

In 1927, the novelist Virginia Woolf wrote an essay called “Poetry, Fiction and the Future” in which she talked about the limitations of lyric poetry to meet a moment in which human beings were coming to understand that the earth was billions of years old, that human life lasts but a second, and that, as she put it, “all bonds of union seem broken.” “The fine fabric of a lyric,” she wrote, “is no more fitted to contain this point of view than a rose leaf to envelop the rugged immensity of a rock.” As the west coast burns and the coronavirus continues to flare and spread and kill, as Black people continue to be shot by police — in the back, when unarmed, in their own homes — even though protestors have been in the streets all summer, and as we head into an election that feels both urgently critical and deeply uncertain, you may be wondering whether “spirituality” is what we ought to be talking about. With history bearing down on us, is focusing our attention on spirituality a case of trying to wrap the rugged immensity of a rock in a rose leaf?

It depends on what we mean by spirituality, I suppose. Because “spirituality” is one of those words that is difficult to define, it gets pressed into use for all kinds of purposes. “Spirituality” is sometimes ridiculed, even within churches, because it seems, to some, to point to a kind of self-indulgence that requires us to turn from the “distractions” of the world and so keeps us from engaging the problems we face, including our deep political divisions. A focus on “spirituality,” for some, threatens to cast the glow of candlelight over those divisions and make them less visible, or to turn our faces in a different direction.

But spirituality, with or without candlelight, is about change. And the word persists, I think, in spite of our difficulties in defining it, because it gets at a kind of change for which we have no other word. The great historian of philosophy, Pierre Hadot, in his book, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, writes about the spirituality of early philosophical movements, like Stoicism, Platonism, and Epicureanism. He says these movements were not made up of philosophers sitting alone in a room thinking their great thoughts — they were communities, practicing together what Hadot called “spiritual exercises.” He notes that the word “spiritual” makes some people uncomfortable, but that he finds the word necessary because none of the other words that *almost* describe what he’s talking about — moral, ethical, intellectual, of thought, of the soul — quite get at what he finds in the spirituality of these communities. There’s something more that he needs the word “spirit” to capture — “a transformation of our vision of the world...[and] a metamorphosis of our personality.” The word “spirit,” he says, points to the “true dimension” of the spiritual exercises of these early philosophers — they were trying, he said, to place themselves “within,” as he puts it, “the perspective of the Whole.” For many of them this meant bringing themselves into alignment with the Logos, the very life of life, the structure of the universe. Christianity, of course, borrowed that term, Logos, to talk about the Logos made flesh, the Word made flesh. Drawing on Hadot’s insights into the spirituality of ancient philosophical movements, I’ll hazard a working definition of spirituality from my Christian perspective: at its best, Christian spirituality is made up of the practices that keep us conscious of God’s presence among us, bring us into the flow of God’s work and God’s purposes, and reshape both our vision

of the world and the way we live our lives. My former colleague, the Rev. Peter J. Gomes, was once asked to summarize the good news of the gospel in one sentence. He replied: “we do not have to be as we are.” The practices of our spirituality are what keep us on the road to becoming something new.

It’s not surprising to find discussions of spiritual practices in the history of philosophy, but it is a little surprising to find such discussions in political writings. But one of the best books I’ve read in the last several years about spiritual practices was written by Timothy Snyder, an historian of the authoritarian regimes of the twentieth century. His book, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, could just as easily have been subtitled: *Twenty Spiritual Practices from the Twentieth Century*. What Snyder has done is to reflect on the lessons he’s learned from studying societies that struggled under tyrannical governments and the practices that people used to resist them.

Snyder’s book about political practices reads like a book about spiritual practices, even sometimes religious practices — reading the Bible is one of the practices he commends, for example. The Bible, he says, is always timely, and he looks especially to the teachings of Jesus who questions the unchecked accumulation of wealth, calls for humility, and insists that we be concerned with what is true and what is false: “And ye shall know the truth,” Snyder quotes, “and the truth shall make you free.”

