

Reward is a powerful life motivator. The reward system in our brain is an essential part of our survival system, over millennia it's developed to give us a hit of feel-good chemicals whenever we've achieved something, done something good or 'right,' and this is an excellent motivator for action, for getting us to do things. A lot of our early learning is rewards based; in that way we're not so different to our beloved companion animals, if you've ever trained a dog, you know a pocket of treats can really help, and on many levels, we humans aren't much more sophisticated than that!

When our kids were very little we clapped and cheered when they took their first steps, doled out M&Ms as an incentive to use the toilet when they were potty training, there were rewards for getting school work done, and words of praise when they supported one another, or defended one another, when they were generous, when they were honest. And, I think, we showed disapproval just as obviously, there were scowl-y faces, stern tones of voice, course-correction conversations and consequences when they behaved badly. Just as rewards can feel so good, disapproval and punishment is intended to feel bad so it can be a deterrent. ... our way into adulthood is signposted by the consequences of our behavior as we grow up.

As a young adult, at work and in my personal life, I'd make choices, I would act or behave in certain ways, because I'd learned what would earn approval from the folks around me. Receiving praise, being included, being thanked were some of the ways I felt rewarded and, although I wasn't fully conscious of it at the time, this shaped my choices and actions more powerfully than my own deep longings. I would often have to set aside things I really wanted to do or say to avoid the discomfort of disapproval.

I learned to modify my behavior so I could fit in, and get that reward. And, I learned to be afraid of the consequences of not conforming, afraid of the consequences of disapproval.

As the years went on, life got increasingly complex with competing priorities: relationships, work, being an engaged member of society, feeling fulfilled as a human being. Knowing only how to function though, essentially, through seeking reward or avoiding the discomfort of disapproval did not equip me or prepare me well for *fullness* of life. Rewards were really useful as a young child, a way to learn how to survive, learn how to follow ‘the rules,’ how to be part of the group, but the next stage of my development was missing. Not only did I not move on from the skills that help me survive and fit in, move on to living, *fully*, but I didn’t even know that was possible.

I was living solely up on the surface, up in the flotsam, being knocked about by the winds of the current moment that cared less about the quality of my life and my role in the life of the world; in these years I had no anchor, no ground beneath my feet, whether I chose to do something or not was mostly driven by what it would give me – would it make me feel better? would it make me feel bad?

My actions in the world, without me realizing it, were shaped and guided by this anticipation of what the consequences would be. I had developed all kinds of skills and abilities to navigate the world, but my own spiritual self, that part of me that’s bound to and of the Divine Truth, that part of me was entirely unknown and so it remained undeveloped, in its infancy.

If my life's trajectory, if the purpose of my life were to move as smoothly as possible through this human-created world, I had most of what I needed to be able to do that by young adulthood. But as a Christian, my life's purpose is to love God and neighbor, including my enemy, and for this, I was ill-equipped.

The Christian Way requires radical forgiveness, healing, and the pursuit of justice, at all costs, and I did not have the skills for that. This life purpose puts me at odds with a culture that's defined by material wealth, that values control, conformity and stability, and systems of power; that sees violence as a justified means to an end ... and so living fully into the Christian life involves risk, risk to self, to status, to relationship. And I did not have the skills for that.

Living fully in the Christian Way calls for thought and action born of our relationship with God, guided by Christ, so we'll struggle if we're hoping to receive praise along the way, and our faith will flounder if we need gratitude or reward to be assured the things we're doing are right, that the way we're thinking, acting, and behaving in the world is good. But this was the only way I'd ever been taught how to get it right.

It took years for all of us to learn how to do the most basic things of life, how to walk, use the toilet, how to use a knife and fork; learning the rules of the culture we live in took a long time, and along the way we figured it out because we were rewarded for what we got right and discouraged or even punished when we got it wrong. If we were to move to some other place, live in another culture, we would expect it to take a long time to figure it out and get proficient. Do we take the need to learn and develop the skills of the spiritual path as seriously as we take the need to learn and develop the skills to function in the world?

We have to *learn* how to live our life in Christ, just as we had to learn how to live our life in the world, and part of what we have to learn is that we must trust a different way of learning. The spiritual life lacks the ‘signposting’ of reward and disapproval we grow to trust for our life in the world, instead, with practice we will come to trust the quiet inner guidance of the Spirit. Our faith is not some-*thing* that can be smaller or larger in size, and we shouldn’t pursue it to be rewarded in any conventional sense. Faith is our own fullness of living, the fullness of our own is-ness, it is something we come into, and it takes attention, cultivation, and practice. So, how do we know if we’re doing it right?

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul says that the fruits of the Spirit are: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; and when these arise in life, arise without effort, without force, without thought even, I think we can be confident we’re on the right path. Looking to the ancients, the mystics and martyrs, the prophets and the great teachers of faith, there’s also courage, courage that has them able to set fear aside in the pursuit of justice, to risk, risk even their own life rather than compromise.

Think of the change we could bring to this world if we were *all* mature in the Spirit!

This interior guide, the guidance of the Spirit, is different for each of us, it’s something we each must learn for ourselves, in the context of our own unique lives, if we’re to actually follow Jesus’ Way. Everything we need for this is already within us, we don’t need more than we already have, we don’t need to be more than we already are, but we do need to learn the Way, and keep learning,

we need to take our practice seriously, be committed to this path, committed to keep practicing, until this world is healed, until there is lasting peace, until there is justice for all. This is the work of our whole life; and here, the spirituality of the Episcopal church and the life and mission of this parish is both our school and our practice space; and our reward is no quick hit of dopamine, but freedom and fullness of life, and this, surely, is the greatest reward of all.