



Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

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The Lost Son Wakes from His Dream

Up to your knees in hog dung
eyeing hungrily
corn stubble
slop bucket
egg shells, coffee grounds
black banana peels
rancid grease, moldy bread.
Rouse yourself
from this putrid
dream of your demise.

Wake up.
Tune in to your reality show.
Walk off the set of the drama
and come to yourself.

Reach down
pull that dying man out of the muck
wash his stinking feet.

Take a chance on mercy.
Go ahead. Say it.
You had it all wrong.
Spit out the words stuck in your craw
like a piece of broken glass:
I am sorry.

And come on home.

Besides,
there will be a party
and presents.



**Wake up, sleeper! Get up from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.** Ephesians 5:14

We call it many things: coming to, waking up, enlightenment, seeing, insight, and consciousness. The descriptions vary, yet the experience is undeniable. The man born blind proclaims to the Pharisees, "Once I was blind, now I see!" Peter falls to his knees in the boat with fish flopping up to his ears, and, recognizing who Jesus is at last, cries out, "Depart from me for I am a sinful man!" The hardened Roman centurion, quaking with the earth beneath his feet, says to his comrades, "This was certainly God's Son."

Such moments of insight, awareness, and startling clarity are a characteristic of contemplative experience. The practice of contemplative prayer increases awareness. Yet insight is not something we control. It comes unbidden and deeply imprints itself on our lives. We do not forget these experiences. They frequently initiate a shift in how we see ourselves and others. In this the third issue of a *Holy Ground* series on contemplation, we consider Waking Up and Awareness.

Awareness may free us to behave in new ways. Coming to ourselves as in the case of the lost son in Luke may change the direction of our lives, our address, even our appearance.

Insight may strike like lightning with breathtaking force, sizzle in our brains, and rip in a flash through our whole being connecting to the Ground of All Being. Other times our awakening may be unobtrusive and gradual. We take out the trash, brush our teeth, put the kids to bed, and watch the news. We think nothing is happening. Then one day out in the snow, we notice a bloom on the rosebush, or find ourselves drawn to an unexpected interest. We say or do something which totally surprises us and we think, “What’s going on? This isn’t like me at all.”

Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

When he came to his senses, he said, “How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ... So he got up and went to his father.

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. Then his son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

Luke 15: 13-24

Insight may arrive like a thief in the night or the phone call at 2:00 am. Maybe a sudden sense of dread bends you double. Dreams of cataclysms and tornados haunt your sleep. A life changing awakening may result in a wrenching dismantling of your reality and the installation of a restorative new view of yourself and the world.

On the other hand unexpected joy may suffuse you with wellbeing. All that your eye falls upon is lit with holiness and beauty.

One fall I attended the Germantown Octoberfest in Louisville, Kentucky. I was making my way through the festive mix of vendors, brats, and beer and found myself on the back side of the food tent where people were eating. A band was playing. I walked over to the tent, pulled aside the tent flap, and woke up. The place was packed. Joy seemed to inflate the whole tent. The band was a group of middle-aged men in Bermuda shorts and suspenders. One member puffed a cigar while playing the drums. The music was a Lawrence Welk polka. People were drunk. A young man hung around pestering the band. An older woman in tight pants leaned against her partner. In my snobby assessment the scene was banal, tawdry, and tacky. The people were ordinary sinners. The beer was cheap, and the music was bad.

And yet, the scene flamed up before me, my heart burst, and tears came to my eyes. For an instant I glimpsed a kind of divine joy, a sense of God's presence and delight in God's creation. I was aware of mercy

and compassion and the love that God has for all creatures. It was as if God drew back a curtain and said, "Loretta, behold the beauty of my children and love them."

Waking up splits us between before and after, darkness and dawn, illusion and reality, unconscious and conscious, the hidden and the revealed. Insight invites us to shift perspective, and to stand outside ourselves, and see from a new vantage point.

For me, my awakening came when
I was kidnapped.

Patty Hurst

Another time I was in deep despair. I called my therapist for help. I described my desperation, my hurt, and anguish. He listened and then gently made a simple observation. "You are really identifying with your feelings of hurt and sadness right now." With those words a light came on. I came to myself.

He gave no advice, offered no medication, just the healing balm of what he saw: that my sense of myself was wholly identified with the anguish I was feeling. I had become despair, suffering, and grief. There was no me left. Yet his words also implied that I was more than what I was feeling. Who was this "I" who was doing this identifying, who was able to call for help? Like the lost son in Luke's gospel, there may come a point, when a person decides

to stop identifying the core of one's being with whatever misery or well-being he or she may be experiencing. The victim discovers an inner conviction to stop being a victim of others, or of circumstances, or of oneself.

After experiences of abuse or suffering, we may unintentionally internalize those who hurt us. Unconsciously we continue to disrespect and victimize ourselves.

Amazingly, simple awareness can set us free. A calm resolve enters the body and the woman holds up her head and walks out the door. The prisoner gives up his swagger and resentment and puts on a cloak of dignity and inner freedom no jailor can steal.

