



# Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

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## Drugstore Epiphany

May 28, 1918

*My friend listened to me as I poured out my heart. “Am I crazy? What is going on?” I asked when I finally ran out of words.*

*“Loretta, you are just going through call transition – you know, that worst part of labor and delivery when you are having a baby and you think you can’t do it.”*

The text came early. “Someone wants to see your house this morning. Is that okay?”

“Of course,” I texted back to my realtor. I scrambled into my clothes, mopped the kitchen floor, and tossed my journal, insect repellent, and phone into a bag. I stopped to polish the kitchen sink and tuck the counter clutter into the dishwasher. As a final touch I turned on the essential oil diffuser. For house showings I chose a “synergy” blend of Bergamot, Geranium, Jasmine, Lemon, and half a dozen other exotic ingredients. The blend is called Joy and the label claims it will put a smile

on your face and encourage a happy attitude. If this “floral, fruity, and sweet” blend doesn’t sell my house, it will at least leave prospective buyers happy.

Ditching my original Sunday morning plans, I headed out to the Church of Lake Shawnee. I stopped at Spangles with its retro 50’s décor and music. Tione took my order for a breakfast sandwich, coffee and orange juice slush. Since I had already skipped church, I figured I’d sin boldly and go for an egg, sausage and cheese sourdough. When I arrived at the Lake, the parking lot bustled with worshipers. I parked and munched my sandwich gazing out upon the majestic trees and still waters.

Franciscan nun and professor, Ilia Delio at a conference I attended recently, said “God is a being of expanding, self-giving love, inclusive, ever creating newness.” In contrast we tend to contract out of fear in the presence of God’s invitation to grow and expand beyond our self-imposed limits.

“Movement is what life is about,” Delio continued. “We are not an inert mass

of entangled electrons blindly hurtling towards an unknown future. Rather we are grounded in the incomprehensible divine mystery which is God, and thus our contingent lives are opened to and embraced by the infinite, unbounded love of God which is eternal, divine and holy.” I have a story to tell you about that infinite unbounded Love and its hunger for creating newness in our lives.

I finish my breakfast, leave my car, and walk across the covered bridge into the beautiful 37-acre Ted Ensley Gardens. The winding paths lead past fountains, streams, spectacular flower beds, and hidden glens. A gazebo, pergola, pagoda, and arboretum trellis overlook the wide blue lake. Monarchs flit above the vivid red salvia. A lone blue heron, a watchful sentinel, stands still at the water’s edge. A young family smiles for a photographer. I revel in the beauty of one of my favorite places in Topeka, Kansas.

This is only my third visit, since my dog, Elijah died last April. He loved the place as much as I do and coming here at first without the big black lab at my side was difficult. Elijah died of cancer six weeks after his black lab, sister, Maya, died of a similar cancer in March.

I am just past the midpoint of a year of many changes. On New Year’s Day I asked God for a word I could hang onto

like a theme, or a purpose, or a promise from scripture for the coming year. I wanted a direction and something encouraging. It would be a watch word, like the heron sentinel, to keep me focused and aware. What I heard in my spirit was “move.” Simple, direct. Just move. I have been planning to move to Iowa City to be closer to my family for some time. And I had heard spoken in my heart a few times, “Your work here is done.” Yet, I argued with God, “Really? Things are going so well. The Sanctuary is flourishing. I love these people and what I am doing.” As the year progressed, the inner call persisted, “Move.”

Kansas has been generous and kind to me. Though I have not always been kind toward Kansas, and especially to its vegetables. We got off on the wrong foot 36 years ago on hot summer day in East Topeka. I was tired, hungry, and itchy with the chigger bites I got the night before, when my husband and I camped at Lake Perry north of Topeka. New seminary graduates and poor as church mice, we didn’t have money for a motel room. My husband rose early and shaved under a cottonwood tree. He put on his suit and tie bent over in our small tent and drove to his job interview.

At seminary graduation when friends asked where we would be serving churches, “We’ll go anywhere but Kansas,” we’d say. We both received

loan/grants for our education expenses. If we agreed to serve churches in one of six or eight Midwest states for three years, our loans would be forgiven. We gayly told ourselves, “anywhere but Kansas.” Neither of us had ever been to Kansas. All I knew of Kansas was the name of some towns – Abilene, Dodge City, Wichita – from the TV cowboy shows my brother and I watched as kids. Kansas seemed to be a place with a lot of dust, cattle, and saloons with swinging doors.

