

# Self-Empowerment

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The newsletter dedicated to nurturing personal development

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## PRACTICAL WISDOM

Greetings, Friends! It is a joy to be with you as the Self-Empowerment newsletter begins its 18<sup>th</sup> year of publication. I am grateful for all the people who have supported this work and inspired me in my ministry.

The process of writing and gathering articles to share with you through the years has had a powerful impact on the quality of my life. Your notes of gratitude and your donations tell me that this publication is meaningful for you as well.

It is my nature to want to share what I learn with others. The more I teach, the more I validate and embody what I am learning. Each time I come in contact with material that lifts me up, deepens my faith, or opens me to greater compassion, I consider how or when I might share it in this publication, or possibly in a workshop or sermon. I am grateful for this opportunity.

There is a Zen saying, "Before Enlightenment: chop wood, carry water. After Enlightenment: chop wood, carry water." What's the difference? The tasks are the same. The need is the same. But the internal experience of the day-to-day tasks makes a world of difference. When we are fully present and awake, the tasks of an "ordinary day" become extraordinarily exquisite. Washing dishes can become the perfect moving meditation.

### Responding to Difficulties

There are many wonderful spiritual teachers who offer techniques to help us remember that we are already perfect, whole, and complete. In their own style, using their preferred methods, they offer a path to the experience of greater freedom or peace. While some of us desire to awaken to a higher consciousness, many of us simply want an end to suffering in our own lives and in the lives of others.

Some are facing acute situations like financial woes or illnesses. Most of us face one or more of the many difficulties that plague our days – stress, conflict, confusion, unfulfilled desires, etc. It can be easy to feel

hopeless or depressed if your view of the world is mostly informed by the "news," whether it is our own personal news or the news reports in the media.

Do you start your day by mentally repeating your fears and concerns at home or at work, or by listening to the media's latest bombardment of murders & disasters? Whether you are rehashing your own problems or the problems of the world, there are empowering or disempowering ways to be with those thoughts and feelings. For example, stories of difficulties could be the catalyst for these or other possible responses:

1- The news can upset and depress me, leaving me feeling hopeless or paralyzed by fear.

2- Awareness of difficulties could motivate me to bring my prayers and positive action to help solve the problems.

3- I could be with my feelings fully, without resistance, and allow myself to go through it to the other side, seeing where that leads me.

4- I might consider seeking professional help from a counselor or a masseuse / bodyworker.

5- Going within, I could ask for Spirit's guidance in how to view the situation from a higher consciousness.

Believe it or not, we are free to choose!

It can be a challenge to remember our freedom to choose our response, rather than reacting out of past habits, but it is a first step in ending our mental and emotional suffering. Each of us has the power to choose how we will relate to personal and universal woes. As easily as we can judge people as stupid, bad, or crazy, we can instead choose to change our mind and nurture thoughts and actions of compassion, love, and healing. But that will only happen when we really want peace instead of drama.

### Levels of Consciousness

Okay, I admit it – I used to be a Drama Queen, unconsciously loving the "hit" of self-righteousness when describing my latest experience of victimhood. My latest news of betrayal, another costly repair, or a new physical symptom was more than the re-telling of facts. In telling my woes I got to experience myself as

*It can be a challenge to remember our freedom to choose our response, rather than reacting out of past habits, but it is a first step in ending our mental and emotional suffering.*

the poor victim who would get your sympathy and plenty of mileage out of the ongoing conversation of the ways life can be so hard. It's the "Life is Tough" philosophy, one that is commonly discussed among fellow sufferers.

But when I got sick and tired of being sick and tired, I made a choice to experience greater peace. That meant I needed to drop my identification with being a victim of people, places, and things.

The process of releasing my sense of victimhood led me to various New Age/Ancient Wisdom teachings. While the tools and methods varied, the common components that I found were: being present, stillness, listening, gratitude, and forgiveness.