“Believe in truth” is one of the practices that Timothy Snyder extracts from his study of the twentieth century, and it’s certainly one that could help us here in the twenty-first. “To abandon facts is to abandon freedom,” Snyder writes. “If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true,” he writes, “then all is spectacle. The biggest wallet pays for the most blinding lights.”

This is obviously one of our most intractable problems as a society: discerning the truth. Snyder associates “truth” with “facts” and, of course, many truths elude being ground down to “facts” — that’s why those ancient philosophers created communities of spiritual practice. It’s why you can’t just turn to the last page of one of Plato’s dialogues and find the answer to the questions of “what is truth? What is justice? What is the good?” Learning to dialogue is not primarily about getting to the answer, or arriving at a fact. It’s about the practice itself, one that requires the attention and consent of both participants in every moment. The point is not to articulate a doctrine, but to shape the way we think, to cultivate an orientation toward life that opens us to conversion, to change. That’s why you can’t just skip to the end of a dialogue to find the answer any more than you can summarize a poem. The answer’s not at the end; it’s not reducible to a definition. The answer’s in the practice of dialogue itself, a practice of moving together toward truth, toward justice, toward the Good.

But we all know what Snyder means when he says “Believe in truth.” The facts he’s talking about are empirical: both complex scientific facts that can be proven through experimentation and study over time — climate change, for example — but also simple facts like: did it rain or did it not? If we get used to resisting facts for political reasons or religious reasons or any other kinds of reasons, then that resistance to facts becomes a kind of spiritual practice in reverse, because it forms us, not toward freedom, but toward a greater vulnerability to manipulation.

Simone Weil, a philosopher who lived during the rise of fascism in Europe, once wrote that Christ wants us to prefer the truth to himself, that he wants us to turn from him to go after the truth. Perhaps this is because Weil saw how Christian images and ideas were being used and abused by the Nazis and their supporters. For Weil, if we turn from Christ to go after the truth, we won't go far, as she puts it, before falling into his arms. Christian truth, any kind of religious truth, is more rich, complex and unknowable than any set of facts. But Weil insists that our faith would never require us to follow facts that are deliberately distorted to insure our allegiance to some person or system. For Christ, as Snyder notes, the truth sets us free.

Another of Snyder's practices, which I think could help us shape a spirituality for these days of division is: "be kind to our language." Snyder argues that we have put ourselves into a trance by staring constantly at televised news — and let me just say, I am guilty as charged. Every story is "breaking news," he rightly says, until the next story arrives. "So," as he puts it, "we are hit by wave upon wave but never see the ocean."

To be able to see the ocean — to be able to discern "the shape and significance" of the events we are living through — requires living language, not slogans. So central to the practice of being kind to our language is finding fresh words to talk about the things that everybody's talking about. Even when we *agree* with what everybody's talking about, Snyder says, we should find new words to say it in. To simply stick to the language that we hear in the news, or even among our friends, is to accept, Snyder says, "the absence of a larger framework." To have a larger framework, we need more language, more ideas. So another part of the practice of being kind to our language is reading. Snyder urges us to read fiction to cultivate our ability "to think about ambiguous situations" and, I would add, to remember that we all mysteries to each other, all more than we know ourselves to be. Read history, Snyder says, read the Bible, read Harry Potter and study how the students of Hogwarts resisted tyranny. But find language that is fresh and unsloganized to talk about the things that matter to us. This seems to me to be a spiritual practice needed in this time of deep division. Because when we hear each other's slogans, we tune out. We're all speaking in shorthand, and we're all sure that we already know what each other means. But if we found new language to say what we've been saying, not only might others hear us and we them, but we might hear something new inside of ourselves, we might realize we have thoughts and ideas that go further than the words we've been repeating along with everyone else.

One final practice I'll lift up from Snyder's book, the simplest of all of them, the one any one of us can do in any moment, is this: make eye contact and small talk. In all the places where tyranny has emerged, he says, what people remember years later is how their neighbors treated them. Small gestures like stopping to comment on the weather or offering a handshake came to mean a very great deal to people living under threat in Nazi Germany or during the purges in eastern Europe. When vulnerable people saw their neighbors averting their eyes from them, or crossing the street to avoid meeting them, they felt more afraid. And with good reason--because someone who is isolated in society is easier for an authoritarian regime to harm than someone who is known, and seen, and held in community.