“We won’t go anywhere unless we both have calls there,” we also promised each other. Then my husband got an interview for a position in chaplaincy at Topeka State Hospital, which he really wanted. So, we came to Kansas and pitched our tent at Lake Perry on the hottest, muggiest night of the year. He got the job and we found a little house to rent. I managed to set aside my disappointment and frustration for a while.

Before we left town to return to Louisville, Kentucky to retrieve our belongings, we drove to our landlord’s home, so my husband could give him a check for our rent. I waited, sweating in the hot car while he went inside, ... and waited... and waited, while my chigger bites warmed up. I didn’t want to be here. Would I ever get a job? In 1981 it was harder for women in ministry to be hired. By the time my

husband returned I had worked myself into a fit of selfish fury. When he got in the car, he handed me gifts from our landlord’s garden – several very large zucchinis. I took the largest and began to slam it into the hot dashboard of the car until it was a seedy pulpy, goopy mess on the floor.

Kansas had a lot to teach me. I had a lot to learn. As Thich Naht Hahn writes, “We do not teach meditation to the young monks until they stop slamming doors.” Though Topeka and I did not get off to a good start, things improved quickly. Within a few months I had a job as an interim pastor, was pregnant, and enjoying the warm welcome of local pastors and the Presbytery of Northern Kansas.

Sadly, the marriage did not last. It ended, through no fault of Kansas, after we had been here for 22 years. I never committed vegicide on any other vegetables or fruits or beat anything for that matter after the Zucchini incident. We did, however, as individuals and as a family find ourselves slamming up against some painful, immoveable impasses.

Change is essential to life and learning how to hold through the dissonance and fear that comes with change is a life long task. Our temptation is to resist, contract, grow rigid, and defensive. The heart

needs to learn to open, rather than to collapse on itself.

I had not realized how far down my roots had reached into Kansas soil. Like prairie grass, I am grounded, nourished and secured by a web of lives, whose roots intertwine with mine. Friends, colleagues, and neighbors, along with sacred experiences of ministry have kept me blooming where I was planted. Earlier this year a friend told me how her husband had to use his Bobcat in order to dig out the overgrown shrubs blocking the windows of their newly purchased home.

I attended a seminar at the Kansas Leadership Center in Wichita last year. We were asked to bring a case study of an adaptive change in our work setting. I brought moving myself and The Sanctuary ministry to Iowa. During the small group session, one of the young whippersnappers offered a “tough interpretation” of my adaptive challenge with these words, “This will probably be the hardest thing she has ever done.”

“Oh, pshaw,” I thought, “What does she know? I have done a dozen things harder than this will be.”

It wasn't long before I met my own unyielding resistance to God and this

plan to move. It manifested mostly as extreme anxiety and feelings of being overwhelmed and inadequate. I began to wonder if I would need to call in a backhoe to extricate myself from Kansas.

Yet from the beginning I knew that the fundamental character of this ministry is that it is impermanent, portable, flexible, and light. Like a roadside fruit stand, it appears in season and offers its gifts to those, who happen to pass by. I never imagined it as an institution or a physical structure. My model was the Russian Orthodox poustinia – a small hut on the edge of a village where a person of prayer lived. The person was available to the villagers with spiritual issues, as well offering an extra hand at times of harvest and community need.

After Elijah died I realized how much his sweet, goofy presence helped calm me and how much his care and affection contributed to my well-being. I missed him terribly. I began to have anxious dreams and worry obsessively about how I could possibly manage this move. I came down with sciatic nerve pain. It would be hard to say goodbye to so many people I deeply love. The present shape of the Sanctuary and the sacred space of meeting in my home would be gone.

Yet the call persisted: move. Then I got a terrible toothache on a Friday night in

early May. I had to wait until Monday to see a dentist. I doubled up on pain medicine and set my timer for 4 hours, so that I could stay ahead of the pain. On Monday morning on the way to the dentist, I stopped at the drugstore to buy more Tylenol. I had taken my last tablet and wanted to have some on hand after the dentist saw me.

I barely noticed the clerk stocking the shelves in the pain medicine section of the aisle. I was in a hurry. My jaw and gum throbbed with pain. I scanned the dizzying rows of pain meds trying to find the one I wanted—the fast working kind. I reached for a box and headed toward the check-out counter. Looking down at the box, I realized I grabbed the wrong kind. I frantically returned to retrieve the right one.

As I was scanning the rows, I heard a soft voice ask, “May I help you?” I turned to see an older woman wearing the drug store badge and smock.

“I have a terrible toothache and am on my way to the dentist. I am looking for this one kind of Tylenol.”

