



Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

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Snowed In

*At dawn my sleepy lab whines softly.
I rise and let him out to sniff his
boundaries and empty his bladder. A few
minutes later he pounces on the door.
Eyes glinting light, he shakes off the
thick blanket of snow on his back. Then
lifting one front leg after the other, he
prances in the kitchen, pulls a dish towel
off the counter and waves it toward
me. The toaster, jar of peanut butter,
and humming refrigerator sparkle
like icicles in the sun. - January 2014,
Topeka, Ks*

I love winter, all of it – grey dishwater skies, wind rattling the siding on the house, cold, ice, blizzards, early sunsets, long nights, and dogs ploughing glad furrows in the snow. I love that winter is a force I cannot control, but only yield to with humility and respect. I love winter's summons to gather up the scattered pieces of myself, burrow down deeply, simmer in darkness, and distill strength for spring.

I love how winter asks me to wait and trust in what is unknown and unseen. Well no. That's not true. I got ahead of myself in my nostalgia over the dog and the sparkling snow. Winter intrudes on our plans and mobility. Will it snow tomorrow? How many snow days are we going to have? Is it safe to drive? Will the hungry polar bears in the arctic circle, who are leaving their melting home, come looking for us to eat? Will spring ever come?

Faith and trust seem to be perennially and perhaps, purposefully, illusive. Faith is not an insurance policy you keep in a lock box. Faith is often deepened along the wild, unkept edges of our comfort zones. Trust is the vulnerable, organic, living exchange of Love in the context of constantly changing conditions and demands.

Winter spirituality is a less-is-more Holiness of pared down praise. Winter speaks in riddles and paradox and says, "Behold the fullness of this emptiness!"

Here excess in prayer and lifestyle seem gauche in a world, stark naked, all bones and angles, thrusting its harsh, nonnegotiable truths in our faces.

In contrast to the world of humans with our getting and spending, the natural world never tries to impress or persuade me of its opinion. It has nothing to market. It simply is what it is – a blast of polar temperatures, a dried tomato vine, a fox sniffing the garbage can, a rabbit without regret or apology leaving tracks in the snow.

What is it about you and me that is unchanging, or nonnegotiable, I wonder. I am a hermit at heart and welcome snow days. I love people and I dearly love being with people. And love for them burns in me like a furnace and pours out molten in my prayers. Then, I hear the howl of the wind blowing the snow. And I am met with this other love – a love of absence, silence, solitude, simplicity, a winter of the soul, where I sit down to a great feast so satisfying that I need nothing else.

Awe and Wonder

Like the winter, which calls us to a halt, so also does the Almighty God of Majesty and Love. On a recent very cold and snowy Sunday morning at

church we heard the story of Isaiah's call. You know: the throne high and lifted up. The voluminous train of God envelopes the temple. The dazzling six-winged seraphim and cherubim flit about, while they cover their heads and feet in homage to the overpowering Holiness. The two celestial creatures call back and forth to each other, "Holy, holy holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory." The door posts and lintels of the temple quake and tremble at the voices who call, and the whole place is engulfed with smoke. Isaiah 6: 1-7

The service began with the trinitarian hymn, *Holy, Holy, Holy*, which concluded with swelling organ and choir sopranos singing the soaring descant. It was as if we had all been transported to Isaiah's visionary temple. As worshippers closed their hymnals and the liturgist stepped to the microphone, I wanted to ask, "Could we pause here for ten or twenty minutes to savor and breathe in this wonder? What if we turned aside from our carefully planned order of worship to ponder this great mystery and allow ourselves to be transformed by it?"

Such moments are invitations to stop being spectators and spiritual consumers and enter into the prophet's story and allow it to become our

story too. Over and over the Word in scripture and in our world brings us face to face with a Reality beyond our comprehension. The only response is to bow and kneel along with the prophet, who is gripped by his own littleness, his foolishness, and arrogance in contrast to the irresistible purity and beauty before him. He sees his own thoughts and recalls the words that have come out of his mouth. Stunned and filled with remorse he grasps his true condition. Then, immediately the Most High washes out the fellow's mouth with a burning coal, and gives him a job to do.



