HOW'S YOUR SPIRITUAL HEALTH?

PRESENTED BY: DR. LUCY MILLER

LUCY MILLER: As we talk about spiritual health, allow me to start with health in general.

It's always a good idea to go to see the doctor every once in awhile for physical checkups, even in the absence of symptoms. However, a doctor does not ask us about our mental health or our spiritual health.

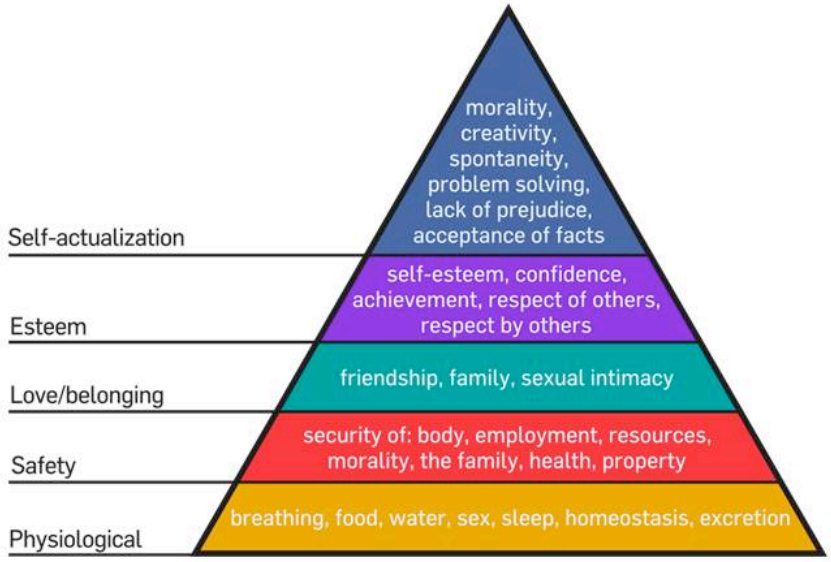
Health is very dynamic. When we're infants, we go through childhood, we grow to adulthood and beyond, and our bodies are always changing. Our mental health, by which I mean how we feel and how we think, is constantly evolving, as is our spiritual health. In very simple terms, the state of our spiritual health refers to that which provides us with the ability to bring meaning to our lives.

So by asking you how is your spiritual health, I am really asking you if you are keeping it nourished. Are you checking on it? Is it keeping up with you as you go through transitions in life?

Our bodies, our minds, and our essence (spirit) continually evolve. We never stay the same. Each dimension of our lives affects the other dimensions and the whole. Spiritual health, mental health, and physical health are intertwined. The whole is more than the sum of its parts. **It's up to us to change and grow with each dimension.**

When I was studying psychology back in the '60s and '70s, so I'm dating myself, one of the textbooks that was required reading was by Dr. Abraham Maslow. He talked about basic human needs as they evolve, picturing those needs as a pyramid. At the very basic bottom of the pyramid we need air, we need water, we need basic physical substance in order for our bodies to live.

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



After our physical needs are met, we need safety. Back in the days when we were all living in tribes and caves, an wild animal or anyone who was a stranger, not of our tribe, was dangerous to us. They might want to eat us or kill us, or fight us for the same resources, which were food, land, air, and water. So ways of providing safety is fundamental for every culture.

This leads us to our need for family, and how we relate to people. We need to feel we belong to our family, our tribe. We need to continue the species through acts of intimacy, caring and being cared for, belonging, friendship and love. Further up the pyramid, self esteem, and esteem of others, are important.

As a scientist of his time, Maslow didn't use the word spiritual, he used the word "self-actualization" which became a big buzzword in the 50s when he wrote this. “Self actualization” really meant bringing our higher selves together, morality, which is owning our own sense of right and wrong, creativity, and acceptance. Yet he was talking about our spiritual selves; loving our fellow man, being able to get along in the world, being all we can be. Thus, Maslow as one of the early people in the field of psychology described the essence of spirituality without using the word.