I immersed myself in practices that began to give me relief from suffering. Through the years I have had mystical experiences, yet my greatest desire is for practical wisdom in the life of a householder. Rather than desiring to feel "blissed out," I would rather integrate spiritual principles into a life well-lived in the culture into which I was born. I want relevant grounded wisdom while participating in an ordinary life as a wife, a mother, a daughter, a friend, and a co-worker. I am not drawn to live in a monastery. I want to be the best I can be right here and right now, in ordinary circumstances. I want to chop wood and carry water with a smile on my face and a song in my heart.

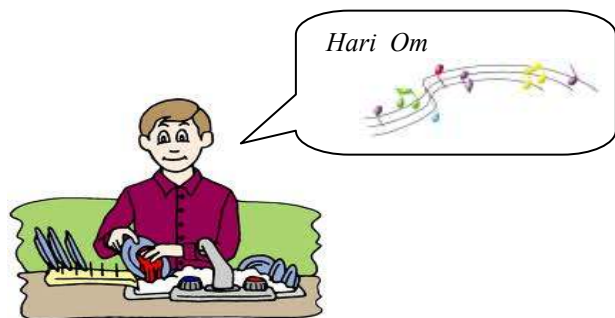
The birth of this newsletter, as well as the other ways I have of sharing what I have been learning, aim at the nurturing of practical spirituality. Whether I am teaching, preaching, counseling, or writing, my goal is to share that which empowers us to be the best we can be in ordinary circumstances.

In the next article Scott Grace (formerly known as Scott Kalechstein) shares his experience of learning how to appreciate an ordinary day. Other articles in this issue include a summary of Michael Beckwith's four levels of consciousness (page 5) and Ragani's introduction to Kirtan, meditative chanting (page 4).

Join me in feeling the joyful experience of Kirtan and *Dishwashing Meditation*, one of my favorite ordinary day experiences of the Here-and-Now.

Have a blessed Autumn season.

Your fellow traveler, *Rev Jill*



## AN ORDINARY DAY

by Scott Grace

*If you want to fly, simplify.*

*Zannah*

I have had a fear and distrust of ordinary kinds of days for a very long time. I have created an epic life for myself, filled with dazzling highs and dramatic lows. With the work/play that I do in the world, peak experiences are quite commonplace. Often, though, a view from the peak is followed by a descent to the valley, and such extremes can weigh heavy in my heart. What goes up does have a habit of coming down on this planet.

Like a tree trying to reach the sky without growing its roots, I grabbed for the highs of life, sputtered in mid-air, and then came crashing down. I justified this turbulent flight pattern by fancying myself to be one of those creative, artistic people who must live close to the edge to get fresh material. At a certain point I started asking myself: Does my creativity come from my willingness to court drama or in spite of it? Could there be a sweeter, more lasting romance available through the consciousness of peace and balance? In this world, rest in peace is a blessing for the departed. Is a lasting peace possible while here on classroom earth? Would I continue to learn, grow and be creative if I gave up my fascination with high intensity living? Such soul searching questions have led me to some soul satisfying experiences and answers.

There was one day when I was feeling unusually calm and balanced. I was taking a walk in a quiet neighborhood, enjoying my uneventful afternoon. As I peacefully strolled, my contentment was interrupted by a slippery serpent of a suggestion. The tempting thought went something like this: "This peace is a drag. If we don't create some excitement soon, surely we will die of boredom!" I saw this as a test, an opportunity to resist eating another apple from the Tree of Knowledge of Pain and Drama. I decided not to take the bite.

"Universe," I prayed with conviction, "I know you are a place of infinite beauty and harmony. I want to live my life aligned with the ways of peace. I know that the birds and dolphins aren't bored singing and swimming your praises each day. They don't need pain and drama to glorify you or to learn lessons, and neither do I. Teach me to see the miracles in ordinary life and to value peace as my greatest possession."

I released my request and continued to sink into a gentle, sweet calm. Suddenly I heard the sounds of an agitated little cat and a large angry dog. The dog had

chased the cat up a fence. The dog was barking, the cat was trembling and meowing 911, and I was at peace. Within that peace my inner voice guided me into action. I approached carefully, made eye contact with the cat, and started beaming love to this precious creature. Slowly I climbed the fence, pausing at times to connect to the cat with my eyes and my breathing. When I got close it came into my arms as if we were old buddies. I climbed back down the safe (dogless) side of the fence and placed my new friend on the sidewalk, who rubbed up against me in gratitude before darting across the street and out of sight.