What is it that bows our heads, bends our knees and lowers us to the earth in postures of penitence, holy awe, and worship these days? The immensity of the universe, the stunning beauty of our planet, moonlight sparkling on the snow-covered lane, the light in a child's eyes - what are the moments, which beg for our attention and call

us out of our self-preoccupation to impress upon us our littleness? How often do we miss an encounter with Holiness, which breaks through our secular minds to reveal the Sacred Heart of all being radiating from every nook and cranny of our lives?

From a perusal of headlines and social media it appears that the great American pastime has become one of taking offense, being outraged over one thing or another, fighting over who deserves to be the most offended, and how others ought not to be offended, or should be offended immediately.

How do we learn to respect the dignity of others, even when they have wronged us? Our capacity to recognize and revere the Sacred Holiness among and within us influences how we treat others, the creation, and ourselves. This reality of a Loving, Living God is what overcomes our differences and binds us to each other with love and compassion.

As a child I watched my father kneel beside his bed every night. This amazed me. We were Presbyterians, who as far as I could see, never kneeled in church. Yet, my dad kneeled down before God at home. Dad gave me a picture of a man's humility that has

never left me. It was as though he said, “Yes I am a grownup. I am your father. I go out into the world to work and I can do many things for you. But I must lower myself before something greater in order to be who I am called to be.”

We have trespassed on the holy ground of our relationships with creation, each other, and with the Creator. The continuing popularity and public homage to children’s television saint, Mr. Rogers, testifies to our hunger for reverence in our relationships. Rogers, a quiet humble man, had an uncanny way of touching into and calling forth the holiness of those he taught and of those who worked with him. Instead of talking down to children, or raucously entertaining them, he treated children with dignity and respect. This Presbyterian pastor continues to represent to millions of people something we deeply need in our time.

Awe and reverence soften and smooth our coarse edges. Awe silences our constant need to talk, as it takes us beyond words to the wellspring of meaning itself. Awe quiets our anxious thoughts, corrects and re-centers us in a depth of awareness and perception far more encompassing, than ego-based tunnel vision. As Isaiah and many others, we are changed and

equipped for sacred work through these encounters. We respect the dignity of God and all God has made.

Dignity and the Brain’s Limbic System

Currently we are engaged in a vigorous debate and conversation about how to treat each other in this rapidly changing world. This debate is often unpleasant, impolite, painful, and disturbing. Yet I believe that much of the blaming, scolding, accusing, resentful, angry, bullying conversation is healthy. The buried and denied atrocities and horrors we have done to each other must be brought into the Light. The expression of grief and outrage is part of truth telling, and may not be polite, or need to be.

Initially, our responses to violations to our dignity and worth are largely beyond our immediate control. When we are attacked, demeaned, physically or emotionally harmed, and humiliated, our brains perceive a fundamental threat to the core of our being. We either retreat or lash out in order to survive the assault. At a very deep level humans recognize that their lives are precious and valuable. Our outrage, suffering, and humiliation testify to our innate awareness of our worth.

The research and experience of

Donna Hicks, who has worked for over 20 years in international conflict resolution, hones in on these strong painful feelings which make compromise and conflict resolutions so challenging.

What seems to be of most importance to humans is how we feel about who we are. We long to look good in the eyes of others, to feel good about ourselves, to be worthy of others' care and attention. We share a longing for dignity – the feeling of inherent value and worth. When we feel worthy, when our value is recognized, we are content. When a mutual sense of worth is recognized and honored in our relationships, we are connected. A mutual sense of worth also provides the safety necessary for both parties to extend themselves, making continued growth and development possible.