At this point I’m going to discuss the concept of spirituality starting with the ways it is not the same as the word "religion." We're going to get into some comparisons to show that religion and spirituality are not two words for the same thing.

Religion is an organized system of beliefs, symbols and practices. I am going to illustrate a little bit with my own personal journey. I was born into the religion of my family. We were Jewish. We were not religious Jews but we were Jewish by culture and history. As a child I was taught I

was Jewish, and that was all. It was my identity. I was also taught to downplay it and not to discuss it with other people, because the world was full of prejudice.

This was in the late 1940s during the Holocaust when Jewish people were *persona non grata*. During the post-war years, children would find out I was Jewish and accuse me of all sorts of amazing crimes, like I killed Christ. I didn't understand how I could do that.

I asked my mother one day, "Why does everybody hate us?" She said, "Because they don't know any better." That didn't help me much.

I also had learned somewhere that we were God's chosen people, and that didn't feel good at all because even in grade school, I liked the idea of equality. I then decided I didn't want to be Jewish anymore, but my mother explained no matter what I decided to be or what church I decided to attend, I would always be Jewish. It had nothing to do with whether we attended synagogue or kept kosher or subscribed to the notion that we were still waiting for the Messiah.

At the time I didn't really understand all this—why I had no choices. Later I learned that being Jewish is being part of a tribe, a cultural identity, which has little or nothing to do with all of the actual beliefs and practices or whether we kept kosher.

Most of the major religions in the world as we know them are tribal in origin. I am going to show you some of our other differences to demonstrate that religion is something that we learn is rooted in words, history and culture, whereas spirituality focuses on our own self. Spirituality is alive, growing and personal to each of us.

Religion and Spirituality – Comparisons

Religion is an organized system of beliefs, symbols and practices.

Spirituality is not doctrine, but focuses on our quest.

Religion is rooted in words, history and culture.

Spirituality is alive, growing, and personal to each soul.

Each religion has a history which is kept alive by passing down the doctrine from one generation to the next. A hierarchy is established within the group, responsible for maintaining the traditions of that religion, and teaching the doctrines to the others. The hierarchy provides leadership status to an elder, a priest, a rabbi, an Iman, etc. They teach and interpret the words that are part of the basics for that religion.

Religion establishes a hierarchy within the group.
Spirituality is your window to the bigger picture.

Religion comes from without.
Spirituality comes from within.

The congregation or the followers subscribe to the system of worship that is taught by the leaders. Whereas with spirituality, we don't rely on sources other than ourselves too to tell us what, or how to think or what to believe. It is rather a personal journey that we take within ourselves.

Religion comes from without. It comes from Bibles, books, text, teachings, and the spiritual leaders. Spirituality comes from within. Religion and spirituality are not mutually exclusive. They both can exist at the same time and one can also exist without the other.

I began to explore other religions when I decided I didn't like this idea of being one of God's chosen people. I wanted to see what else was out there and maybe even learn why the religions were often fighting each other.

My explorations began in childhood and continued through my adolescence and adulthood. I went to Services with friends. I read many, many books, and I learned something from all of them. There was much good that I could learn. But I also learned that none of the organized religions in and of themselves, including the New Age ones, were really a perfect fit for me.

However, I never gave up on my own evolving spiritual identity and I learned most of all to be comfortable with not knowing all of the answers.

Religion and spirituality are NOT mutually exclusive.

I have known many devout people, including priests and religious leaders who have questioned their own beliefs and tenets of their religion, and harbored their own doubts. Some of them have written beautiful books about this. I am reading one right now by Andrew Greeley, a priest, who had many doubts and questioned much of what he was supposed to believe in. He certainly questioned what the Vatican declared as truth.

Conversely I have known people who are steadfast in their religion, going to church regularly, but could not tell you why, except that it was simply expected of them. It was what good people did. They were not inclined to look deeply within. Some do not question out of fear because that is what their leaders had been preaching to them.

There are many reasons why spirituality and religion can exist separately or together, or one without the other.

