

Holy Ground

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A quarterly reflection on
the contemplative life



*This, my dear
is the greatest challenge
to being alive.
To witness the injustice in the world
and to not allow it to consume our light.*

THICH NHAT HAHN

I want to remind myself and you of the obvious: We get to be alive. We find our being and live and move in the Giver of All Life. Let that sink in. What an astounding gift. You are breathing. Your heart is beating. You are a living being among other forms of being. Our ancestors have sacrificed for us, for the light, for love, peace, and justice.

And you – who may have recently walked through cemeteries to bend down and leave flowers in memory of loved ones and ancestors. You, who turned off the news and wept and tried to find words of comfort for those who suffer. You, who working for justice and peace. You, who can barely keep it together. You, with the heavy heart. You who wake with dread in your throat. You, who sit numb, uncomprehending and stare out at this world, hopeless, shattered, and angry –

Beloved ones, how is your light? Do you

know where it is? What is the quality of your light – a dim sputtering flame, a sparkler in the dark, a burning sun? Or has the injustice of the world gobbled up your light? We are all easy prey for the temptations of despair, fear, and hopelessness.

For better and for worse – here we are, alive, reading these words in a line of print or pixels on a screen. Most of us get to hear the soft murmur of the leaves on the rose bush as rain falls. Most of us hear the birds chatter and the dog barking down the block. We can reach out to family and friends.

We can lift the cup and drink our coffee and taste its bitterness and warmth in our mouths. Most of us have a place to live, where, with a quick twist of our wrists and nimble fingers, we fetch fresh, clean water from a faucet.

Will we pause and lift up our eyes from contemplating all that is wrong or worrisome and dare to sink into the ever-present, scintillating, wondrous gift of life itself? Life - so incredible, both tenacious, and fleeting, and inconceivable to most of the known universe. Insistent life thrusts itself forward, even in the midst of carnage and destruction. Life sprouts, beats, pulses,

blooms, and reaches into the light in all its forms and shapes.

Thich Nhat Hahn reminds us that the greatest challenge of being alive is to see injustice and not be consumed by it. This revered Vietnamese teacher and activist was familiar with these words of Jesus.

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

MATTHEW 5: 14-15

Under the deluge of bad news, our light may sputter. Some of us may forget where we put it. Was it the bushel basket, out in the garage, or under the bed? When we lose our light, the sheer gift of the wonder of life itself is snuffed out within us and all of us suffer the loss of your light.

Evil, that mass of sin and brokenness in the world, that likes to keep us believing in its horrible power and presence, laughs when we fall for its lies, and chuckles, when we are frozen by fear. Evil rejoices to see us reach for control and cling to our power,

possessions, and pride. Evil steals our joy. It pounces on the least bit of perspective, humor, beauty, love, and goodness in the world and gobbles it up. Then, belching and picking its teeth, it goes looking for more truth to distort, more self-sacrifice to redefine as weak, more souls to torment with doubt and a fussy fault-finding inner critic.

Our species can be ruthlessly cruel, what John Calvin called total depravity. Our sin and limitations propel and perpetuate some of this cruelty. When we sense threat or danger our neural system activates behaviors in response. Part of this drive to respond to perceived threats is baked into our evolution and resides in our amygdala. This oldest and more primitive part of our brain detects threat and activates our defensive and offensive responses. We have evolved with brains which scan for threat five times per second.



The drive to defend and protect ourselves is part of our DNA. Assaults on our autonomy, integrity and dignity bring deep, lasting wounds. The desire to



fight back, save face, and avoid painful humiliation and shame is hardwired into us.

Jesus' words to stop hiding in fear and lift up the light of our energy, joy, and vitality for all to see is radically counter to all that we have learned in order to survive as a species. Jesus offers a third way between clobbering our enemies and making sure we don't get clobbered back.

There is hope! Neuroscience chimes in with news of the plasticity of our brains. We are not as hard-wired as we thought. We can learn to befriend our painful feelings, our anger and fear. We can rise above the sticky, web of despair and misery. We can calm our anxious reactions.

