



# Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

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## Forerunners

### Ubuntu

Aim for the simple  
hidden acts of love  
which keep time ticking  
like tiny golden gears  
in the pocket-watch of the stars.

Reach for the ordinary goodness  
that rarely makes the news  
but forms the loamy ground on which  
we walk.

Paths our ancestors wore in the living of  
their days  
now yield to our imprint, gently  
propelling us  
out of the gravity of singularity  
to leap beyond ourselves and see  
that I am  
because they were and we are.

Take the unassuming  
nondescript scrap  
tossed by the wind  
across the parking lot  
holding the list written in your hand—

bread, eggs, fruit, mustard, milk—  
and the essential worker  
driving the bus, behind the counter,  
leaning over the patient.

Care little for pithy memes  
and what is trending now  
or the preening of curated selves  
in your reflection on the screens.

It is you in that old ratty sweater  
rising up to lean down and put on your  
shoes,  
pouring milk on your cereal, praying for  
your children  
you  
whom I am trusting in and living for.

The woman in the red hat  
waiting at the corner for the light  
to change  
waves back when I wave.

For a moment, an eternity,  
the struck flame of connection  
crackles between us  
tugs us from our separate cells,

uniting to say  
we are one here on this corner  
and indeed, we are made of miracles.

Every day communion is served  
on a corner near you.

Eucharist pours from heaven  
runs down the street  
children jump in the puddles -  
maybe you do too.

*Ubuntu* is an ancient African word meaning  
'humanity to others'. It is often described as  
reminding us that 'I am what I am because of  
who we all are'.



On late summer evenings on my  
deck, I listen to the ringing swell of  
tambourine concerts. Cicada choruses  
soothe my soul. The rapid buckling and  
unbuckling of drum-like tymbals in  
their tiny abdomens can be deafening.  
The critters, who emerge from the  
ground and their winter feast of tree  
roots, are not shy in announcing their  
resurrection.

For me the cicada song is like waves  
crashing and receding on the shore  
of the ocean. The rhythmic sweep of  
sound from the trees carry me back  
to my childhood in Iowa on barefoot  
summer nights – fireflies, hide and  
seek, popsicles, and kids screaming  
with laughter, as we plucked the  
critters' brown, brittle exoskeletons  
from trees and threw them at each  
other.

I long to abandon the brittle, cramped  
casing I call my "self" in a burst  
of resonant sound like my molting  
neighbors. I have been trying to die to  
myself this summer.

This was not my idea, and the notion  
has been at work in me for several  
years. It is one of those, pesky,  
persistent summons out of scripture,  
which keeps popping into one's  
awareness in various ways – prayer,  
a book you randomly pick up and  
open, a conversation, a rhyme or song  
repeating itself. In my case I would  
add to these my own weariness with  
the burden of this self, which desires  
and grasps, resists and repels all real  
and imagined threats to its existence,  
as well as my self's loud and raucous  
seizure of center stage in my life.

For example, I attended a zoom retreat

for spiritual guides on how to lead zoom retreats. Our capable leaders, using an Ignatian discernment process, asked us to answer some questions to see if we might be called by the Spirit to offer such events.

We started with the facts: 1. What do I know about my choices at this point? I wrote, *resistant to digital commodification and marketing of religion*. 2. What am I noticing that is inviting me to consider offering or continuing to offer virtual retreats? I wrote, *I have a lot of material to share and I want to ease others' pain*. 3. What ways do I want to contribute to the moment before us? The answer came immediately to mind, and I wrote, *to disappear; to decrease*. Hmm, zoom retreat leadership may not be for me.

I was as non-plussed at this “disappearance” response, as you may be. What I want to give to this time – is to disappear, to decrease? Yet in recent years I have been wondering if self-denial out of love for God and others may be the particular spiritual work and mark of a Christian in our age. For the survival of our species and a remnant of a civil society, we need people who willingly set aside their own needs and desires, who

divest themselves of their power and privilege, and say to our neighbors of all species, “I must decrease, and you must increase.”

*They came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” John answered, “No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.’ He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason, my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease. John 3: 26-30*

In the days of John the Baptist the promised land was occupied by Roman Legions and the temple priests who had no king but Caesar. “John’s ministry of repentance and baptism exposed how a majority of the population were inexorably entangled in the web of impurity which was woven into the fabric of political, economic, and social life under the conditions of the Roman Empire occupation. This society was suffering from inequality of wealth,

oppressive taxation, and abuse of power.

“John’s injunction to share clothing and food strikes at the very heart of an acquisitive society.”

– R. W. Farmer, *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 2, p. 960

John is seen as a forerunner who ran before Jesus to prepare the way. On meeting Jesus and baptizing him, John saw that Jesus embodied truth, justice, love and the power of God and brought a vision more encompassing and demanding than John’s own.

Jesus, picking up the baton from John, would be even more direct with ethical demands for justice and mercy, and in addition, one other audacious caveat – to follow the way of Jesus, you must deny yourself and take up your cross. What? Die to your own right to yourself, your desires, and will?

In such sacrificial emptying of ourselves God increases in us and in all the world. Could the power and presence of Christ be gathering in the hearts of the disinherited, the outcast ones, the ones oppressed and confined by racist systems which bind and chafe and kill? Are these forerunners pointing to the corruption and abuse

of power and making way for new life and healing? Are there those in whom Christ is at work building strength and power and creativity to step into leadership, lift up their voices, and lay down their lives for Love? Might these be the ones we have been waiting for to deliver us from our prejudice, contempt, and bias, and from our grasp on money, privilege, and power?