Religion is dogmatic.
Spirituality is mysterious and metaphorical.

Religion offers answers, which are taught.
Spirituality poses questions to guide our journey.

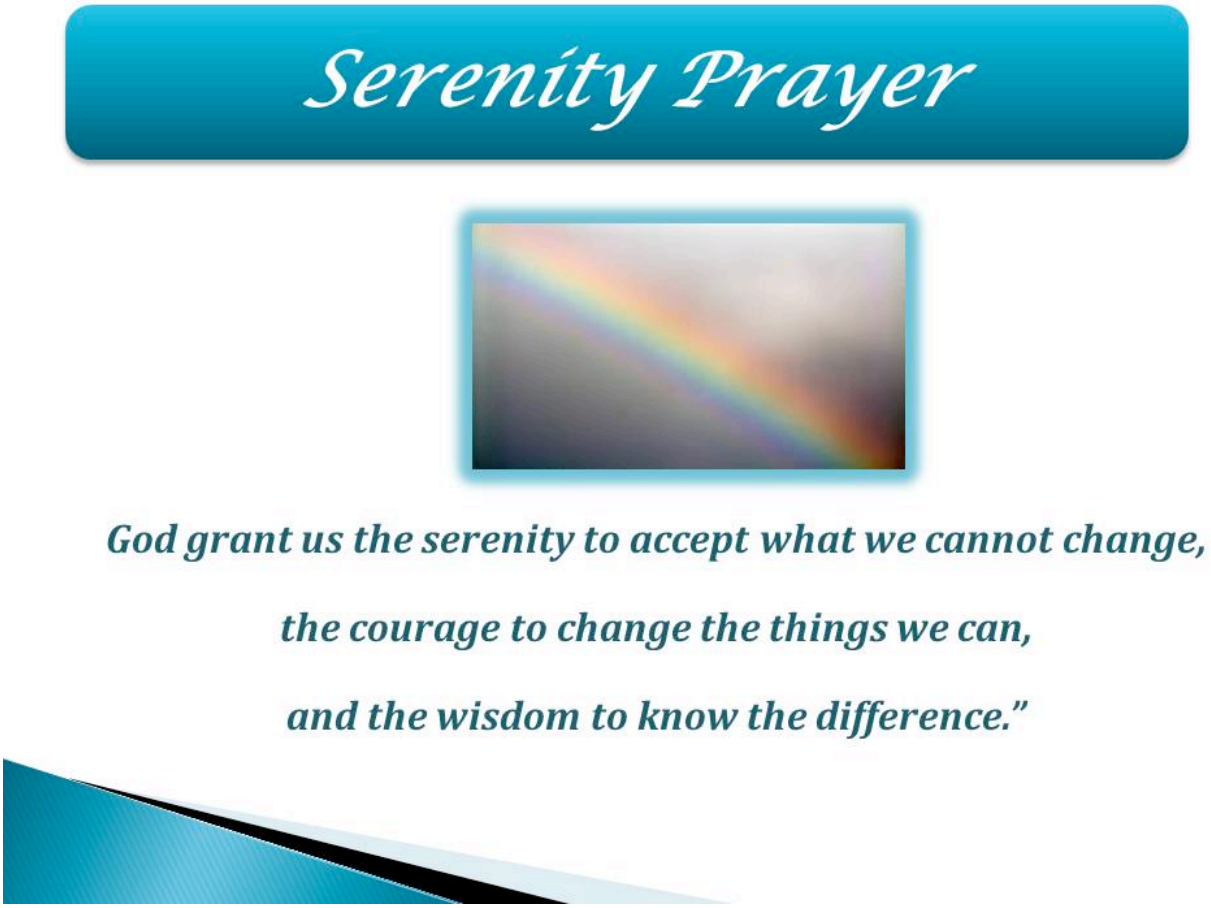
A few more comparisons: religion is dogmatic. A code is taught and followed; a set of rules. Some institutions proclaim they are teaching the word of God which cannot be questioned. On the other hand, spirituality is mysterious and metaphorical, and sometimes is very hard to describe in any concrete way. Religion teaches answers which offer people comfort. Spirituality, conversely, often poses questions which serve to guide a person's journey.

