



Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

Vol. 32, No. 1 • Spring 2021

Disillusionment

On the first and long-awaited day of kindergarten I drove her to school. She talked the whole time about her new clothes, the ribbons in her pigtails and her snazzy backpack with all her supplies. Later in the day, when I picked her up, she was quiet in her car seat. "How was school, honey?" I asked eagerly. "Well," she said, sighing, "it was not like in my dreams, mom."

My heart is so heavy and tender. Something is stirring within. I don't not understand what is going on with me.

The floor dropped away. It's like being in some kind of free fall and I have no idea where I will land.

Just a kind of dull weariness. I can't get motivated. I don't know if I can trust God or even pray.

Spring is amazing and that is so great, yet I still feel on edge.

The world wide web is busy taking the temperature of our pandemic ridden species. Various diagnoses of what ails us are offered, alongside treatments for the malaise we may feel. Psychologist, Adam Grant's recent opinion piece in The New York Times is entitled: *There is a name for the blah you are feeling. It's called languishing.*

Perhaps you have had difficulty concentrating, or "pandemic mind." In this era of multiple calamities and massive changes, where previously accepted norms and truths are daily challenged and revised, many people feel confused, angry and distressed.

Disillusionment does this to us. When a core belief is shattered or an unexamined assumption exposed, the new truth rudely shouldering itself into our awareness may be painfully disorienting.

The confrontation of what is so with

what we hoped or believed was so sends an alarm to both body and mind. Your grip tightens. Your heart races. You want to fight back or run and hide. Your fundamental sense of self threatens to cave in. The story you tell about who you are, the memories, beliefs, hopes, and experiences called *YOU* is falling apart.

And so, we languish. We lose our vitality. We droop over our phones playing games or checking our email over and over. And we suffer from being forced to remain in an unpleasant place or situation.

Adam Grant may have chosen the right word. In a scolding, blaming culture, which disdains weakness and fears vulnerability, feeling feeble is about the worse thing one may have to deal with. At the same time recognizing and naming the condition of our souls is helpful.

Christian spirituality is familiar with this and brings a different perspective to this lethargy, which shows up in most of us multiple times in our lives. For the early church fathers and mothers, who had a psychological acumen we often miss, unmasking illusion and deceit was a natural part of deepening faith and the resulting

languishing was a sign of growth. Words like *acedia*, dark night of the soul, and *aporia* (impassable, difficult, hard to deal with, at a loss) were applied to this condition of a poor soul stuck in a rut.

I see this condition as simply part of the journey to greater freedom and living with greater integrity. Rather than languishing, and other negative assessments, I would call it the process of the evolution of consciousness or putting on the mind of Christ.

One may find equivalent assessments of periods of languishing in uncertainty in various spiritual traditions, all of which involve uncovering our illusions and self-deceit, in order to see ourselves, others, the cosmos, and God with new eyes.

We can find many characters in the Bible who got their minds changed. One could learn a lot about the process of transformation by close readings of these case studies of spiritual awakening and encounters with the Divine. What was it like for them? Did they languish? Did they resist Love's invitation? What was the outcome?

A prime example is Paul, who approved the stoning of Stephen and was *severely persecuting the*

*church by entering house after house;
dragging off both women and men and
committing them to prison. Act:8: 1-3*
You remember the encounter the old
Paul, Saul, had with a brilliant light
and a startled horse, who threw him to
the ground.

*I fell to the ground and heard a voice
saying to me,
“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting
me?”
. . . Since I could not see because of
the brightness of that light,
those who were with me took
my hand and led me to Damascus.
Acts 22: 7,11*

Paul’s Testimony

Struck by a sickening blow to the gut,
slamming against the pitiless rock
I went down to the ground.
My body lay in the dust
My body folded upon itself in the dust.
My heart smeared with the dust.
And I lay still in the dust,
closed upon the dust,
like the wing of some great, dead bird.

I fell down
rolled down
splayed down
split, spread down
across the ground

like butter.

Like a serpent
I went down
crawling over the ground
on my belly.
I went down to the ground
where the salamanders and skinks
scurry over the cold stone walk.

I went down to the ground
where the sow bugs curl and the beetles
hide.
I went down to the ground
and swam with turtle
out of the depths
up into the light
and stretched my neck long
and turned my face
to the sun.

When I was lifted up from the ground,
day became night.
I staggered
and my sin was always before me.

You wonder if it happened,
if I really saw what I say I saw,
heard what I tell I heard.
You wonder if I am mad
or fabricating.
See here, see
the proof is in my groping blindness
my stunned, numbed, nauseous soul

stumbling in a foreign land.

There are ones who can testify
that I saw well enough before,
that I did not wear this unveiled
shocked look of the newly blind.
There are ones who can remember the
zeal and pulse of desire in me.

My mind
shattered into brittle splinters,
discrete thoughts
wholly
separate
with
no
known
connection
to
one
another
save my existence.

