

Holy Ground

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A quarterly reflection on
the contemplative life



IF THERE BE ANY VIRTUE



This morning three crows hopped about in the cluster of smashed walnuts in the parking lot. The trees, now bare, dropped the round green hulls, bouncing and rolling down the drive to rest at the curbs. At the repeated crunch of tire tread the hulls shucked off and the hard black shells cracked open. Now the crows arrive to feast in the drizzle and peck the meat from the shells. They strut and swagger, cawing warnings at the squirrels.

Then I read about bats – those mammals with wings, which many people fear – and a man who loves and studies them and calls them - sky-puppies!

Those crows and the sky-puppies saved

me from my fraught self. You see, it doesn't take much to set one's soul right, to make a shift, change the channel, to recalibrate and find one's bearings. We need only to get out of heads and open our eyes.

For those, who read the Summer Issue of *Holy Ground* – *What the Trees Said*, they are still talking to me, and I hope to you as well, or, if not the trees, whatever summons you to change the channel. I loved reading about your own experiences of encountering Holiness speaking to you through creation.

What Walnut Tree Said

Stop looking.
And start seeing.
You have already
Everything
That you need.

Poet William Blake concurs with Walnut, “When the doors of perception are cleansed, we will see things as they truly are, infinite.”

You may not care a whipstitch about crows or sky-puppies, let alone what

a whipstitch is. I do believe you care deeply about this life we share and that you long to live with love and hope in your heart. Most of us want to offer something of value to each other and to live a life that somehow witnesses to goodness, truth, and justice. We are made to be deeply loved and to love deeply.



It is difficult when the outside is hard pressed by the trouble in the world to keep the inside serene, but it is only difficult when you think you can make it serene. The serenity will be given to you; that is the benediction and reward of those who have sought, knocked and found. You are here at this moment in this place, in this Presence, and the Presence is the only Reality and Presence is your Shepherd.

- Letters of the Scattered Brotherhood,
ed. Mary Stone

Written in England during World War 2, these letters of encouragement remind us that our troubles are perennial problems. And our serenity is a gift, which is always accessible when we are willing to seek and knock.

In the chaos and static of our inner and outer lives - the brewing anger, fear, shame, anguish, sorrow, and the constant push to produce or accomplish - we struggle to meet these deep desires of our hearts. Our perception of reality is obscured and distorted. St John of the Cross used the image of a dirty window to describe the process of spiritual maturing, which includes purification and cleansing.

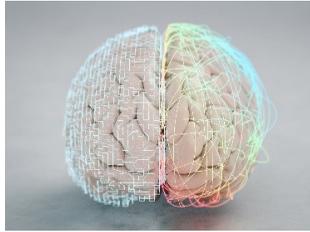
The prophet Malachi called for a good scrub with a Brillo Pad of Fuller's soap and heat of a refiner's fire. These themes of inner change run through scripture with images of conversion, new life, and in Paul's case, scales falling off our eyes. We recognize we cannot go on living in the way we have. Something needs to change and part of it is how we see ourselves, each other, and our beliefs about God and the world.

What clouds your window on the world, what blocks your serenity? What drags you out of the arms of grace and union with Christ into the push and pull of ego,



expectations, self-criticism, and grasping for control?

Life is hard and we are complicated creatures. Consider the neuroscience of our brains,



for example. We are hard wired to remember the negative experiences, that is, to say what we interpret as negative. This is useful some of the time, but much of the time it can be very destructive. Our cortisol levels go up, our body experiences increased stress. Our blood pressure goes up. Our hearts race, hands sweat, and we become hypervigilant. Our focus narrows and locks onto the perceived threat. We lose perspective and our sense of humor. Recent research from the Cleveland Center for the Brain shows that every day our brain processes 70,000 thoughts. 90% of those thoughts are repetitive. 70-80% are negative.

Further, negative thinking diminishes the brain's capacity to think, reason, and form memories. And also produces greater risk for dementia. It is not surprising that the Bible understood this long before we have.

Maybe God created evolution because

she knew it would take us a long time to get smart.

Jesus also foresaw our bad memories when he said at the last supper, "Do this in remembrance of me. So, we put those words on our altars and communion tables. Jesus knew that the people of God have always had notoriously bad memories and that we were going to forget.



There is hope! Neuroscience has shown we can change our brain! We can rewire and create new neural pathways, simply by holding and focusing on a good moment in our awareness. We need only to savor the positive, for as briefly as 20 seconds. This will carry that memory past our center for short term memory into the folder in our brains called: You Need to Remember This!

Many of us have discovered the power of keeping a daily list of things that we are grateful for. Gratitude makes a big difference to our mental well-being.



Gratitude helps us to see what is
there instead of what isn't.

- Annette Bridges

Victorian Jesuit Priest, Gerald Manley Hopkins, well before neuroscience, had submitted to his own purification and cleaned the soot from his window on the world. From his expanded awareness he offers us a stunning vision of reality. London was the center of the biggest empire of the world in the 19th century. Hopkins brings hope in the context of the deplorable living conditions and an economy that existed on the backs of suffering, oppressed people.

GOD'S GRANDEUR BY GM HOPKINS

The world is charged with the grandeur
of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook
foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of
oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon
his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have
trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared,
smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares
man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being
shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep
down things;
And though the last lights off the black
West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink
eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with
ah! bright wings.

