



Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

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Somebody Needs to Bow

What your heart yearns for is closer than
you think

thoughts

wolves howling at the moon
see their feral beauty
don't go out chasing them
everything you need is here.



My life is a rollicking journey into my own ignorance. I increasingly do not mind being a fool. I often stand at the edge of my known world. Gazing out upon a great sea, I hear the seagulls call, watch them swoop and glide above the waters and soar across the blue sky.

“Come on in, Chickee,” a voice urges me. “Let go. The water is great.”

“But is it safe? I have things to do, miles to go . . .”

Where I go wrong is thinking, of course. By thinking I mean that ongoing project of naming this and that, and piling up cognitive structures, separating myself from union with it all, and hunkering down in a cozy, insulated, defended self, which keeps me dawdling on the shore of bliss, pacing back and forth, as the moment of grace recedes.

M. C. Richards reminds me that “the kingdom of God will come when we are willing to be penetrated by bliss.”

The problem is that these rickety mental constructions of self may at any moment collapse in a pile of rotting lumber. Lent invites us to offer this self, in all its struggle, selfishness and suffering to Christ.

*Here I am just as I am, a hot mess.
Help me let go of my will and express
your will, your creative energy and life
through me. Amen*

The ego is useful. At the same time, it needs to be held lightly and gently. Always fearing its demise, this false self, as Thomas Merton called it, requires ongoing maintenance and assurance. It strives to keep the veil of illusion over our eyes, as it insists on its existence by trying to prop itself up, grasping for power, control, approval, safety and security, and to change the way things are.

One can only wrap your arms around such a besieged self with loving compassion. For this self is a confused thicket of thorny desires and fears. It needs our loving kindness. Jesus sees into our predicament, with his compassionate eyes, when he tells his friends, they will need to deny themselves and die in order to follow him. “What?!” his followers exclaim.

A new self, a true self, a self, grounded, not in its own willfulness and endless needs, but in the abundant life in Christ, waits in the wings for its cue. To stand clueless and empty-handed in the midst of the mystery of our being is to dwell in the realm of God.

Canaries in the Coal Mine

The US Department of Transportation recently reported that road fatalities spiked in the first half of 2021, the largest increase ever recorded in its reporting system’s history, during a six-month period. More than 20,000 people died in motor vehicle crashes on U.S. roads, a nearly 20 percent increase from the same period in 2020.

A recent post by a local pharmacist carefully explains the steps in filling a prescription. She pleads with readers to be kind and patient to those who work at pharmacies. Three staff members have resigned because of customer nastiness.

You have heard about or witnessed the rude, aggressive treatment of airline personnel and restaurant servers. In addition, there are the lone-wolf angry ones, who express hatred and rage by threats or acts of violence of varied severity. Groups and organizations exist, which encourage such acts of terror, disruption, harassment and harm.

The crushing toll of Covid is not the only illness from which we are reeling. We can see the canaries in the coal mine. The innocents, who are exposed to a societal toxicity that seeps into every corner of our lives, may be

infected by suffering, rage, hatred, resentment, and trauma. Such exposure may result in mental illness and actions and behaviors which harm us all. Other people serve as scapegoats to carry our blame and shame, and on whom we inflict our animus.

We appear to be at the end of our tolerance for not having things go the way we want. We also have a limited range of options in how to respond to loss and suffering in our lives without blaming others or projecting it outward.

This is surely Jesus's cue and ours as well. Caught in an impasse of unyielding wills, somebody has to stop playing this deadly game. Somebody has to drink the cup. Somebody has to let go of preserving her status, power, possessions, esteem, and instead of counterattack to absorb this sickness into the love of a suffering God. As John Lewis absorbed the blows of the police on that march to Selma in 1965, are we not, too, called to absorb by our faith, by our love for God and neighbor, and even at times by our bodies, the sins of others against us?

I attended a webinar sponsored by the Presbyterian Church USA about how militarism has bankrupted our

communities. This church is calling for investment in a culture of care, instead of a culture of war. One of the speakers noted that people buy guns, because they want to control other people.

In stark contrast to imposing our will on others by using a weapon, the very essence of contemplative prayer is to surrender our need to control. Jesus calls us to put down our weapons to be both disarmed, and disarming. We pray for God's will to be done, not our will.

The most essential part of meditation, what meditation really is, is a relinquishing of control. You surrender into what is.

- Adyashanti, Falling Into Grace

How do we put down our weapons and be disarming? How do we develop trust and mutual respect in a culture based on competition, rivalry and an understanding of freedom, which among some people, includes my right to say and do whatever I want regardless of the consequences to those around me?

As I wrote at the beginning, I do not have the answers. One thing I do believe is that change can begin with a

bow.

The Sangha

I click on the link and wait for the host to let me into the zoom gathering. Soon I am greeting smiling faces with a wave. The facilitator welcomes us and briefly describes the format of the gathering. We each share briefly about our day, or what is on our hearts this evening. As our name is called, the speaker places palms together and bows to the group, who in return bow back. When the speaker has finished, the bow between speaker and listener is repeated. The bowing is optional, yet most in the group join in.

