

“Salvation and a Kale-Garlic-Ginger Smoothie”
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>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word. Amen<<

Molly Worthen’s piece in *The New York Times* earlier this month caught my eye because it talks about salvation.¹ But it does so in an unorthodox way by profiling modern wellness gurus. These wellness gurus, she writes, preach “a gospel of health, wealth, and contentment.” They’re “spiritual entrepreneurs,” she says, who have “cultivated” “spiritual communit[ies]” around the country and world; and they “offer theologies and daily rituals of self-actualization.” These wellness gurus - these spiritual entrepreneurs - and their spiritual communities, “are,” she says, “filling the gap left as traditional religious organizations erode,” and “face-to-face connections with communities and institutions” fray.

Some of the most well-known gurus, she writes, are people like Joe Rogan, a “tattooed, kale [smoothie]-drinking, Ultimate Fighting Championship commentator and comedian; Tim Ferriss, champion of ‘The 4-Hour Workweek’; Aubrey Marcus, founder ... [of] a nutritional supplement company devoted to ‘total human optimization’; [and] Lewis Howes, a former professional football player who ... runs” a wellness school called “the School of Greatness.” The gospel they proclaim - in their bestselling books and hours of podcasts - is about self-optimization, encouraging readers and listeners to do such things as: start each day with a kale-garlic-ginger smoothie or with 12 ounces of water mixed with organic lemon juice and Himalayan sea salt (apparently this is how Jack Dorsey, CEO of Twitter, starts each day).² Other “total human optimization” suggestions include doing regular meditation and periodic fasting; learning mixed martial arts; taking cold showers to activate the immune system; drinking mushroom coffee from Finland or pomegranate white tea, endorsed by a former Navy SEAL; reading books on evolutionary psychology and Stoic philosophy to learn control over urges; and planning “vision quest” trips to such places as the jungles of Peru where shamans will brew psychedelic tea for you - “don’t worry,” writes Molly Worthen after she sipped the tea, “the intense nausea [from its psychedelic effects] means you’re grasping new dimensions of reality.” Wellness gurus advertise muscle-building protein powders, fat burners, multivitamins, and “nootropics” that boost the brain’s memory and processing speed; some of them even advocate learning the didgeridoo - the indigenous Australian wind instrument - to cure sleep apnea; the list goes on. Their podcasts and books have become, writes Worthen, a “cultural phenomenon.” Joe Rogan’s podcasts are up to 30 million downloads a month, ranked second on the iTunes podcast chart, behind Oprah.

One podcast listener said the gurus “help the masses identify [and fill] the hole in the [human] soul.” And another, who said he “used to be Catholic,” has found a sense of order in the daily [routines - the daily] liturgy ... [that includes] meditating, and ... [regular] fasting,” and drinking kale-garlic-ginger-smoothies. “Humans seem to be wired to seek salvation,” writes Worthen. And “it’s appealing to think that the latest lifestyle trend could be your path to existential bliss.”

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/03/opinion/sunday/podcast-bros-rogan-ferriss-junger.html>

² Seems legit: <https://caloriebee.com/nutrition/Benefits-of-Starting-Your-Day-With-Lemon-Water-and-Himalayan-Salt>