"You might not be sure, today or tomorrow," Snyder writes, "who feels threatened in the United States." So he recommends making eye contact with everyone: smile, offer a handshake, stop and chat for a moment when you can. If you make eye contact with everyone, he says, then you

will, for sure, make some people feel better. And you will combat the isolation that increases vulnerability.

The practice of making eye contact and small talk might be thought of as part of a larger spiritual practice: the practice of hospitality. This is a practice that is cultivated through habit, repetition and muscle memory. My favorite story about this practice is that of the Huguenot community of Le Chambon, in France — a Protestant Christian community that sheltered 3,500 Jews and 1,500 others persecuted under the Vichy regime and helped many get over the border to safety in Switzerland. This community had, a few centuries earlier, lived through its own persecution and had long experience in sheltering refugees. Indeed, the path they walked with those they helped get from their village to the Swiss border in the twentieth century had been walked by their ancestors for very similar reasons. This community kept those paths clear through their well-honed practices of hospitality, even in the years they didn't need them so urgently. When refugees began knocking on their doors in the early 1940s, the community didn't wonder what to do or how to do it. They simply did what they had practiced doing in their everyday lives: they offered hospitality to those who needed it. They opened their doors and their kitchens, they provided false documents and ration cards, they made up beds in their churches and their schools, and they accompanied people on the perilous journey to the border. As a former child refugee in Le Chambon, put it: "Nobody asked where you were from. Nobody asked who your father was or if you could pay. They just accepted each of us, with warmth and shelter." The community of Le Chambon had been practicing hospitality for a long time in ways large and small. They were formed by its gestures — opening the door when the knock came rather than sitting still and silent until whoever was knocking moved on, keeping extra pillows and blankets and food on hand. And, I expect, making eye contact and small talk with people they encountered. The community had practiced being open and welcoming for generations. And so when it was a matter of life or death, they could open their doors without hesitation because they had practiced every day of their lives; it was an expression, a practice of their spirituality. This kind of spiritual practice, Pierre Hadot has written, "allows us to respond immediately to events, as if they were questions asked of us all of a sudden." Because they had built up their muscle memory of ordinary practices like opening the door, and providing what was needed, the people of Le Chambon created a space of safety for those who needed it the most. Sometimes these kinds of heroic acts feel like miracles, coming out of nowhere. But most of the time, they're prepared for, in community, through practice.

Ever since reading Snyder's book, I've been trying to make more eye contact — not with everybody, as he suggests, but with the people with whom I come into contact in the course of a day. And found it remarkably difficult at first. I had to slow down to do it, for one thing, and I had to believe that pausing to make eye contact with someone is just as important as trying to get where I'm going. Gradually, I realized that when I make eye contact with people throughout the day, I feel more present in the world. That's one of the many things that difficult about this moment--it's hard to make eye contact on zoom. But trying this practice made me realize that I am often thinking of one thing and doing another. Without practices that gather up the scattered parts of ourselves from time to time, practices that can bring our inner and outer lives into alignment for a moment, we can go through life slightly dissociated from everything going on around us. We're not fully present. And when we're not fully present, we have no way of crossing the distances that divide us from each other, at least not nonviolently.

Seven years ago our country was shown the nonviolent potential of a rich interior presence when an African American woman named Antoinette Tuff, the bookkeeper at an elementary school in Decatur, Georgia, talked a young white man, armed with an AK-47 and five hundred rounds of ammunition, into laying down his weapons and surrendering before anyone got hurt. What made her so skillful and so compassionate when confronted with a heavily armed man who told her he wasn't afraid to die? What allowed her to see in him the possibility that he might not do what he came to her school to do? What made it possible for her to speak to him as if he were a member of her own family, to call him "baby," to tell him she loved him, to promise to stay with him until the police arrived and to make sure they didn't shoot him? "I've never been so scared in all the days of my life," she told the 911 operator when it was all over.