Walking away, I realized that my prayer had just been answered, and I was being shown how the consciousness of peace can never be boring. When we are at peace we are literally on call for God, attuned and open to the numerous opportunities that become available to share our peace. Peaceful vibrations are highly contagious, and being a vehicle for their spreading is one of the greatest joys of living. One of my songs says:

I'm on call for You  
Twenty four hours a day  
You're love illumines the way  
Here I am  
My heart holding your Hand  
Sharing a peace here  
That passes all I understand  
Let me be your Eye in the storms, God  
Let me be a wide open space  
Let me touch my brothers and sisters  
With a touch of your Grace

It occurred to me that if I had not already been in a place of peace while that incident unfolded, I might not have thought of helping. Or I might have tried to act without sensitivity to offer to the cat, who I intuited was open to my help because of my state of mind. Then I remembered how often I had tried to get close to an attractive member of the opposite sex when my mind and body were broadcasting anything but balance and peace. The adrenal glands, useful and appropriate at times of possible physical danger, were being activated in my romantic life. Fight or flight, the choices presented by the adrenals, are not very helpful for building a foundation of trust and love in a relationship. Fear can be exciting, and can be confused with passion, but it has nothing to do with the energy currents of real love. In fact, I had gotten so used to that heart thumping energy, I thought it was love I was feeling. In romance, I had played out the roles of both the aggressive dog on the prowl and the trembling cat

staying just out of reach. It's no wonder so many of my relationships ended up on the fence!

So here I am now, going through an ordinary day in my life. And the kind of day I once feared was boring, I am now cherishing. I saved no cats, nor did I lose the soft strum of my heartbeat to the adrenaline rush of a dramatic high or painful bummer. What I did do was stay attuned to the peaceful center inside me. Within that center there is a sweetness, a feeling of wholeness that does not crave recognition or search hungrily for its completion. Within that center there is a sense of contentment that is far more soul-satisfying than any and all mystical, peak experiences. Yes, it's just another day, here on the ground. And for that I am extraordinarily grateful!

### The Flight Of The Tree

Ever since I was a little boy my heart would  
dream of flight  
From the tears I shed I would take my jet  
Trying to soar into the light  
Well I made it to the sky most times  
Taking in the view I found  
But the tears would come back to my eyes  
When I crashed back on the ground  
At the point of being on my knees  
with no runway left to turn  
I came face to face with an oak tree  
And a mighty truth to learn  
I said, "Oak tree, my how high you've grown  
What a point of view you've found"  
It said, "What sustains my soaring heights  
Are my roots deep in the ground"  
Out of my mouth there came a prayer  
like I never prayed before  
For my words had power from my pain  
And it shook me to my core  
I said, "Mother earth and father sky  
There's a lesson here for me  
For from birth I've dreamed that I can fly  
without rooting like this tree"  
Plant my feet in soil firm and high,  
to the ground I must return  
For although I might be born to fly  
There's some groundwork here to learn  
So I let my spirit sink back in  
To the soil I feared would hurt  
And I found my soul could really grow  
In the middle of the dirt  
As for the rest, you know it well, for it's what  
all life's about  
As my roots grew stronger in the ground

I began my branching out  
Tall and thick and full of heart  
How I'm growing like a tree  
But I won't forget how I got my start  
Being wounded on my knees

And when heaven's winds blow through my leaves  
I give thanks for my rebirth  
For the flight I yearned for was conceived  
The day I came back to earth

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*Scott Grace is a coach, a speaker, a modern day transformational troubadour and a lighthearted miracle mischief maker, He travels the United States, Canada and Europe, speaking and singing at conferences, Unity and Religious Science Churches, and wherever people are open to humor and playfulness merging with truth and wisdom. He can be visited at [www.scottsongs.com](http://www.scottsongs.com).*

## **Kirtan** by Ragani

Meditation doesn't come easy for many people. And that's where kirtan - an ancient participatory music experience - offers another method. Without the work of mentally quieting the mind, kirtan can carry us effortlessly to a place of quiet, to stillness. One of the oldest sacred music traditions of the world, the kirtan call-and-response chanting genre comes to us from India. Using ancient Sanskrit mantras, the kirtan calls upon sacred energies which serve to quiet the mind, remove obstacles, and bring us back to the center of our being.

