



Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

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Let Go and Keep at It

"I don't care. Nothing will change. I don't trust any politicians. They're all liars. They're greedy. I won't be voting," Andy confided as we did leg lifts in the pool. "Now, your left leg to the side." He smiled apologetically, "I guess I am jaded." I was in the pool for aquatic therapy for the bulging disks in my back. I felt a stab of sorrow for my young physical therapist assistant. "Do you feel somehow betrayed or let down?" I asked.

"Wow, hmm I don't know. That's deep." Andy replied. "I voted for Obama. He said he was for education, but took away subsidized loans." Andy wants to continue his education to become a physical therapist. He has been accepted at a school, but it will cost \$85,000. "I want to advance, but I am worried and scared about taking on so much debt."

Andy, who is gay, doesn't go to church anymore. He asked what church I was with. "Presbyterian," I said.

"Never heard of it." After a pause he asked, "Is that one that marries gays?"

He went on to talk about the effects that the local Westboro Baptist Church with its vicious attacks and hate signs has had on him. Summing up he said, "Fred Phelps is evil." By then we were out in the deep end doing scissor kicks and the frog.

I can't get jaded Andy out of my head and my heart. He is a good PTA and fun to work with. His sense of alienation from institutions of government, church, and education is deeply held. The gods of Westboro Baptist and his home church offer him no comfort. I told him about the Metropolitan Community Church here and that some Presbyterian Churches will marry gays. He was not interested. Cautious, cynical, and fed up, Andy's comfort was the concert that he and his friends were going to that evening.

Disillusioned?

Is there anything left worth setting your heart on? Worth giving yourself to fully, worth dying for? Why bother? They are all greedy liars aren't they?

Maybe you know an Andy. Maybe you have an Andy tucked away inside you. Andy is disillusioned. When we find ourselves in Andy's shoes, it is likely some of our illusions have crashed and broken up on the rocky shoal of a reality we had not seen clearly before.

The praying life is a long journey of letting go of what isn't or is no longer. Over and over we are asked to release what we hope and dream and wish for in order to welcome what is.

Disillusionment is fertile ground for growth, yet sometimes we fail to make the passage to a deeper understanding of ourselves and God and become stuck in resentment or apathy. Sometimes we cope with our loss with denial, a rush to control and force change, or attack. Sometimes we numb out with social media, some other distraction or substance. Andies, wherever we find them, and there are many, are suffering. They are suffering a great deal and they feel very alone.

You may recall that God does not

tell Moses *I am what you thought I would be, or hoped I would be, or were afraid I would be*. God, shrouded in unspeakable mystery, instead offers the untranslatable, unpronounceable: *Yahweh*, I am who I am. I am being itself, Reality, the life you call existence.

Here in this world on the far side of some wilderness, when you lift your eyes from obsessing about yourself, you may be accosted by Wonder. You know, that slice of Mystery which slips sideways into your life – the stunning sunset, the dog snoring beside you, the call of a whippoorwill – that thrills you with a sudden joy.

God does not lift us out of our mortal circumstances. Jesus, the earthy one, meets us in them.

A contemplative life is no more or less than simply following Jesus, God with us in this world, as we are led through our existence. The more we come to know and receive the Being of Holiness into our being, the more we will enter into Christ's rhythms and mind. Following Jesus means leaving everything behind and taking Jesus at his word: that he is with us always to the end of time. Therefore, every moment is holy, is chock full of God,

simmering with Being. Even the awful moments.

And yes, it is frightening, especially when one cannot see a clear way ahead and must lean into faith. It hurts even more when something we love very deeply is yanked out of hands. Yet Jesus reveals himself to us in the very situations or events we are trying to escape, as *an ineffable mystery*. We come to know Christ, The Mystery, as he comes to us in the form of our life, our being.

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: “Follow thou me!” and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

Albert Schweitzer

Too much change?

You sweep people away like dreams that disappear. They are like grass that springs up in the morning. In the morning it blooms and flourishes, but by evening it is dry and withered.

Psalm 90: 3-6



The pace of change has rapidly accelerated in the digital age and many people are overwhelmed by this. Today’s culture is an overflowing cauldron of cynicism, skepticism, rage, and suffering. Many people face an internal landscape like bankrupted cities – crumbling structures of meaning, now useless beliefs, wreckage of broken dreams, and clear evidence of betrayal and deceit. We shake fingers. We face off against one another with arms folded in stony faced polarization.

In such periods of personal and societal impasse it may appear that God has left the premises, and that God, too, has lied to us. Now my understanding of who God is may be dismantled and reconstructed.

Contemplation is not sitting in rapture before the Blessed Sacrament, or entering a shimmering comprehension of some attribute of God, or achieving

union, enlightenment, or a spiritual gift. All these and more consoling gifts may be part of our life with The Earthy One. But the essence of contemplation is being awake and aware of what is so, the given reality as we are experiencing it, which may not be pleasing or desirable in any way.

Two important aspects of all forms of prayer are honesty and surrender.

Tell the truth. We bring ourselves – our jumbled up, messed up, anxious selves. We tell the truth about how it is for us. We stop lying to ourselves and to God.