Questions arise so I am going to talk a little bit about the whole idea of questions and answers. We humans are blessed with minds that ask questions. Mahatma Gandhi said, “When faith becomes blind, it dies.”

There are no right or wrong answers. We can have many points of view, rather than answers. I suggest we seek wisdom. And wisdom can only come through self-discovery via life’s challenges.

Spiritual health trusts our wisdom rather than set answers which may change. How many of you are familiar with the serenity prayer?

I will read the prayer:



It was written by Reinhold Niebuhr and adopted by AA which is why so many people are familiar with it. AA is not a religious organization, but it is a spiritual one.

Speaking of questions that we might ask ourselves to help guide our journey, here are some four basic ones that most of us have asked ourselves at one time or another.

Whence do I come?
Whither do I go?
Why am I here?
What do I need to learn?
What is my purpose in this life?
And who am I, really?

That one last one lingers. Who am I really? That's a big one. One answer that has resonated for me over the years, particularly after getting hit by a taxicab and a few other challenges that I've had, is that **I am a spiritual being having a human experience, rather than a human being having a spiritual experience.**

Let's take a little time right now for all of you to start on a little spiritual journey of your own. Take a few, slow deep breaths, not too deep but just comfortable breaths. Find that comfortable spot in your chair and just remember every time you take a breath to exhale before you take another one. Remember, your breathing provides our most basic physical need: oxygen.

We sometimes forget to really breathe, and that's why when we're anxious or angry, we get out of breath. We're now going to just be aware of our breathing, and as we do, imagine yourself walking down a beautiful wooded path, enjoying the solitude. You don't see anyone else there. It's just you and all of this beauty around you. It's a clear, crisp fall day. Some of the leaves are beginning to change color. So you can imagine yourself walking down this footpath, leaves, beautiful colors of trees, feeling the warmth of the sun, the coolness of the breeze, and just enjoying this walk.

Continue to breathe, and while you are walking along really feeling peaceful in your solitude. In a little while you see someone off in the distance in front of you. You can tell it's a person walking towards you. You don't feel any fear. You just know that there is another person enjoying the same path as you are.

As you get a little closer, you can tell by the way this person is walking that he or she is elderly. You can just see that in how she moves.

As you get a little bit closer still, you begin to notice this person is the same gender as you, if you are a man, this person is also a man. The person seems to be about your size.

As the distance narrows and you continue to walk, and you continue to enjoy the beauty or your walk, you see this person is also coming closer. You are getting closer and you recognize this person with surprise. This person is you some years in the future. Maybe 20 or 30 years in the future.

This is your golden opportunity to ask your future you a question. What will that question be? And how will your future self answer you?

Take a few moments, close your eyes, and we'll find a way to get your attention when it's time.

(Five minutes later)

LUCY MILLER: How was your experience? Would anyone like to share?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: In meeting my old self, this wise woman said "Don't worry my dear, you will be okay. You've done so much. You've lost so much. And you've lived well. Enjoy your journey: I have a few surprises for you down the road."

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I think all of us say to ourselves at some time, if only I had my life all over again, I wouldn't do this at all. So one question I might ask my future self is, what is there in the next 20 years that shows I should have done it differently? Will that give you a chance to do it differently? It's a philosophical question.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Okay. I think I would ask my future self if have I made a difference, and have I loved enough other people, particularly the people that needed love?

LUCY MILLER: Notice how we all share a similar theme. What is our purpose? Purpose can be seen in three ways: first in **being**, which means being all we can be. It means **doing** all that we can in order to **become** all that we can be. It means **giving** and **sharing.** Sharing is about having compassion and connections with others. The drive to share is what brings me to ALDACon. We here have all had the experience of losing our hearing and learning to not only live but to thrive and to give. Sharing that experience is a very positive thing. While here I also get back so much. I get acceptance from my peers, I learn from my peers, and I think that we are all peers, even if I am the one up here presenting.