...In today's reading from the Gospel of John, Jesus comes to the end of a long speech that mentions eternal life several times. It's salvation language like that of the wellness gurus. And like the gurus with their mushroom coffee and their kale-garlic-ginger smoothies and their Himalayan-sea-salt-laced lemon water, Jesus advocates a change in diet: he speaks of eating his flesh and drinking his blood to gain eternal life. Jesus repeats the words "eat my flesh and drink my blood" so many times in his speech in John ch. 6 that many hearers get nauseous and walk away. Others, including a few of his disciples, are horrified, even disgusted. But Jesus is adamant, saying again and again, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life." Because of words like these - and because of the practice of celebrating the Lord's Supper, which includes the phrases "this is my body" and "this is my blood" - second century Christians were accused by some Roman writers of being cannibals.³ An accusation that Christian theologians like Justin Martyr and Tertullian, between the years 150 and 200, labored to deflect, pointing out that the words "body" and "blood" are symbolic not literal. It's metaphorical language - like the language Jesus uses throughout the gospels, but especially in the Gospel of John. John's gospel presents Jesus as the champion of metaphors: "I am the Good Shepherd," says Jesus; "I am the gate"; "I am the Light of the World"; "I am the Vine"; and here, in his speech in John ch. 6, he says, "I am the Bread of Life," "whoever eats this bread has eternal life." It's textured, multi-layered, robust, and symbolic language. It's "gigantesque diction," said theologian G.K. Chesterton, like when Jesus - elsewhere in the gospels - talks about camels going through the eyes of needles and mountains being lifted up and cast into the sea. Scripture itself is loaded with this sort of artistic language: "the teaching of the wise is a fountain of life," says the writer of Proverbs; "O Lord, you are the potter and we are the clay. We are the work of your hand," says Isaiah; "the Lord is my shepherd," says one Psalmist; "the Lord is a rock, a fortress, a stronghold," says another Psalmist; "you are a new creation," wrote St. Paul to the Corinthian Christians; "you are the salt of the earth," says Jesus to his followers in Matthew's gospel; "I am the Bread of Life," he says in John ch. 6, "whoever eats this bread has eternal life."

This "body" and "blood" language - this artistic, imaginative, symbolic language - this word picture, is meant, I think, to jolt, to engage, to disorient, even to offend, as art sometimes can. It's language that breaches social conventions and norms - disruptive words to match Jesus' sometimes disruptive behavior: like when, in John's gospel, he sits and chats with a woman at a well - crossing barriers of gender and class; or when he teaches his disciples the new commandment - to love one another - and then stoops down to wash their feet; or when he showcases sacrificial, selfless love for humanity by being nailed to a Roman cross. Gigantesque diction and action, to borrow again from G.K. Chesterton. Words and deeds that show us, we might say, what eternal life looks like and sounds like in flesh and blood.

The phrase "eternal life" is itself, I think, a word picture with layers of meaning. One meaning focuses on time, what poet Christian Wiman calls the "instinct for eternity that every time-bound life contains." In his speech in John ch. 6, Jesus speaks of eternal life as something in the future: "whoever eats of this bread," he says, "*will* live forever." The Greek tense is future. But Jesus also speaks of eternal life in a way similar to one of the wellness gurus with their mushroom coffees and kale smoothies. He speaks of it as a certain *quality* of life - as something that can be enjoyed *now*. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood," he says, "*have* eternal life." It's a taste and a sip of divine life *now*. It's to

³ The charge of "cannibalism," however, was more widespread in antiquity, aimed at many groups believed to be at odds with the norms of Roman society. See Andrew McGowan, "Eating People: Accusations of Cannibalism against Christians in the Second Century," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2/3 (1994): 413-442.

realize, as the old Celtic Christians did, that the dividing line between heaven and earth is blurry; that God's eternal life is woven into the fabric of our material existence; that, as theologian J. Philip Newell observes, "at the heart of humanity is the image and goodness of God," and that within each of us "the light of God."⁴ When we nibble bread dipped in a communion cup each month (as we will next Sunday) - the body and the blood - and when a fresh baby is baptized with water (as we celebrated today), we remind ourselves as a community of faith that "eternal life," that divine life flows through each of us; it's a *quality* of life we enjoy now. It's the community of the Triune God - Creator, Christ, and Spirit - visible in the church community at communion. And it's the life-giving Spirit of God - like life-giving water - sprinkled on a baby's forehead.