Surrender. We surrender ourselves whole heartedly and place our lives in God's hands. *Repeat these two steps daily for the rest of your life.*

Our lives are laid down in layers like sediment from different ages. Your deepest truth may take some time to get to. Start with the truth you have at this moment no matter how shallow or selfish it may seem to you. It is the only way to come to a deeper truth.

Surrender may also happen in layers. We shed old skins and masks, which free us for greater authenticity. Such inner freedom may only be discovered as we surrender the upper layers.

Author and teacher, Thomas Merton called these layers our false selves.

Telling the truth and surrender require our consent, our *Yes. Yes I will. Let it be.* And for many of us that Yes will need to be continually renewed, re-examined, and repeated over our lives. We change. Conditions change. And our God changes too. We let go of understandings and images of God, as we mature on the journey with Jesus. God always has more to show us and something new up the sleeve of All Being.

Is it worth it? Why bother? What if nothing happens? The outcome of such truth telling and surrender is the union of your being with The Being that we call God. In this communion we find inner peace, compassion, wisdom, and joy. Like putting on a swim suit for aquatic therapy and moving through the exercises, prayer is a discipline with many benefits and well worth the effort.

Persevere

The practice of contemplation both, requires perseverance, and teaches it. To sit in silent openness, to surrender one's whole being for twenty minutes is difficult for most of us. To pay attention to the moment, the passing images, thoughts, and feelings and simply be aware of what is there with compassion teaches persistence. You will wiggle

and sigh. You will plan and scheme.
You will worry about your finances.
You will wonder what time it is.

And you will stay – held there by the thin thread of your desire for God, for peace, for hope, for healing, or help. It is that desire, that Ineffable Mystery you can never quite fully grasp or name, that sat you down in the first place. It is the awareness of your own deep need for God that is God. So you sit still. Soon the disaster that is your life comes crashing in and right along with it, that Earthy Jesus guy.

When we least want to turn to God in this offering of our lives, is likely when it is most important to do so. We do not want to deal with what will come up in ourselves. This is especially true when we are grieving or running from some half-buried truth. It just hurts too much. Tears come. We want to run away. If we can stay a little longer, breathing, having compassion for ourselves, we may discover a tiny piece, sip of comfort. Small doses are best at times like these.

Under the turmoil, anger, betrayal, and shame of our existence waits the tender heart of Jesus and the Trinity twinkling within you. It will seem so little. How

will this momentary peace help with my huge problems? Trust. It is all you can bear for now. Trust. Stay a little longer. Take another sip. Let its warmth begin to spread within you. We think surrender is an act of weakness. We think we will only get our hopes shattered again. We think we already tried this.

In fact, the complete relinquishment of the human will is like sitting down to a good meal or sinking into a warm bath. It is like putting your feet up to watch a pink and orange sunrise. The decision to trust God at work in our lives in all circumstances is tremendously freeing. We lay down our weapons of defense, image management, and control of others. We release our shields of resentment, blame, and that ridiculous, ugly helmet of ambition. We say, golly, why didn't I do this a long time ago?



Be kind

The One who comes as one unknown speaks to me deeply in the mystery of autumn. Jesus often turned to the lake, the lamb, and the lily to anchor his message of the realm of heaven in the earth.

Autumn slays me with her lavish beauty and kindness. The kindness of mildewed covered zinnias opening vivid orange blooms on their stems anyway. The kindness of frost-bitten impatiens, curled and limp on one side of the pot, while red and pink blooms riot on the side protected by vines. The kindness of tomato plants hit with frost for several nights, yet heavy with fruit blanketed with thick leaves.

The kindness of blue sky, thrumming crickets, the trembling honeysuckle offering herself to the hawk moths. The kindness of doves leaning into each other on a bare branch.

In autumn, here in Kansas, little appears to quit early and go home before the last possible moment.

Holding back nothing autumn opens her purse and pours out all her coins in a profusion of shining largess. She shouts, "Here, help yourself to this golden wealth. Jump into my great drifts of prodigal beauty." Walking my

dog through the neighborhood, I weep, thrilled by this existence of ours.

Autumn teaches that letting go, ultimately, does not diminish me. Letting go enlarges me and allows something new to emerge. May we be kind as everything is slipping away. May we be kind as wrinkles appear, doors close, vitality recedes. May we be kind waiting in darkness and disillusionment. May we be kind when we can find only a tiny sliver of hope to hang onto. May we be kind to everyone and to ourselves, for the kindness we share is no less than the kindness of Christ.

My neighbor believes we are living in the end times of Revelation. I believe the end of something is always coming. The trumpet vine shivers in the wind and says all things are passing. Every moment is a new apocalypse with Jesus on its heels.

I say, "Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on."

I asked jaded Andy if it was okay for me to pray for him. "Yes! Please do," he said. I have faith that he will find his way and his hope. He was kind to me.

And he hasn't lost his sense of humor.

He told me several tasty ways to combine peanut butter and chocolate. My favorite is dipping warmed Oreo cookies in a bowl of peanut butter.

I think I will arrange a festive plate right now.

Loretta F. Ross



*Do not let your hearts be troubled.
Do not let them be afraid. John 14:27*

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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

*Do everything with a mind that lets go.
Do not expect any praise or reward.
If you let go a little, you will have a little peace.
If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace.
If you let go completely,
you will know complete peace and freedom
Your struggles with the world will have come to an end.*

Ajhan Chah



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