Now let's take a few minutes to think about the times when you felt you were fulfilling your life's purpose. Also while you are thinking about that, think about the role your deafness has had on your life's purpose. I am going to give you a few minutes to think about that because, again, this is a very personal journey.

(time lapse)

LUCY MILLER: Did anybody come up with something surprising? I know for myself I would not be the same person that I am now if I could hear. I might not even like myself as much.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I am a hearing person myself but meeting up with all of these people with hearing loss has broadened my life a little and given me a chance to help my wife. It's been quite a run actually. This is my 11th ALDAcon I think, so I am pretty familiar with all of this.

LUCY MILLER: Thank you. You have reminded us that our deafness affects many people in our lives.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I use my deafness as an example for others, especially students, deaf students that I work with, or other people with NF2, especially for my family, my children. Both my children have NF 2, so I try to be an example of what it means to thrive as a deaf person. Especially with my students, my children, and being there for my husband when he died at the end. Just being an example of compassion.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I think that my deafness was destiny that I helped start ALDA because of being deaf. When I went deaf there was no ALDA, and I had nowhere to go. I think because I had lost my hearing, I reached out to other deaf people who didn't know what to do. I feel I helped.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My daughter lost her hearing three years ago, and I am still on the journey of trying to figure out what my purpose is because it has profoundly changed my life. We did not have any experience with deafness prior to that. I am learning how to be the parent of a deaf child. She is not a child anymore. She is grown up but she is still at home with us. I am constantly asking myself, "What is my purpose? What am I supposed to be doing? How am I supposed to handle this?" I haven't figured it out yet. I am on that spiritual journey. I spend a lot of time asking these questions because it's just not what I thought my life was going to be about. I don't have an answer; I just have a lot of questions.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: As a deaf daughter of a hearing mother, I too have a lot of questions that I am trying to answer. I am still on a spiritual journey. I lost my hearing three years ago. One semester I was finishing a college degree, and I had to take about a year off so that I could adjust. I have not adjusted yet, and I have no clue what I am going to do with my life. I did go back to school and finished my college degree. I have my bachelor's degree. I am not able to work due to NF2, and other disabilities. My mother is still trying to figure out why and what are we doing. I don't know. I volunteer and I help special-needs students in high school, and I get down in the dumps sometimes. I was able to go to the Special Olympics this year. I put my hair in pigtails and decorated my walker, and I acted like this huge cheerleader. They loved it. They were so accepting of me and of my hearing disability. And that made me feel great!

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My best friend was deaf. So I was learning sign and we had a deaf church, and I lived across the street from a School for the Deaf. I thought, "Some day when I grow up, I want to become a teacher of deaf children." Then my family moved away, and for many years I kind of forgot that wish to become a teacher of deaf children. Instead I became a nurse. After that I became a nurse educator. Then I retired and thought, what am I going to do now? I started losing my hearing. I became a deaf woman and I met another deaf woman who I asked, "What do I do now?" She said, "You need to improve your sign." I said, "Okay." I thought, "How can I use all of my education, my teaching experience now that I am older and retired?" I moved to a retirement community where many people are losing their hearing. Now I've started teaching some Sign language classes, very simple signs because I am not perfect myself. That gives me a reason and a purpose in my life. My mom told me that my life now has come full circle back to deafness.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I lived most of my life in Colorado, but I also lived in Wyoming. When I was in my last year of college I ended up in the hospital for about a month-and-a-half. I couldn't speak. I couldn't even hear very well, and I thought that was the end. They put me on the top floor of the hospital with a window looking over the mountains. I thought about those mountain trails. Now I am able to walk again and walk up those mountain trails. I always like to meet people, maybe even myself.

LUCY MILLER: Mahatma Gandhi, spiritual leader of the Hindus, is well known for the work that he did for India, and for people in general. He once said, "When faith is blind, it dies."