The bustling self-care and spirituality industries offer ways to respond wisely to our feelings, rather than reacting. And some churches are reaching out to those, who struggle to find their lights, by offering support for mental illness and rest for exhausted servants.

What we may miss in just trying to get through the day is that the realities we face in this time of chaos and turmoil, along with the issues in your life that are the most difficult for you, are forming the curricula of your spiritual and faith development. Whatever causes your deepest pain and longing is where you are meeting your teacher. Here you are

instructed about how it feels for you to carry a cross, how it feels for you to deny yourself and follow Jesus, how it feels and looks like for you to decrease that Christ may increase. And how it feels for you to get over yourself and discover your freedom in trust in God, as you say, "Not my will, but yours."

We seek help from coaches, spiritual guides, therapists, medication, religion, and friends to get rid of our suffering. We blame the cause of our discomfort on others – the politicians, the government, some group we do not like, our pastor, our family. We arm ourselves with weapons of various kinds – sarcasm, irony, apathy, resignation, defensiveness, anger.

Meanwhile, the Spirit is quietly at work in our souls. It may appear that everything is falling apart, and you are being swept away. Being overwhelmed is an appropriate response. We shouldn't be surprised after saying, "Yes, I will follow you all the way and die to myself," that we feel at some points like we are dying and it hurts like hell.

The hard thing here, what your mind will do all it can to try to figure out, is that to be delivered from the tyranny of the self is not something we can do on our own. The minute the ego steps in to say - "Ok, I've got this self denial thing worked out. There are three steps. And I will now write a book about it." - we have, once again, been



fooled. The surrender of sacrificial love is a grace we cannot own or control. We can only receive it as our being alive unfolds.

Have you ever noticed how the people who are acclaimed as heroes, never planned to be, and how they often deny being a called a hero? They just did what had to be done at the time. They responded to a need with the grace that was given.



Twenty-one years ago, on September 11, 2001, I watched the crashing planes, the falling Twin Towers, and demolished Pentagon on television. In those events, and the weeks that followed, we saw both the depravity and the glory of human beings.

I also saw (in my mind's eye) enormous, thick, metal doors reaching up from the ground and disappearing into the heavens. The doors were slowly closing, getting closer and closer to shutting out the light. I saw myself rushing up to the doors and calling out to others to put our bodies between them and throw our weight against their immensity in order to hold the doors open and let the light in.

Holding open what seeks to put out the light seems to have been my work since then. Maybe it is your work too - to insert oneself into the midst of encroaching ignorance, lies, hatred, fear, greed, selfishness, and lust to say: No! Not over my dead body!

My commitment has wavered and been consumed by my ego's ever-burgeoning desire to protect itself and its false sense of power and control. I have wrung my hands, cowered, and felt paralyzed by a sense of inadequacy. I have said, No, this is too much! I can't stand to read about these folks at the grocery store or the kids at the school.

Then I went to church and almost walked out on the sermon. The visiting preacher is a good man and presented a fine sermon, which included a section about the immense suffering that occurred in the Civil War. This was the Sunday after the mass shootings in Buffalo, New York and Uvalde, Texas. I just couldn't take in the knowledge of any more sorrow. I wanted to put my hands over my ears. I wanted to get out of there. Though I cringed at times, I stayed in my pew and was glad to hear the totality of the message, which was uplifting at the end.

After the Benediction I met the visiting pastor in the narthex and thanked him saying, "I was sure glad when you got past the suffering of the Civil War and on to the comfort Jesus gives his disciples in John's



gospel.

Recognizing my distress, he quickly said, "It was too much. It was too much!" I expected to reply, "Yes! It was!" But instead, these words tumbled out of my mouth: "No. It wasn't too much. That's the way it is. It is always too much. Yet God is enough."

Over and over, we see those doors closing, shutting out the light. We hear the echoing cries of the hungry, the poor, the oppressed. Over and over, we get our noses rubbed in the stink of our own failures to be the holy people we have been called to be.

The Holy One has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the God require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?

MICAH 6:8

Over and over, we carry a cross. We encounter brutality. We face derision. We find ourselves pinned by the nails of our circumstances to a cross.