Here on the border with the refugees, in hospital hallways, and communities struggling to promote justice and truth - here is the suffering Christ, saying follow me into this pain, make it your own, and lift up these voices, share this truth, wisdom, and love.

The command from Jesus to deny oneself for others is unlikely to be noticed in our self-seeking, self-righteous, entitled, contentious culture. Through constant encouragement of individualism, free enterprise, and the pursuit of profit, an insidious and dangerous idolatry of personal freedom and individualism has overtaken us and even appears in some churches. Feeling little or no responsibility to others for how my actions may impact them, I have no opportunity to discover the freedom and joy that comes from surrendering the grasping, anxious demands of a contorted self always

under siege.

*The characteristics of individuality are independence and self-will. We hinder our spiritual growth more than any other way by continually asserting our individuality. "God wants to bring you into union with Himself, but unless you are willing to give up your right to yourself, God cannot. (Jesus said,) "... let them deny themselves..." – deny their independence to themselves.. Then real life - the spiritual life - is allowed the opportunity to grow."*  
- Oswald Chambers

There is a qualification regarding self-denial that must be addressed. Over and over humans are shuttled into cultures of control and oppression by the whip of religion. The abuse of Jesus' call to self-denial has a long and bloody history both within and beyond the church in our culture. Alongside distorted images of God as a punisher, we have glorified and praised self-denial to raped, beaten and verbally abused men, women, and children. Christians have also condoned abuse and trauma under the guise of a false spiritualization of suffering.

In addition, a cultural idolatry of endurance and pain tolerance

has condoned the practices of some coaches to tell athletes with concussions and injuries, or mental illness to suck it up.

Words of Jesus taken out of context have been exploited to justify horrific abuses, torture, genocide, systemic racism, and the suffering of millions for centuries.

To recognize the voice of the shepherd in the cacophony of those claiming to know what is best for you requires careful discernment. The key is your personal freedom to choose or not to choose denial of self.

In my case my "self" got all excited and decided to take control of this new project of dying to self by reading books, meditating, attending classes, and thinking, which, though a natural response any good Presbyterian would make, totally misses the point. Giving up one's right to oneself is not another spiritual practice to try or to perfect.

The call to self-denial comes with a further demand: follow me. Jesus, unarmed and vulnerable shows us the path to diminishment and the shedding of privilege and power.

To entrust oneself to the will of God

and leave behind my will in order that I may be led by the will of God is the ongoing work of discipleship and spiritual growth.

Overtime as we release control of our lives for faith in God, we discover a new ease with ourselves and others. That fussy, ever-shifting self that never fit right and scratched your neck and gave you hives when it was hot, begins to crack open and release you into a whole other way of being in union with Christ and all that is within Christ.

One does not need to take an arduous journey, a pilgrimage of hardship, or sleep on a bed of nails. “Come home, come home,” Jesus says to us, absorbed in counting the beads of our losses or taking photos of our gains. “Pull yourselves away from the pond, where mesmerized by your own reflections, you fall into yourselves choking, sputtering, and flailing to stay afloat.”

Jesus, was it so with you, when your cousin grabbed you by the shoulders and plunged you under the waters and your father spoke those words, *My Beloved?* You, plunging into the flood, were confirmed in your identity as your father’s son and released with the conviction and power of God.

The denial of self is not a rational decision. Rather it is a response to the compelling and awe-filled presence of God impacting our lives. As in Jesus’ case, denial of self emerges from an encounter with Holiness, which breaks through our resistance with beauty, or grace, or love that brings us to our knees. Here we discover our own deep need for our Beloved.

We need only to give ourselves space and stillness to encounter the holy and our own nothingness, and thus to abide in the ever-unfolding grace beyond ourselves.

*Loretta F. Ross*

*Let yourself be silently drawn by the stronger pull of what you really love.*

- Rumi, translation by Coleman Barks

## *Pay Attention*

A helpful question when crawling out of a cicada shell is to ask yourself, who is looking? Am I seeing from the perspective of my ego or from grace? Am I experiencing my world by making comparisons, judging, anxiety? Or am I gazing on the world with eyes of compassion and love?

## *Contemplative Prayer Group*

There is an invitation beyond the wall of knowledge, which is not some regressive state before the mind can operate, but a transcendent state that's beyond where the mind can go. That's what spirituality is. It's going where the mind can't go.

- Adyashanti

We periodically offer small groups to explore silence and the presence of God with us beyond where our minds can go. Such shared silence cleanses and soothes, heals and opens us to grace.

A donation of your choice helps us pay our costs. We are offering groups this fall.

For further info and to register- Email:  
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or phone 785-230-0365

Come join us. We need each other.

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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

**T**o forget the body is to forget our dependence, our frailty, our limitations. To forget these aspects of our embodiment is also to forget the value, indeed the necessity, of humility, generosity, care, patience, and mercy. Our habituation to these experiences and others like them is what MacIntyre calls “the virtues of acknowledged dependence.” These qualities are, in his view, grounded in a recognition of our limitations and weaknesses as embodied creatures. If digital culture tempts us to forget our bodies, then it may also be prompting us to act as if we were self-sufficient beings with little reason to care for or expect to be cared for by another.

– L.M. Sacasas *The Materiality of Digital Culture*, *Comment Magazine* August 12, 2021



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

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