Antoinette Tuff is obviously a person with deeply nonviolent instincts and a lightning-quick ability to bring the whole range of her experience to bear on a dangerous situation; the mystery of her skillful, compassionate response is not something I can explain. But when she was asked to explain how she did it, she talked about a spiritual practice that she had been taught by her pastor. The previous Sunday, she told Anderson Cooper, her pastor had begun a sermon series on how to anchor yourself in God as you move through your life. And it inspired her so much that she got up early on Monday morning so she could study and practice before she went to work. By the time the gunman walked into her school on Tuesday morning, she had been practicing anchoring herself in God, praying on the inside no matter what was going on around her, for a couple of days. When that young man walked into her office and pointed a gun at her, she said, she could pray *for* him and talk *to* at the same time. And that's what she did, anchoring herself in God in the midst of chaos, keeping the gunman in view as a struggling human being as clearly as she could see the danger he posed.

The practice of praying on the inside, of anchoring oneself in God, has a long history. The desert monks knew how to do it, and people crossing the desert seeking safety in the present day do too. Antoinette Tuff learned the practice from her pastor. And we learned from her something more about the possibilities of our shared humanity, including the crossing of the most fraught distances.

When I think of Antoinette Tuff, I think not only of her extraordinary heroism. I think of her getting up early to practice anchoring herself in God. A few years ago, at a conference on Christianity and mass incarceration, I heard the scholar André Willis talk about the importance of this kind of "inner transformation" through spiritual practice. Because oppressive systems bring us into distorted relationship with ourselves, he said, we need to cultivate practices that support resilience, practices that guide us into the free space within us. As St. Teresa of Avila famously told the nuns in her care in the 16th century: you can make a journey to your interior castle whenever you want, and you don't have to ask anyone's permission. The inner life cultivated by spiritual practice is a place of resilience and resistance, but also of freedom and creativity, as Antoinette Tuff showed us on that fateful day in her school.

The great pastor and theologian, Howard Thurman, once wrote that we all need time alone in order to reset our nervous systems. Without our own experience of solitude, he thought, it was difficult to give what he called "unhurried attention" to others. This kind of attention is not easy to give, just as, for some of us, it's not easy to make eye contact. "Skill in tarrying with another,"

he writes, can seem mechanical and artificial at first, but we have keep at it, train ourselves the way Antoinette Tuff did, the way the Stoics did, the way, Thurman said, Jesus did. It's Jesus capacity to offer unhurried attention, Thurman believed, that helped people struggling with their demons relax in his presence, that drew children to him, and people whom others shunned. "How indescribably wonderful and healing it is to encounter another human being who listens not only to our words, but manages, somehow, to listen to *us*. Everyone needs this and everyone needs to give it, as well — thus," he says, "we come full circle in love."

When Thurman first became a minister, though, he wasn't good at this. And he struggled to find a connection between the inner life he experienced in solitude and the communal life he experienced with his congregation. But he kept trying, by moving back and forth between the two and eventually "the door between their questing spirits and my own," he wrote, "became a swinging door" through which love could move.

Lest you think this is too much of a rose leaf to cover the rugged immensity of the rock of our division in this country, Thurman was writing during segregation which he described as a "disease of the human spirit." Our "tight circles of isolated security" of "whether of religious faith, political ideology, or social purity," he said, deprive us of love, which he saw as a necessity, not a luxury. His student, Martin Luther King Jr., believed the same. The "often misunderstood and misinterpreted" concept of love, King wrote in his last book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, "has now become an absolute necessity for [human] survival."

All of the practices we've been thinking about — from Snyder's eye contact to Le Chambon's hospitality to Antoinette Tuff's deliberate anchoring of herself in God's presence to Howard Thurman's swinging door are practices of openness and, as such, are risky. Which is why we need each other—communities in which we can turn to one another and, together, toward the world, knowing that if we do not have to be as we are, then the world does not have to be as it is.