Benefactor so prone to give, that He delights in us for asking. To thirst is our highest virtue, when rightly guided, for it carries us as in a triumphant chariot to our sovereign happiness. We are made miserable only by taking a false way to satisfy our thirst.*

The story of the Samaritan woman at the well is a striking image of the relationship between our initial needs and our deep desires. The woman is led by conversation with Jesus from an immediate sense of needing fresh water to her deeper desire for “the spring of water within, welling up for eternal life.”

Even through the pain of being confronted with her many losses in human relationships, the Samaritan woman approaches a more truthful sense of her identity. She also learned that to attend to desires, and to discern between them, is a process of becoming more passionately focused on what is life-giving rather than destructive.

When we think about the discernment of desires, it is important to remember that although we have many dimensions each of us is a single, unified human being. We tend to distinguish between emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual parts of ourselves. We divide up our desires according to their association with one of these dimensions.

Yet these dimensions of our personality, and the kinds of desires associated with them, exist in a continuous interdependence. The way we treat our bodies affects the deepest longings of our spirits. And our spiritual desires find their expression in our immediate feelings and in our bodily reactions.

It is important to grasp that our so-called spiritual desires do not exist in a separate compartment of life. The whole of life is spiritual. We cannot say that any desire is irrelevant to the process of spiritual growth and discernment. We can learn to pay attention to changes in our bodies as indicators of spiritual well-being or spiritual confusion.

The process of discernment can be understood as a way of moving from the surface of our lives, the place of many desires, to our center, our soul or essential self. Etty Hillesum wrote: *There is a really deep well inside of me. And in it dwells God.*

Sometimes I am there too. But more often stones and grit block the well, and God is buried beneath. Then he must be dug out again.

As Etty knew well, it would be a mistake to pretend that this journey to our center proceeds along a simple straight line. At different moments we move in and out—sometimes nearer the surface of our lives, sometimes nearer the center.

It is certain that none of us, not even people we call saints, move totally and finally beyond the more superficial or even less than healthy desires. We are brought back to them, again and again. Sometimes this feels disconcerting and depressing. Human progress through life is rather like a spiral continually curling back on itself and yet moving deeper.

The journey of desire moves us beyond conforming to an understanding of the “will of God” that is arbitrary and totally detached from our actual experience of living. Rather, we are drawn ever deeper into God’s desiring within our lives and personalities. God’s desiring in us is expressed in and through what we come to see as our deepest desires.

When we befriend our desires rather than ignore or deny them, we can test them and gradually learn how to distinguish deep desire from wants. Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman reveals her thirst for life giving water, the deep desire to be known, accepted, freed from addiction to destructive wants.

Satisfying our deepest desires yields a lasting contentment beyond transient pleasure. Mary Karr gives eloquent testimony:

Time-lapse photos show
my fingers grew past crayon outlines,
my feet came to fill spike heels.

Eventually, I lurched out to kiss the wrong mouths,
get stewed, and sulk around. Christ always stood
to one side with a glass of water.
I swatted the sap away.

When my thirst got great enough
to ask, a stream welled up inside;
some jade wave buoyed me forward;
and I found myself upright
in the instant, with a garden
inside my own ribs aflourish. There, the arbor leaves.
The vines push out plump grapes.
You are loved, someone said. Take that
and eat it.