

The Spiritual Activist

Claudia Horwitz, Penguin Compass 2002

Pg 17-18

Committing to the Path: David Sawyer

An educator, consultant, and executive coach, David Sawyer has spent three decades inviting people to explore the connections between leadership, service and spirituality. He spent ten years at Berea College developing student servant-leaders. Sawyer led the team that designed the New Generation Training Program at Youth Service America and the national training for Summer of Service, the pilot for President Clinton's AmeriCorps program. Now he advises leaders in business and social change programs around the country. David is a native Kentuckian and lives in Portland, Oregon.

My spiritual life now revolves around a formal practice, under vow to a spiritual teacher, but it hasn't always been so. At 13, I became disillusioned with Christianity, and full of adolescent frustration, renounced it bitterly. As a junior in college, after a truly dark year, I encountered eastern religion and philosophy, and discovered that the spiritual process did not have to be about "believing in God". It could be understood as a journey towards God. This idea was very liberating to me. One spring day, I had what I guess could be called an enlightenment experience. For three days my depression disappeared, and I experienced real clarity and happiness. I will never forget the horror—sitting in an economics class—when that state of grace vanished. Shook me utterly. Trying to recapture that gracefulness got me seriously involved in the spiritual path. I thought it might take a couple of years! Thirty years later it can still be a tremendous struggle.

I took vows in the Tibetan tradition in the mid-80's, and had the sense that vows built a kind of spiritual "container". Lessons didn't leak out so quickly, and the "water level" began to rise. My ultimate teacher though, turned out to be western born Avatar Adi Da, also known as the Ruchira Buddha. His autobiography blew me away in 1973, but the demands of his community were way more than I was prepared for. In 1995 the chance to see Adi Da for the first time presented itself. On Easter day of 1996, he and I had our first personal exchange. It was quite intimate; we kissed. I was able to speak words of love and respect in his ear, and he responded very tenderly. It was a special moment in my life.

After that I took an eternal vow—a scary thought, and a very real commitment. As for formal practice, I continued to meditate and pray every morning, but a subtle link had been established. I had the feeling that my own efforts were being met halfway. I could actually feel a new energy, a "brightness", and knew that I had encountered a remarkable teacher. These days practice is less a private struggle to "get somewhere" than it is about turning to a tacit spiritual presence. Of course I must do that turning, which given my talent for resistance, can be very difficult. Adi Da once humorously called me "spiritually challenged"!

In the west we have a basic distrust of spiritual teachers, which given the shocking lack of integrity so many have displayed, is entirely understandable. My feeling is that a relationship with a true teacher—in any tradition—quickens our journey and helps us to finally experience new states of being. This sort of bond is sometimes called the "guru yoga"

in the east, but there are examples in our western world too. Having said that, I don't believe that you must have a spiritual teacher to do a great deal of real inner work. Nor do I believe that you must meditate formally. I think of inner work as anything that helps us to navigate our issues and learn to shine: real therapy, strong friendships, long walks, great books, daily prayer, uplifting music. When asked to advise others, I usually recommend that they just choose something simple and start doing it every day. For years I used to collect my thoughts staring out the window with a cup of coffee or glass of wine, which was very centering. Doing something briefly every day—in a manner that you find congenial—gets your feet moving along the path without a lot of resistance. After that, things tend to evolve organically, as they should, and you discover new ways to strengthen your spirit as the journey progresses. For some that may involve a living teacher, as it has for me.

One day at Berea College I found an old Christian text that talked about our inner and outer journeys—another very liberating idea for me. I was worried that serious spiritual practice would weaken my work in the world, the outer dimension, but the opposite has been true. I have more clarity and listen much more deeply. My bullshit detectors are keener, but greater compassion has also awakened. I focus increasingly on the essential rather than the ephemeral. Kindness and directness have learned to coexist. Thankfully, people seem to be receptive. My experience has been that spiritual work has cleared away a lot of inner garbage and helped me to be more rather than less effective in the world.

The integration of our inner and outer journeys is terribly important. And can be terribly difficult. The ancient Greeks thought of these two journeys as circles overlapping side by side, and had a word for their almond shaped intersection—the “majorca”—which symbolized the sweet spot where our inner and outer journeys are connected. This is where our deepest values and gifts find expression in our work, and where the work we do stimulates and enlivens our inward strivings. Buddhists refer to this conjunction as “right livelihood”, and hold that our work needs to not only make a contribution to the world, but also to our own spiritual development—a sacred thing, and a rare one.

Some outer environments can be tough for spiritual practice. Recently I spent two years working with BP in Alaska, helping them strengthen and soften their organizational culture. I had a ton of stuff to work through, given my old feelings about the oil industry and about multinational corporations generally. I used to feel that entering that building every morning was like entering a lead vault—a no-practice zone. My learning curve was nearly vertical, and I came close to bailing out after six months. Now I count it as one of the richest periods of my life, full of inner and outer lessons, and full of strong, surprising friendships.

Dag Hammarskjöld, the secretary general of the United Nations during the dark years of the Cold War, said, “In our era, the road to holiness must pass through the world of action.” That pretty much sums up my sense of who I am and what I must be. I've always been very much a person of the world, and I keep believing that it's possible to live an American contemplative life – a life that is intensely involved in the reshaping of the world but also profoundly committed to realization. This is my challenge and my commitment.