*Why do men not reckon his rod? Why can't
we see and pay heed to God's presence
and grace? Why do we keep walking on
and on in the same way? Who knows the
answer.*

Yet here Hopkins finds hope.
*And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep
down things*

Here it is, what we are made to yearn
for and why we trod onward: *the dearest
freshness deep down things are living
within and around us, as is the Realm
of God.* Together we are the Beloved
Community along with the crows and
flying puppies.

How could we ever choose the coarse



and vulgar, the rude and belligerent, the lure of power and money, when there is an unfolding love so sweet, tender, and fierce ever with us and all creatures on this planet, as we live under the Spirit's warm breast and bright wings?



We have a choice. The wise author of Proverbs understands our predicament: Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. - Proverbs 4: 23.

How do you guard your heart? What will you allow into you mind? There are so many ways to harbor serenity, to shelter the Christ Child dwelling with us. The world is a web of glory. God wants nothing more than to delight us and delight in us. God's mercy and love continue for generations as we pass it on.

The call to step out of the Empire and into a cloister appeared early in the church. In the 4th century, aristocratic Christian women of Rome left behind

their luxury and the corruption of a wheezing empire and headed for the desert. Their wealth bankrolled the monastic movement. We all need a place set apart for silence and stillness. The early church fathers and mothers and the budding monastic movement understood the need for deepening our prayer and faith in tough times through silence.

Silence allows us to take responsibility for our inner lives and to listen, identify, accept and release what is there. We learn how to be good company for ourselves and Jesus. We are able to distinguish between our fussy ego self and our true self, at ease and home with God. St John of the Cross put it simply: God does not dwell in an occupied heart.

Say to yourself I will keep all controversial opinion, all human impulses and talk without myself, in the outer realm of my life, for I know that trial and error, failures and half successes, the onslaught of personalities, obstinacies both within and without my own personality, are the passing and changing elements of living. I shall keep them outside the walls of my fortress. I know that within me in the quietness beyond silence is the assurance of immortal



life and the potentiality for peace here and now. I know by this act, this sacrament of communion with the divine Presence within me, I am being freed of those responses and impulses that would keep me earth bound. I know that as I live this life it is, but an echo as compared to the Life within, eternal, immortal, omniscient.

- Letters of the Scattered Brotherhood,
ed. Mary Stone

Last year after the Christmas eve mass, I came out of the church and looked up at the sky and around at the snow and it was all so beautiful. Walking home in the snowfall, I asked God, "How can I please you more?"

"What did God say," I asked. The young man told me, "Just let me love you."

Loretta F. Ross

What we allow to occupy our minds matters. Paul writing to the Philippians from prison offered some simple directions:

Finally, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. Philippians 4:8 KJV

Many years ago I was invited to lead a retreat for a group of Catholic married couples. The retreat focused on God's desire to be with us. At the end of the retreat a young man came up to me and told me a story.



SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Develop a Justice Imagination

A justice imagination invites us to trust God not only with the immediate aspects of our life, but also with our socioeconomic, political, and collective lives. How can we build our trust in God to intervene both directly and through human action, to repair policy legacies of racial inequality and cultural patterns of anti-blackness?

- Psalms for Black Lives – Reflections on the Work of Liberation, Gabby Cudjoe-Wilkes and Andrew Wilkes

We have no trouble imagining catastrophe or apocalypse or some threat. A justice imagination is not overcome by defeat, or attack. It sees through and beyond the negative to possibility. We cannot achieve what we cannot conceive. We must cultivate the faith to imagine the impossible, as Mary did when the angel Gabriel announced she would conceive by the Holy Spirit the Son of God. Her faith, her yes to the impossible changed the world.

When love comes from a deeply felt belief that we are God's beloved, we love our neighbors, strangers, and even our enemies from a justice imagination big enough to encompass the sorrow, anguish, and unresolved pain that accompanies holistic faith.

- Psalms for Black Lives, Gabby Cudjoe-Wilkes and Andrew Wilkes

Ponder what a justice imagination might look like in your life. How do you nurture that dearest freshness deep down knowing that you are, indeed, God's Beloved and highly favored?

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

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

What the Sanctuary Means to Me

I just read the latest issue of Holy Ground and, not surprisingly, I found much that resonates with the experience of my soul, lately. Loved all the words about moving: shimmy, shove, haul, sift, sort, pack, unpack....and this: "Now I cannot sit still enough". I am familiar with 'the trap,' 'the prickles' and I appreciate the invitation to welcoming prayer. As I enter this new place and new ministry, in so many ways it feels like coming home. Thank you for continuing the ministry of the Sanctuary Foundation. Your words help me settle into stillness. Your invitations offer openings to find the love of God, holding us in the midst of upheaval.

- Cheryl



Prayer

All day I have been waiting for You with my faculties bleeding the poison of unsuppressed activity. I have waited for your silence and your peace to staunch and cleanse them, O my Lord. You will heal my soul when it pleases you because I have trusted in you.

I will no longer wound myself with the thoughts and questions that have surrounded me like thorns: that is a penance you do not ask of me. You have made my soul for your peace and your silence, but it is lacerated by the noise of my activity and my desires.

My mind is crucified all day by its own hunger for experience, for ideas, for satisfaction. And I do not possess my house in silence.

But I was created for your peace, and you will not despise my longing for the holiness of your deep silence. O my Lord, you will not leave me forever in this sorrow, because I have trusted in you, and I will wait upon your good pleasure without complaining anymore.

This, for your glory.

- Thomas Merton



Holy Ground is published by The Sanctuary Foundation for Prayer.

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

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