

“AUTHENTIC SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE” *Excerpts from an article by Gerald May from Shalem News given to us by Bill & Fran Taber. Gerald May (1940 –2005) was an American psychiatrist and theologian. He conducted workshops in contemplation and psychology, and wrote several books on how to combine spiritual direction with psychological treatment.*

“Someone describes a vision, an encounter with the Divine. Is this ‘real’ or is it an illusion contrived by ego? People interested in spirituality and psychology have always been concerned with differentiating authentic spiritual experiences from psychological symptoms. In my recent research, I have collected eight qualities that may help in reflecting upon these differences.

“...it is just as true to say that all experience...holds at least something of God’s truth. Therefore, the qualities that follow should not be used too arbitrarily. Further, our experiences cannot be judged on the basis of their content alone. We must look at how these experiences are integrated in the larger picture of life; in context, in community, and over time.”

Meaningful Integration. Authentic spiritual experiences do not exist as isolated ‘highs’. They occur within the context of real life and are integrated in a way that is meaningful for both individual and community.

Bearing Good Fruit. Authentic spiritual experiences lead to good effects for individual and community. Classically, this includes deepened faith, hope, trust, compassion, creativity, and love. Authentic experiences do not lead to privatism or destructiveness.

Decreased Self-Preoccupation. Authentic experiences lead people to feel more identified with and open to the rest of humanity and the world. Experiences that lead to feeling of being more special or better than other people are probably not authentic.

Self Knowledge. Authentic spirituality leads to a greater understanding of oneself. Signs of repression, denial or shutting out of self-awareness indicate a lack of authenticity.

Humility. Authentic experiences lead to a particular kind of humility, one that painfully recognizes one’s human inadequacy yet at the same time increasingly realizes one’s own preciousness and worth as a child of God. It is a humility that is combined with dignity. This is in contrast with experiences that lead either to arrogance or devaluing of oneself.

Openness to Differences. authentic experiences lead to less defensiveness about one’s own faith and increased respect for people of differing faiths... they do not result in aggressive clinging to one’s own understanding.

Open-Endedness. Authentic spiritual experiences contain a quality of further invitation (to) continued growth and healing.

Ordinariness. Although authentic experiences may initially be accompanied by celebration and enthusiasm or by trepidation, their integration brings a quality of wondrous appreciation of the ordinary; life is holy. Experiences that lead to a strong separation of the holy from the mundane must be questioned.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Do you recognize any of these qualities in your own spiritual journey? Or in your experience of having a leading or ‘carrying a concern’?

Do you have any questions or thoughts?