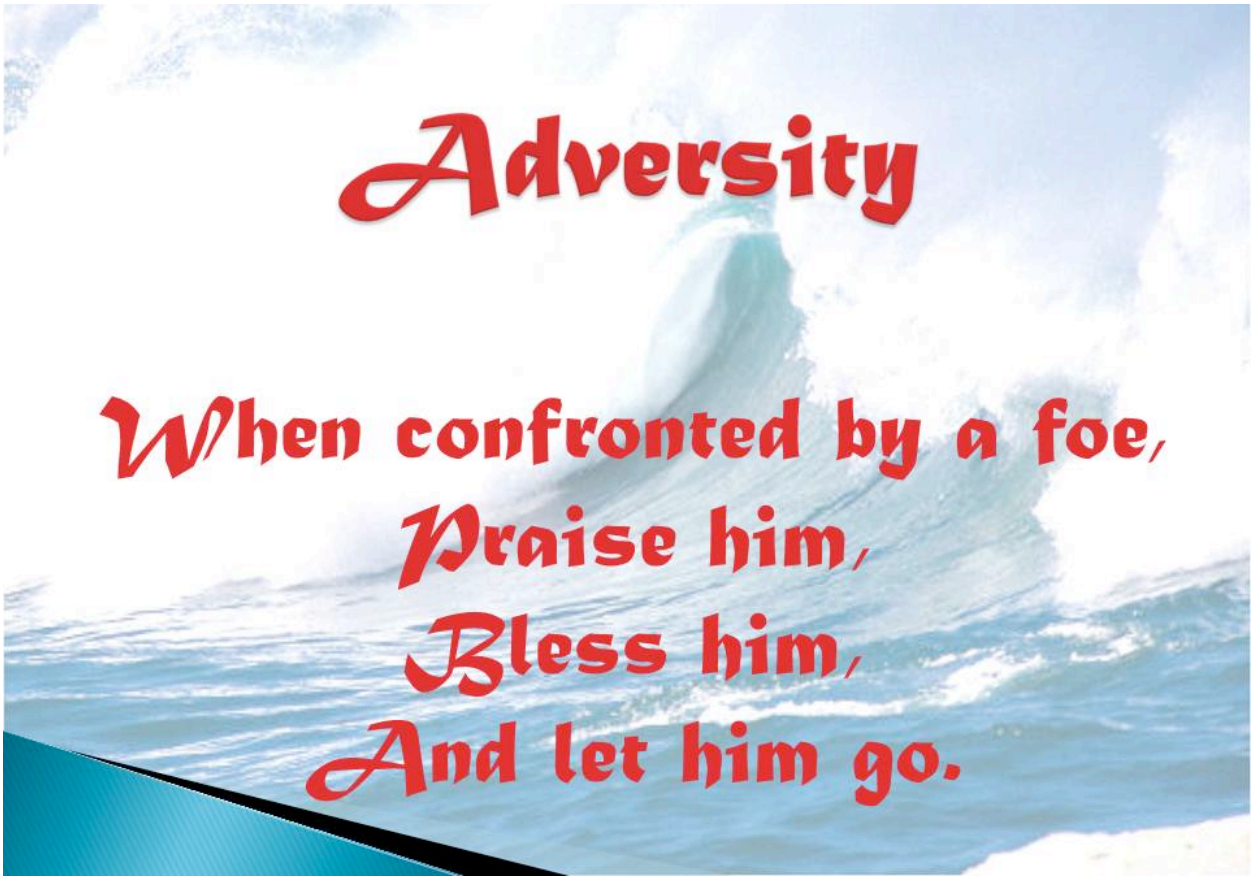
What he did mean by that? I pondered that for a while. Sometimes people who are religious talk about blind faith. Does that mean they stop questioning? They stop seeking and then faith dies? That is how I interpret it.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I interpret it as you stop believing. My interpretation of that line tells me you stop believing in yourself and in others.