This, I think, is the most powerful meaning of "eternal life": that the line between flesh and spirit, between sacred and secular, between physical and spiritual is artificial; it's blurry. It's why a theologian like Pelagius from the early fifth century could gaze at the world and see God's spirit throughout, when he wrote: "Look at the animals roaming the forest: God's spirit dwells within them. Look at the birds flying across the sky: God's spirit dwells within them. Look at the tiny insects crawling in the grass: God's spirit dwells in them. Look at the fish in the river and sea: God's spirit dwells within them. There is no creature on earth," wrote Pelagius, "in whom God is absent When God pronounced that . . . creation was good," continued Pelagius, "it was not only that [God's] hand had fashioned every creature; it was that [God's] breath had brought every creature to life. Look too at the great trees of the forest; look at the wild flowers and the grass in the fields; look even at your crops. God's spirit is present within all plants as well. The presence of God's spirit in all living things is what makes them beautiful; and if we look with God's eyes, nothing on earth is ugly."⁵

This blurring of lines that Pelagius wrote about; this eternal life - God's life - flowing through our world, is why we might look at a story like Thursday's story about the Argentine police officer named Celeste Ayala, as an example of eternal life in flesh and blood.⁶ Officer "Ayala was among a team of officers who took six siblings into state custody in La Plata, a municipality near Buenos Aires, on Aug. 14, because they were in dismal condition at home. The youngest, who was about seven months old, was crying furiously. . . . Ayala, who is breastfeeding a daughter 16 months old, said she sought permission from the hospital staff to breastfeed the [crying] baby." And there, right in the hospital, in her police uniform, Officer Ayala nursed the baby. "Marcos Heredia, a colleague, posted a photo of [the scene] . . . , [and wrote] 'I want to make public this great gesture of love you had [for] this baby, whom you treated like a mother without a second thought, even though you didn't know him.' . . . The post went viral, turning the small act of kindness into national news." And Officer Ayala was promoted to sergeant as a result.

And I think we see God's life - eternal life - flowing through the words of Indian-American Sunayana Dumala. Her husband was the victim of a hate crime in Kansas earlier this year - shot by an assailant who said, "get out of my country." Dumala has become an activist, speaking out in favor of immigration reform, and urging people, in her words to "Take some

⁴ J. Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1997), 14.

⁵ Quoted in Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God*, 11.

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/23/world/americas/argentina-police-officer-breast-feeding.html>

time to understand and embrace diversity in race, culture and religion. It is in our hands to make our society safe and secure for our future generations and create a fearless world.”⁷ And, it seems to me that we see God’s eternal life - what Celtic Christians called the “image and goodness of God” at “the heart of humanity” - in the personal discovery of actor Joaquin Phoenix, who played Jesus in the film *Mary Magdalene* back in the spring. Phoenix perused the gospels in preparation for the role, and had an epiphany. “It suddenly occurred to me,” he said, “when I thought about the healings and how [Jesus’] notoriety and his message spread so quickly and so powerfully. I thought about the people during that time [who were sick and] ... shunned from society. And here was this man [Jesus] that not only didn’t shun you, but embraced you and validated you and looked into your eyes and touched you, and that was the healing, that is so powerful. ... [T]hat is so beautiful to me”⁸

...Let me close by again quoting the fifth century theologian, Pelagius: “Some would say,” he wrote, “that believing in Christ and worshipping him is what matters for salvation. But this is not what Jesus himself said. His teaching was almost entirely concerned with action, and with the motives which inspire action. He affirmed goodness of behavior in whoever he found, whether the person was Jew or Roman, male or female. And he condemned those who kept all the religious requirements, yet were greedy and cruel. Jesus does not invite people to become disciples for his own benefit, but to teach and guide them in the ways of goodness. And if [people] can walk along that way without ever knowing the earthly Jesus, then we may say that [they are] following the spirit of Christ in [their] heart[s].”⁹ And, I would add, that such goodness is what eternal life looks like in flesh and blood. Amen.

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https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/sunayana-dumala-embrace-diversity-new-year_us_5a4b9c5ee4b025f99e1db870?section=us_religion

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<https://www.christiantoday.com/article/joaquin-phoenix-on-how-playing-heart-wrenching-jesus-in-mary-magdalene-inspires-him-to-be-more-empathetic-considerate-and-forgivingexecute1/126517.htm>

⁹ Quoted in Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God*, 18.