### **Freedom from the Daily Chatter**

By repeating simple mantras over and over, faster and faster, the kirtan is an easy way for people to experience some freedom from the daily chatter of the mind. And while it is true that we can sing these chants in the solitude of our own home, there is nothing like the magic of chanting live with musicians and hundreds of participants-from kids to seniors-all adding their energy to the chant. People often say they feel "buzzed" for days following such a chanting experience.

### **Absorb the Vibrations, Ignite the Spirits**

So what gives us that buzz? Something about the kirtan experience goes beyond the music itself, goes to a deeper experience of vibration. We all resonate at different frequencies, and these frequencies change according to what we are doing and thinking. So when we are all doing the same thing-chanting, breathing, and moving to the same rhythms-our vibrations begin

to synchronize and the resulting experience is very powerful. The laws of vibration help us out here, because vibrations align themselves to stronger vibrations, so even if you're having a truly rotten day, it may be difficult to hold onto those feelings during the chant experience. If you were only to sit in the room without participating, the idea is that you could still feel the shift. Something happens-the energy begins to activate the spirit that exists within us all.

### **It's the Heart, not the Art!**

Although the kirtan involves music, the underlying art of kirtan chanting is not actually about musical ability or training-it is about the heart. Everyone can participate, regardless of age or cultural background. The purpose of this music is to get us out of our heads and into our hearts. Typically, the songs can last for 20-30 minutes each with a few moments of silence in between each song so you can soak it all up. The longer songs allow for deeper experience of the effects, and with the simple, repetitive lyrics (it's a chant, after all!) we really don't have to think much about the words.

### **Chants Heal**

In fact, because the ancient Sanskrit lyrics are not familiar to many of us Westerners, these words take us away from the mind's constant chatter a little easier. The powerful healing and transformational energies of these ancient chants can help to reconnect us to the Ever-Present and Eternal Being that lies within us all. All the mantras, melodies, and instruments of kirtan are designed to lead us toward this meditative state.

### **The Beauty of Relaxation!**

We provide floor seating in the traditional style of kirtan events in India (and yes, we also provide chairs for those who prefer chairs), and this living-room style music experience allows people to sink into themselves, to relax and ground themselves during the chants. Most of us spend the day in our heads, running here and there, thinking about where we have to be and what we have to do next. The kirtan gives us a time to come back to our center. And when this happens, beautiful things begin to unfold. Feelings of inspiration, peace, and a sense of connectedness are common experiences.

### **Experience Peace, First Hand!**

"The first time I came to a kirtan, I felt so peaceful, so relaxed," comments Amy, who now regularly participates in the Milwaukee kirtan experience.

"Something happens during the kirtan, and I get this deep sense of inner peace and connectedness." Amy is not the only one with these experiences; a few hundred people attend the monthly Milwaukee kirtan event, and they often return with their friends the next month. "It's like you go into a space- the music takes you there- and

when you emerge at the end, you feel different, more energized and inspired," says Jeff, another kirtan buff.

### Quiet Your Mind, Feel Your Self!

Kirtan helps the mind become quiet, and when the mind quiets, we can begin to perceive the mystical things, the sacred experiences, that are around us always. In the silence between the songs, when the song stops, you can feel something. And that something is you. There is no greater experience than the experience of one's Self. And that vibration is always within you, that vibration is you. That's the beauty of any chant experience-with little or no effort we can experience and enjoy the vibrations of peace, energy, healing and inspiration that are always within us.