LUCY MILLER: Good. Thank you. Let's move on.

I sort of pictured that path when I was taking you on that walk. The Golden Rule encompasses compassion, empathy, tolerance , and forgiveness.

I remember once as a young child, I was grabbing a toy from another child at a birthday party. I don't remember whose fault it was. I was about six or seven years old, and the other child's mother made us both sit down and write the golden rule 100 times. So that really got deeply embedded in me, and I am so glad she did that. I was barely old enough to write. So it certainly served its purpose. I think this rule should be really the bottom line for all of us.



Sometimes the seas are stormy and the ocean gets rough. We face adversity and loss. We may feel that God has let us down. I am sure we all have at one time or another. What happens then? It is during these difficult time times and challenges that we may discover more comfort and strength in the wisdom that we acquire during a sometimes difficult spiritual journey.

How many of you have experienced your deaf deafness as adversity? I think that is a very common one. It certainly is a challenge.

During the worst of these times, how did you feel?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I view viewed it as adversity because it separated me from other people, including my family.

LUCY MILLER: Yes. As Helen Keller said, blindness will separate you from things, whereas deafness separates you from people.

Few of us escape the feeling of anger and sorrow during these times when it's stormy, and that negativity puts us in the role of victim. We feel justified in our anger and our sorrow.

There is another thing that we can do. When confronted by a foe, bless him, praise him, bless him, and let him go. It's not an easy thing to do, but when we do let go, we release the power that that situation had over us. It's really a letting go of negative feelings. What does it mean to bless him? To me it means finding strength that I didn't know I had. Remember, this is a personal journey for each of us. At what point were you able to let go of negative feelings on your journey?

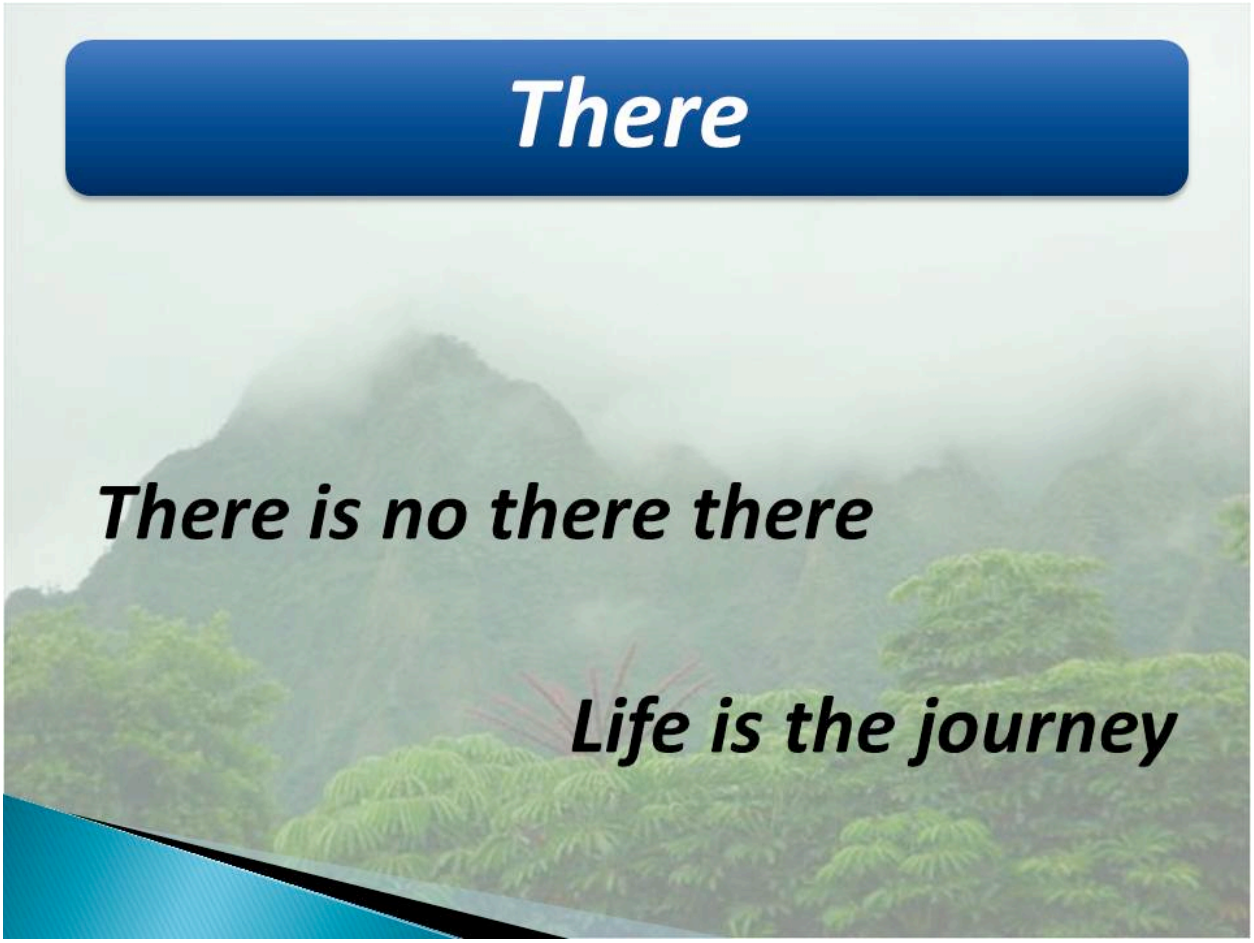
AUDIENCE MEMBER: The last time I spoke here I should have said what I had most on my mind. We were talking about spirituality and religion, and for me I believe strongly in my Catholic religion. For me it has most of the answers that I need including for adversity or anger or whatever. For me, that's the thing.