Nothing could prepare Jesus's disciples for what it would mean to follow him. They just had to do it and be overcome by it. It will always be "too much." Nothing

can really prepare us for this process of inner and outer crucifixion and death to ourselves. This is a solitary walk with the weight of the gravity of your own life.

Others may help and God is with us, Jesus promised that. Still, we each must kneel in our own Gethsemane and come to terms with that sticky web of self-deceit, confusion, and fear which binds our minds and bodies in endless knots that blind us to the brilliant light of God within us and to lift up our light for all to see.

How do we do such a thing? We have the capacity to take responsibility for our inner lives. We have the capacity to break the curse. So much depends upon where we place our attention. Where we are looking makes all the difference.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before



us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

HEBREWS 12: 1-2



Beloved of God, get over the shame. Shake it off! Come into the light. And do not forget the joy. If you have lost your joy, for God's sake and the sake of the rest of us, go find it and let it shine!

Life is amazing.

Loretta F. Ross

WORDS OF WISDOM

Jesus Christ is an embodiment of multiple overwhelms and the life of Christian faith is itself the most profound experience there is of being overwhelmed.

- David Ford, British theologian

The Way Out Is In

The way out is the way in. You have to go back to yourself, face your deepest fears, and accept the impermanence of our civilization. The practice is to deal with our fear and grief right now; our insight and awakening will give rise to compassion and peace. Otherwise we'll only make ourselves sick with denial and despair. If you can be at peace in the face of the reality, then we have a chance. ... So we need to transform our individual and collective fear.

The problem is a human one. And that is why we need a spiritual dimension. If you can generate the energy of calm, acceptance, loving kindness, and non-fear, you can help offer and introduce that dimension of non-fear and togetherness to the situation. Technology alone is not enough to solve the problem. It needs to go together with understanding, compassion and togetherness.

Pp 47 -49. Thich Nhat Hahn, Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet, pp 47-49, 2021, Plum Village Community of Engaged Buddhism, Harper Collins, NY



AN OPPORTUNITY
TO CONNECT!

Zoom Contemplative Prayer Group

To heal our society, our psyches must heal as well. The military, social, and environmental dangers that threaten us do not come from sources outside the human heart; they are reflections of it, mirroring the fears, greed, and hostility that separate us from ourselves and each other.

—Joanna Macy

You are not alone in this difficult time. Join a group to practice contemplative prayer, reflect on your life in God, and find strength and peace.

We use a simple liturgy for prayer, which includes an extended period of silence.

A donation in the amount of your choice helps pay our costs.

For further info and to register:
Email info@fromholyground.org
or phone 785-230-0365

We need each other.

THE Praying Life

A BLOG ABOUT CONTEMPLATIVE LIVING

Stay current with Sanctuary news. Find worship and spiritual formation resources. Catch up on earlier editions of *Holy Ground* as well as recent ones.

Read and follow The Praying Life Blog at <http://www.theprayinglife.wordpress.com>

Find us and follow the Sanctuary and Loretta F Ross on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter.

And if social media is not your thing, just email info@fromholyground.org or call 785-230-0365.

News Notes

Welcome to our new updated design for Holy Ground. We hope you enjoy the fresh look and more color in each issue.

We have been awarded a grant for spiritual formation leaders from the Presbyterian Church (USA). The grant funds a week long Sabbath for Loretta this fall.

Your subscription renewals, gifts to the The Sanctuary Fund, and prayers are deeply appreciated. Your generosity is making a difference as we work to offer the love and compassion of Christ to people all over the world.

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



To be totally open and willing to receive the fullness of the Spirit is the proper disposition for transformation. What is important at this point is not our self-initiated activity, but our humility based on our having tasted to the depths the lack of integrity and the possibility of all evil that is inherent in the freedom of choice of our human nature as well as its capacity to receive God. We receive the Spirit in the degree that we have been divested of the false self and have allowed it to die with Christ. Now we are ready to rise with Christ with all the attributes that are present in the divine human being and through the Holy Spirit to live ordinary life in a divine way, thus manifesting [God] in all our actions and relationships.

—Thomas Keating



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...the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Revelation 22:2-3

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