In darkness I paced that long night.

Near dawn some
thing like scales, like slivers,
husks,
a tough membrane-like scum
shucked from my eyes.

And I saw for the first time
the world
like a worn pouch turned inside out.

When sight returned
there remained as a translucent cataract
Christ.

Between me and creation exists that
dear face
and upon it I gaze unceasingly
and therein find All.

“It hurts you to kick against the goads,”
he said.

One aspect of Christian spirituality is
the belief of many saints that God is
at work in us beyond our conscious
awareness. The truth that we are not
in total control is very threatening to
the ego. That fuss budget has to know
everything, control everything, and
be right. And so, we languish, feeling
depleted, useless, and unproductive. It
is our ego, our false self, who struggles
with its loss of power. Here is the
invitation to embrace our own poverty
of spirit and see how deeply attached
we are to our own wills and desires.

Paul is knocked off his high horse.
He faceplants into his own fallibility
and need for help from others. It took
a period of languishing before his
vision returned, and years for him to

process and integrate that conversion experience into his psyche.

Jean Pierre de Caussade writes:

The spirit of total self-abandonment, accompanied by a fervent and reiterated prayer to fulfill all the demands of God, frequently announces a coming transition to painful and crucifying interior states.

The sentiment of confusion and self-annihilation is a solid effect of the Spirit of God: all the graces which he gives us should always bring with them humility, and one should regard as suspicious all impressions which do not tend in that direction or which leave behind them the slightest smoke of pride, presumption and vain self-esteem. - Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence

Paul had totally abandoned himself with devotion to a particular notion of God's desires for him. God took that zealous devotion, turned it upside down and transformed self-righteous Saul into Paul. (Who still remained a bit self-righteous in my opinion.)

In our tendency to focus on ourselves and our narrow interpretation of the world around us, we too may assume

our desires are God's desires and require a faceplant or two along the way.

This era, in which we are privileged to live, is inviting us to respond to massive changes and global needs. To respond fully requires a leap in the consciousness of our species in order to adapt to change without going extinct. To survive we must learn to live more selflessly, to see that our individual well-being is intricately woven into the well-being of all of life.

Our opinions can become so sacred that we grow hostile to the mere thought of being wrong, and the totalitarian ego leaps in to silence counterarguments, squash contrary evidence, and close the door on learning.

Adam Grant, *Think Again – The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*.

What does it mean for you to put on the Mind of Christ – to release the contents of your mind for that of Christ's. What might you be asked to let go or leave behind? Maybe our species is being

invited to a massive self-emptying.
Like all adaptation and change it takes
time to accept what we have lost and
begin to see what we have gained.

Yet, ultimately, to be disillusioned
is to be set free. This action of grace
removes the plank in our own eyes
and dethrones our egos and much of
the healing process is hidden from our
conscious awareness.

On our own, we would furiously resist
such painful confrontation with our
pride and ignorance. Yet we live in a
universe that will not tolerate deceit
and denial for long, nor practices which
destroy life, or cognitive constructs
which are inherently unsustainable.

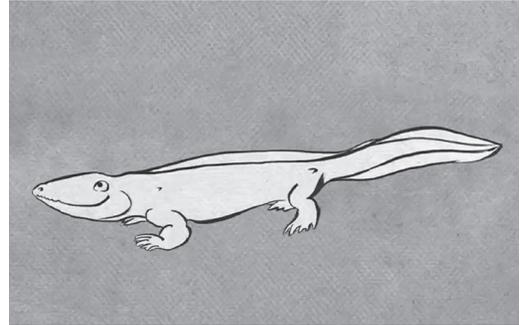
So be kind to yourselves, when you
struggle with your life. Be gentle and
patient with your grumpy, out of sorts,
doubting self. Think of the courage of
the ancient ones leaving the sea behind
and slowly changing fins to legs. We
owe so much to their courage and the
guiding Spirit of All Life urging them
on.

Trust that in the muck and the rubble
something new is being done within
you, a healing, a release, a gift given,
a new day, dawning. Surrender to the

Love that will not let you go.

Yours, ever evolving along with you,

Loretta F. Ross



*The final wisdom of life requires not
the annulment of incongruity, but the
achievement of serenity within and
above it.*

Reinhold Niebuhr

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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

When a core belief is questioned, though, we tend to shut down, rather than open up. It's as if there is a miniature dictator living inside our heads controlling the flow of facts to our minds, much like Kim Jong-un controls the press in North Korea. The technical term for this in psychology is the totalitarian ego, and its job is to keep out threatening information. Personal affronts threaten to shatter aspects of our identities that are important to us and might be difficult to change.

Adam Grant, *Think Again – The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*



Holy Ground, formerly titled *making Haqqodesh*, is published by The Sanctuary Foundation for Prayer, a not for profit charitable organization.

Helping people find holy ground in the midst of a busy world.

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