LUCY MILLER: I hope no one felt I was putting down religion.

(AUDIENCE MEMBERS): No, not at all!

LUCY MILLER: I said that in my own search, I didn't find a perfect fit, but I took much from all. One really good thing about an organized religion is the community. Here at ALDA we also have community.

So we praise him, bless him, and then we're able to let go. Sometimes we talk about forgiveness, such as, "Oh, I forgive you." Well, really the most important part of forgiveness is forgiving oneself. If I can forgive someone else, I am really forgiving myself for being able to let go of feeling victimized. It can feel like sometimes soaring to new heights over the top of that wave. We can begin to feel gratitude. That is a very important part of life.



If we keep saying, "Well, when I get through this mess, I'll be able to be free to do what I want." But if you don't enjoy the journey, you are delaying the essence of life. You may have purpose, you may have goals you are working towards, but if you fill your days with work that you dislike in order to celebrate only a nebulous destination, sooner or later you are going to find yourself feeling unfulfilled, lost, or empty.

So love your journey. Your passion will shine through, not only through your own spirit but also through those around you because each one of us is a spirit. Through our spirits we're connected.

I've touched on some weighty topics here as I am talking about what is it about life, ourselves, our relationships, our joys and our sorrows, our purpose.

There is one more important piece I have not mentioned, and that is humor. Without a sense of humor, it's pretty hard to get through anything. The ultimate cosmic joke, which has been attributed to Carol Burnett, is "Comedy is tragedy plus time." How much fun it is later to look back on something. Isn't it fun to be able to tell a joke that was on us at the time? Those are the best kinds of jokes.

It helps to keep in mind is that if we can have humor in dealing with the most difficult of problems, we can say: "Well, some day I'll look back on this and laugh." And I do. It happens every time.

This pretty much concludes the journey that I was hoping to take you on. A good thing, because our time is up!

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Lucy Miller, known as Dr. Lucy by long-time ALDA members, has been presenting ALDAcon workshops for many years. Her life's work has involved the study of human behavior, relationships, and the psychological, sociological and spiritual impact of deafness. Severely-to-profoundly deaf nearly all her life, she lives in Hawaii, having moved from California in the early 90's.