*Ragani has led kirtan groups for over 20 years. Visit [RaganiWorld.com](http://RaganiWorld.com) for downloads and info about her live events.*

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### Kirtan Artists

Following are a few well known Kirtan Artists:  
Krishna Das ([KrishnaDas.com](http://KrishnaDas.com))  
Wah! ([WahMusic.com](http://WahMusic.com))  
Deva Premal and Mitan ([DevaPremalMiten.com](http://DevaPremalMiten.com))  
Kirtan Rabbi ([KirtanRabbi.com](http://KirtanRabbi.com))  
David Newman ([DavidNewmanMusic.com](http://DavidNewmanMusic.com))  
Yvette Om ([YvetteOm.com](http://YvetteOm.com))  
Angelika ([AngelikaHealingMusic.com](http://AngelikaHealingMusic.com))  
Ragani ([RaganiWorld.com](http://RaganiWorld.com))  
Snatam Kaur ([SnatamKaur.com](http://SnatamKaur.com))  
Suzanne Sterling ([SuzanneSterling.com](http://SuzanneSterling.com))

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#### St. Therese, "the little flower"

The world came to know St. Therese, "the little flower" through her autobiography, *Story of a Soul*. She described her life as a "little way of spiritual childhood." She lived each day with an unshakable confidence in God's love. "What matters in life," she wrote, "is not great deeds, but great love." Therese lived and taught a spirituality of attending to everyone and everything well and with love. She believed that just as a child becomes enamored with what is before her, we should also have a childlike focus and totally attentive love. Therese's spirituality is of doing the ordinary, with extraordinary love.



## Four Stages of Consciousness

There are many descriptions and maps of consciousness. One that you may find useful is the Life Visioning Process as developed and taught by Rev. Dr. Michael Beckwith. He describes four levels of consciousness which can be viewed as benchmarks in your spiritual work. *Victim*, *Manifester*, *Channel*, and *Being* are the names of the levels in this four-stage evolutionary journey of awareness. Following is a brief summary:

- 1 - **Victim consciousness:** This is the experience of bad things happening to you. You might feel powerless, angry, sad, fearful, or resentful. There is usually someone to blame.
- 2 - **Manifester consciousness:** This is when a person begins to let go of focusing on blame and is willing to accept greater responsibility. There is a shift in the person's attitude and experience. They may recognize there is a Divine Power at work, something to be learned, or a gift hidden in any challenge. As an empowered individual they become a co-creator of their life circumstances. "Change your thinking, change your life experiences".
- 3 - **Channel consciousness:** At this stage one may begin to recognize that they do not know how things "should" be and yields to an organic flow instead of trying to manifest or control circumstances. This "let go, let God" attitude allows them to be guided by intuition, inspiration, or a higher knowing. They may experience themselves as a conduit for the expression of Good.
- 4 - **Being or Unity consciousness:** This is the "awake" state of Oneness, allowing the perception of separation to fall away. It may be a brief experience or one that lasts. There is a recognition that there exists One Life in which we are all connected.

We may cycle back and forth, spending various periods of time in each of these states of mind. When we feel triggered into a victim state, our spiritual practices can help us to let go of blame, or surrender control, or release separation. With practice, we can spend less and less time in a state of victimhood. That is the healing journey of awakening to higher consciousness.

*Rev. Dr. Michael Bernard Beckwith, founder and spiritual director of the Agape International Spiritual Center, a transdenominational community in Los Angeles, has developed and recorded "The Life Visioning Process" a transformational inner technology for spiritual evolution. It can be purchased from [SoundsTrue.com](http://SoundsTrue.com) or [AgapeLive.com](http://AgapeLive.com).*

## Daily Word

*I am guided by the love of God.*

I am immersed in the flow of God's love that continually guides and blesses me. It is my guiding presence, strengthening me in mind and body and helping me be a greater expression of peace and love in the world.

Just as a leaf effortlessly flows along on a river, gently floating around and over any obstacle in its path, I effortlessly flow along on the river of life. As I relax and allow myself to be guided by the love of God, I experience the gentle peace of knowing that regardless of appearances, I am being divinely led along the path of life that is right for me. Led by the love of God, I learn the lessons I am meant to learn and reach the spiritual understanding that only I can experience for myself.

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Love



**The mission of Agape Interfaith Ministries is to encourage, support and inspire a deepening conscious relationship with Divinity for the greater experience of wholeness, abundance, love and peace. We serve to elevate consciousness through individual and group educational activities, and community service.**