

*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? (Isaiah 55:2a)*

*You open wide your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing. (Psalm 145:16)*

*And all ate and were satisfied (not filled). (Matthew 14:20)*

In Matthew chapter 13 Jesus is teaching the crowds in parables. Chapter 14 begins with the beheading of John the Baptist. Jesus gets into a boat by himself, not with the disciples, and goes into hiding. With the death of John the curtain has begun to fall upon Jesus too.

Somehow the crowd follows him on foot and when he disembarked they were waiting for him. The improbability of 5,000 men, plus women and children, knowing where Jesus is headed by himself in a boat and beating him to his hideout on foot is worthy of a scene in a Monty Python movie.

The tradition has read this story allegorically and symbolically. Just as the *wine* and *milk* and *bread* and *rich food* in Isaiah are metaphors, so the *bread* and *fish* in Matthew.

Jesus may be grieving but the crowd is hungry. Hungry for what? More of his teaching, hungry enough to jeopardize his security. His compassionate interpretation of the tradition, his creative insight into the reality and nature of God, heals body and soul.

In an interview, Lisa Miller, Professor of Clinical Psychology at Columbia University, talks about her new book, *The Awakened Brain: The New Science of Spirituality and Our Quest For An Inspired Life*. Her research shows that people who identify as spiritual or religious are far less likely to run into all kinds of health problems—mental health problems and physical health problems.

In the mid 90's, in the early stages of her career, she was working in a residential mental health facility in New York. One of the older patients suffered from severe bipolar disorder. He asked if there were any plans to commemorate Yom Kippur. The doctor in charge said, "No."

Dr. Miller, a Jew, approached the unit chief and said, "I'm not a rabbi, but I would be happy to facilitate the prayers if that is ok with you." "Sure, if you want," was the response.

Dr. Miller and some patients gathered for the prayers. The man with severe bipolar disorder held the group in the cadence of the prayers, everyone followed him. Miller told the patients she was glad to be with them on this day and asked if anyone would like to speak.

As the patients shared stories, Miller noticed that whatever the patient's symptoms had been the day before, in that moment, they were free. In that moment, they were free from suffering. They were free of the characteristic patterns that had dragged them down in a way that was equal and opposite to their main symptoms.

Miller thought, a mental health system minus spirituality makes no sense. And that became her life's work, to understand the place of spirituality in renewal and recovery and resilience and to put this in the language of science.

Using data sets that everyone knew and trusted, she asked one new question: What is the impact of spirituality? The findings, she says, were jaw dropping. The magnitude of the protective benefit of personal spirituality is an 80% decreased risk of addiction to drugs or alcohol

Plugging into the equation every other possible explanation that was generally taken in mental health, it turns out the more high risk we are, the more that there is stress in our lives, the more that we might be genetically at risk for depression, the greater the impact of spirituality as a source of resilience, as preventative against major depression.

One of the most beautiful findings in her 20 years as an investigator has been an MRI study conducted together with colleagues at Yale Medical School. Looking at people of many different faith traditions, the first finding was that there is one neuro seat of transcendent perception, and we all have it.

When subjects recount spiritual experiences, their brains light up. The bonding network comes up online, just as when we were held in the arms of a parent or grandparent. The brain responds to spiritual stimuli in the same way it does to a hug from a family member when you're a baby.

Dr. Miller describes herself as very left-brained. But when she sees peer reviewed science that says *we're naturally spiritual beings*, that when we cultivate our spirituality, we're 80% less likely to be addicted, 82% less likely to take our lives, it speaks to the left side of her brain long enough to quiet down and *listen* to the other parts of herself.

At the inner table of human knowing, Dr. Miller says, we all have an empiricist, a logician, an intuitive, a mystic and a skeptic. The skeptic is welcome, but it is not scientific to allow the skeptic to be the bouncer. The intuitive and the mystic know as well as the empiricist and logician.

If we are spiritual beings *by nature*, then all the stuff in the world, all the power and ego stroking status in the world, will never satisfy the deeper hunger of our souls. *Listen* to your life. Your dissatisfactions are trying to tell you something. *Listen carefully*, says Isaiah, *and eat what is good. Listen, so that you may live.*