We have been given incredible power for healing and change in our choice to wake up. What is it we wake up to? We wake up to *authority* - an authoring, fathering, mothering source, Our Father – within us. We *come to* this Source, this true self. We know now where we have come from and where we are heading. Nothing and no one can ever take us beyond the boundless reach of the mercy of this Love.

... the Father himself loves you dearly because you love me and believe that I came from God.

John 16: 27

As I watch with others in their waking and coming to, it may appear that nothing is

happening, but hurt and more hurt. I drink a little more coffee and resolve to stay awake with them as they pace their dark nights. I throw myself on the ground for them too, beseeching God to hasten the process. I don't mind losing some sleep in order to see the first glimpses of gold and red fringing these souls' horizons.

“You are a ruby embedded in granite. How long will you pretend it's not true?” asks the poet, Rumi. Living in a pig sty may become so familiar, that moving out seems disloyal. We may have become convinced that all that we are is someone who is wronged, betrayed, or persecuted. We have constructed a distorted view of reality out of our sorrow and loss.

We do not see that we are wearing our pain like a costume and are believing a lie. When we come to our senses, we stop perpetuating a struggle that has already been resolved.

Yes, there will still be work to be done. The jewel will be cut away from the granite, turned, and polished. Yet uncut, unrefined, unset, a ruby is a ruby. How wonderful to know that you have found yours and it is resting in your pocket.

The glass in your throat will not cut as much as you imagine it will, when you kneel before your father or mother or sister or spouse, or Maker. You in your pride think you are unforgiveable. But you can no longer pretend that you were not signed

with the seal of mercy before you were born.

*... sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on its brow
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely until it flowers again from
within, of self-blessing.*

Galway Kinnel

Sleeping beauties under a spell, we lie suspended, unaware, paralyzed in the midst of our lives. So much within us and around us conspires to keep us asleep, wandering in dreams of the past or future. We obey the commands of our consumer culture like robots. Reality television and news broadcasts claim to show us what is real. Our beliefs, likes, and dislikes are vigilantly molded by an economy in which everything and everyone is a potential commodity or a competitor. Our worth is determined by productivity, usefulness, and market value.

No wonder the call to wake up and to stay awake resounds through scripture.

Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion!

Isaiah 52: 1

Watch out! Stay alert! You don't know when the time is coming... Therefore, stay alert! ...Don't let him show up when you weren't expecting and find you sleeping. What I say

to you, I say to all: Stay alert!

Mark 13:33-37

Jesus took along Peter, James, and John. He was sad and troubled and told them, "I am so sad that I feel as if I am dying. Stay here and keep awake with me." ... When Jesus came back and found the disciples sleeping, he said to Simon Peter, "Are you asleep? Can't you stay awake for just one hour? Stay awake and pray that you won't be tested. You want to do what is right, but you are weak."

John 14: 33-38

Wake up! Strengthen what little remains, for even what is left is almost dead. I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of my God.

Revelation 3: 2

Waking Up and the Practice of Contemplation

I know of few things we can do to help us stay awake, which are more effective than the prayer of silence. As we practice meditation or contemplative prayer, we become more aware of the passing stream of our thoughts, attitudes, moods, and feelings. We begin to separate ourselves from these shifting emotional and mental states. We discover we are more than the neural pathways and chemical reactions in our brains. We loosen our attachment to these passing phenomena and our learned responses to various stimuli. We grow in self-awareness. We create space between the thought, feeling, or sensation and the

one who is experiencing the thought or feeling. There in that space Christ waits.

What is necessary to change a person is to change his awareness of himself.

Abraham Maslow

Like a shuttle, the mind passes back and forth, in and out between the warp threads of our experience, drawing the weft in its ceaseless effort to weave meaning out of our pain and our joy. Over and under, back and forth we trace the worn path, pulling our experience behind us and fabricating stories about the future. Over and under, back and forth, anticipating, trying to create a pattern, a wholeness, and a story for ourselves that will hang together, provide warmth on cold nights, and cover our nakedness.

Meanwhile, we totally miss the fathomless depths and sufficiency of this moment, where according to those who dwell there, the Holy One reigns in splendor. So intent on justifying and explaining ourselves; so intent on refuting, proclaiming, defending; so determined to anticipate disaster and control our lives and the lives of others – we end up sleeping through the exquisite wonder and fullness of each new moment. We fail to trust the love and providence held out to us at great price.

The miraculous gift for those who pray into the silence of God is the awareness that each new moment holds all we will ever need.

Loretta F. Röss



Questions for Reflection

Recall a positive experience in which you became aware of something or gained insight.

1. What was the context of your waking up? Where were you? What was going on in your life?
2. What did you become aware of?
3. What was your response?
4. What were you blind to, or had you been pretending or lying to yourself about something?
5. How did this awareness change you?

6. As you reflect on it, has the awareness continued, expanded, or deepened over the years?

Now choose an awareness that rose out of a painful experience and ask yourself the same questions.

Turn to God in prayer and share what is on your heart.



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The river of the water of life...flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb...On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

Revelation 22: 2-3

*Perhaps it is better to wake up, after all,
even to suffer, rather than to remain
a dupe to illusions all one's life.*

Kate Chopin

...

*The first step toward change is awareness.
The second is acceptance.*

Nathaniel Branden



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