I learn one person had a lovely day; another lost her job. Grateful to be there and in need of a chance to catch our breath, we each reflect and share as we offer reverence to the miracle of each life before us.

When the gong sounds, we settle into silence. Some of us turn off our video or move to sit on a cushion on the floor. Others remain, sharing their quiet faces at meditation. Together we watch what is present – our breath, our passing thoughts, a bodily sensation, and the still spaciousness that opens within our awareness, when we cease controlling, clinging and trying to understand. A tenderness moves among us. We relax

and sink into the simplicity of being. I will carry the fragrance of this grace into my evening, walking slower, more present to each moment, kinder, calmer, and so deeply grateful.

You may recognize this way of bowing to others as Hindu and Buddhist practices. The group I was sitting with are followers of Thich Naht Hahn, beloved Vietnamese, activist, teacher, and scholar, who died recently at age 95. This group practices the Buddhism that Thich Naht Hahn developed and led at Plum Village community in France. He introduced to the communities he led this simple practice of bowing to reinforce the dignity and worth of each member.

This gesture has long been present in monasteries and some churches, as well. To preface one's remarks with hands in prayer and bowed head asks me to remember the beauty, the holiness, the grace of each listener, and to honor them. To respond to someone's words with that same humility and grace once again shows devotion and mindfulness about what was spoken and the speaker.

This practice stands in stark contrast to the way many of us treat each other. In a culture of attack, blame, shame, and mockery, words become weapons,

which may hurt as deeply as the wounds of gunfire and fists.

To lose a sense of control over ourselves and our lives can be terrifying to our ego, who sees its primary responsibility to protect and defend itself at all cost. Yet over and over we experience loss of control in multiple ways, large and small. I am backed up in traffic for 45 minutes because of an accident. My interview for a job does not yield an offer to hire me. My desire for someone to change or stop doing something I dislike is frustrated. We get sick or injured. We do not get the response we want from someone. Rejection is a wound to the ego, because the ego sees itself as separate, unique and alone, dualistically in relationship to the world.

To begin to see oneself as *we*, as part of a larger whole, allows us to let down our guard, relax the 24/7 surveillance of the ego, and enter into grace. Treating one another with respect, if not with a bow, at least a sense of the holiness of each one of us, no matter how hidden that holiness may seem, is a step in the direction of establishing and maintaining the human family in sustainable relationships.

When we cease to see others as

human beings like ourselves, we dehumanize and slap labels of derision and disrespect on them. They become objects in our way, or lesser beings to patronize, persuade, blame, or manipulate as a means to our ends. Reconciliation requires the self-giving love of Christ. Somebody needs to bow – to recognize the suffering of the other, to see into the heart and speak to the pain or despair that resides there. “Violence begets violence,” wrote Martin Luther King, Jr. When we see the other as enemy or threat all hope for reconciliation is buried in a clash of humiliation, pride, suffering, and fear.

Could we start over and begin with a bow? First, bow to yourself and the beauty and wonder of Christ residing within you.

Take a look at Thich Naht Hahn’s *Four Mantras*, which offer a way of denying ourselves, while deepening our relationships. He had suffered good deal of anger, rejection, and suffering himself. The Four Mantras offer a way of breaking through those impenetrable impassés between us.

“The first mantra is “*Darling, I am here for you.*” And if you are truly present, this mantra will produce a miracle. You become real, the other person becomes real, and life is real in that moment. You bring happiness to yourself and to the other person.

"I know you are there, and I am very happy" is the second mantra. When I look at the moon, I breathe in and out deeply and say, "Full moon, I know you are there, and I am very happy." Whenever you are really there, you are able to recognize and appreciate the presence of the other – the full moon, the North Star, the magnolia flowers, or the person you love the most.

The third mantra is: *"Darling, I know you suffer. That is why I am here for you."* When you are mindful, you notice when the person you love suffers. If we suffer and if the person we love is not aware of our suffering, we will suffer even more. Your presence alone will relieve a lot of his or her suffering. No matter how old or young you are, you can do it.

The fourth mantra is the most difficult. It is practiced when you yourself suffer and you believe that the person you love is the one who has caused you to suffer. The mantra is, *"Darling, I suffer. Please help."* Only five words, but many people cannot say it because of the pride in their heart. If anyone else had said or done that to you, you would not suffer so much, but because it was the person you love, you feel deeply hurt. You want to go to your room and weep. But if you really love him or her, when you suffer like that you have to ask for help. You must overcome your pride."

-Thich Naht Hahn

May we all overcome our pride
in this season of giving and
forgiving.

Loretta F. Ross



Thich Naht Hahn and Martin Luther King, Jr were friends, who worked together on the non-violent resistance approach that King and others used in the civil rights movement. When King nominated Thich Naht Hahn for the Nobel Prize, he said "I do not personally know of anyone more worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize than this gentle monk from Vietnam. His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity."

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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

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate...Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

– Martin Luther King, Jr.



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

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