“Here, this is what I think works best. It’s what I use,” she said, pulling a box off the shelf. It was a buy-one-get-one-free featured item.

I shook my head, “But I don’t need two.”

“I’ll buy it and give you the free one. I’m out right now,” she offered. For the first time I actually looked at her in the face, grateful for her comforting help. She said, “I saw you when you first came walking down this aisle.”

As we walked toward the check-out counter, I told her how relieved I felt and asked, “Are you an angel?” She stopped and turned to me, shaking her head, “Oh, no. I am not an angel. But I do have the Spirit. Do you know what that means?”

“Yes, I know. I’m a minister.”

She looked away, tilting her head up, thinking. “Let me see if I have a song for you.” She waited, then said, “Yes, I do.”

There next to the shelves of paper towels and napkins, across from the soup cans, she gazed into my eyes and sang me a song. It was a song I have never heard. I think she composed it on the spot. Her voice was sweet and so was the song. It began with the words, “Gentle Jesus” and was about a tender Jesus, who loves and protects and is with me. Goose flesh broke out on my arms. Tears ran down my cheeks. When she finished the song, she looked away and then turned back and said, “Rest. God wants you to know you are to rest. Everything is planned and will come to pass. Do not fear. You must

rest.”

She had no idea how stressed, alone, and afraid I was feeling. I thanked her and told her about my plans to move and my fears.

Then she took one of the boxes of Tylenol that she was carrying and placed it on a shelf next to the paper towels. Here she said, “This is God.” Then taking a folded drug store flyer of ads and coupons, she held it in front of the Tylenol, completely covering the box.” This is you,” she said, pointing at the flyer. This is your pride, your ego, your controlling. You are resisting God. God needs to be the one who leads. You should rest in him. He will do everything. You need to tell Jesus you are sorry. Don’t worry. He isn’t mad at you. He is very, very gentle and loves you so much. He will make everything happen. He is totally in charge and you are resisting him.

Then turning away from her visual aids and looking thoughtfully, she said, “I see these big white doors opening. There is a path in the woods. It’s a blue path? Hmm, blue. Let me see, yes it’s blue. You have to trust God in this.”

“I don’t even know your name,” I said as we continued up the aisle. “Thank you so much.”

She quickly walked over to the check

out clerk and said, “I am buying these.” She handed me one of the boxes. “You do not need to know my first or last name,” she said as I walked out the door.

I arrived at my dentist’s office, still in pain, but hopeful and infused with a love, a softness I had never felt before. The softness enveloped me like feathers. The Holy Spirit leaned over me with her bright wings.

This stunning gift initiated a period of inner healing and growth that is still unfolding for me. It increased my awareness of my own striving, pushing energy, and even a kind of brutality toward myself. This gentle loving Jesus exposed more clearly my own inner harshness, shame, and ego driven desires.

And yes, that evening on my knees, I told Jesus I was sorry for getting in his way. I know more quickly now when I am trying to lead instead of following Christ. I feel a shift in my body, an inner contraction, a tightness in my jaw. I think of those soft feathers and I relax. I came to terms with the source of that driving energy within me, which blocks my access to the gentle spirit of Love at work for me, with me, in me, and all around me.

I could not extricate myself from this deep-rooted, distorted conception

of reality and my behavior without the penetrating gentle love of Christ. I had been praying a lot, seeking counsel, reading scripture, and practicing centering prayer during this time. But what I needed was beyond my manipulation and all the spiritual practices I might attempt.

It would not take a backhoe to move me on to a new place, only a caring drug store clerk with the Spirit within her.

If we could stop resisting our resistance to God's invitations and embrace our discomfort, we might discover the treasure hidden in the very thing we are running from. Try it. Get moving. Shake off the dust. Go sing a gentle song to a stranger today.

Yours, amazed by Grace.

*Loretta F. Ross*

*Please note:*

After my move I will still be working with Kansas clients for spiritual direction on phone or skype, as well as writing, teaching, and leading retreats. **Holy Ground** will continue publication.

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*Hearsay and Rumors about the Beloved*

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Copies of Holy Ground are available at \$2.00 each, 10 copies for \$15.00, 20 copies for \$30.00. Shipping included.

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

**H**oly Ground – that burning reality which can only be apprehended  
– breaks into, really, the present moment (mine or another’s) – and  
which, surprisingly, disorders, reorders, rearranges, resynthesizes all  
my previous arrangement of reality.

*Holy ground is not the object, but rather, we are the objects, subject to the  
flaming Presence who is creating us in the divine image.*

Letters from the Holy Ground, Loretta F Ross



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