We have an inborn desire to be treated well, because we are psychologically programmed to believe our lives are dependent on it. We cannot help but react to being mistreated. Our emotional radar is set at a very low threshold for indignities. The second we sense that someone is judging us or treating us unfairly or as if we are inferior, the emotional warning signal flashes on. Research suggests that we

are just as programmed to sense a threat to our dignity – to our sense of worth – as we are to a physical injury.
Donna Hicks, PhD, *Dignity - Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict*, Yale University Press, p 6-7

We need to see and honor the deep wounds passed down through centuries of individual and corporate humiliation. We need to assess and respond to the epi-genetic transmission of trauma, those traumas that change a person's DNA with a marker that affects ensuing generations. We need to feel the deep suffering of each other. We need to confront our complicity. We must confess our sins against each other, make reparations and atone.

Unacknowledged feelings of shame (created by dignity violations) are at the heart of all human conflict.

Thomas J Scheff and Suzanne M. Retzinger, *Emotions and Violence: Shame and Rage in Destructive Conflicts*

When we slow down and turn aside from our agendas to allow ourselves to enter into and savor the experiences of wonder, awe and reverence in our lives, we become open to transformation. We see ourselves and others with new

understanding. Here, we join the long line of awe-filled ones – Isaiah, Mary, Joseph, Jesus, the women at the tomb and countless others, whose vision of the holiness of God, as it is manifest in individuals, empowers them to change the world. Here, from our view in the Temple of the Universe created by God, each soul we meet is priceless and shining.

The same burning reality of God, which scorched Isaiah’s mouth, ignites our hearts to the dearness of every soul in their struggle, suffering, and yearning to be made whole and holy. May our every moment be a benediction, every breath, a bow.

With deep love and gratitude for you,

Loretta F. Ross

The experience of reverence is crucial because it provides us with an internal check on our oh-so-human tendency to think of ourselves as superior beings, an attitude that can justify all kinds of harmful behaviors.

Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*.

SUGGESTIONS FOR A REVERENT LENT

1. *Keep Solitude and Silence.* Set aside time to simply be present with what is. Focus on your breath. Practice with a mantra or simply repeating the word, *reverence*, allowing the meaning of reverence to sink into your bones.
2. *Slow Down.* Practice the presence of God, or mindfulness. Choose a simple task you perform daily: emptying the dishwasher, preparing a meal, brushing your teeth, going for a walk. As you do the activity pay close attention to each movement, how your body moves, the physical sensations, emotions, thoughts. Gently notice the thoughts that focus on the past or future. Then return to the present moment.
3. *Contemplate your own and others’* experiences of dignity violations. Some of these may arise from childhood or even generations before you. Notice any body sensations, emotions. Have you attached thoughts or attitudes to these experiences? Have they become part of your identity or story? Sit down with people you trust and reverently share experiences of such violations. Listen with compassion. Pray for healing.
4. *Watch for how reverence shows up in* Jesus’ life and ministry. Throughout the course of the Lenten scriptures, look for the presence and absence of reverence and

dignity. Where is Jesus' dignity violated. How does he respond? Where do you see reverence in his relationship with God and others? Notice any shifts in yourself in how you relate to and think about others.

5. *Experiment with postures of reverence and awe: kneel, prostrate yourself, light a candle, use a prayer shawl. How does reverence feel in your body?*

6. *Take in the wonder before you, which is ever waiting to be seen – the soft beat of your own heart, the eagle's swoop over the river to catch a fish in its beak, the child humming softly to herself.*



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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 need has never been more urgent for people in leadership positions to be educated in all matters related to dignity – both the human vulnerability to be violated and the remarkable effect on people when they feel that they are seen, heard, understood, and acknowledged as worthy.

Donna Hicks

Donna Hicks book, *Dignity – Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict*, includes chapters on each of The Ten Essential Elements of Dignity and The Ten Temptations to Violate Dignity. You might add this book to your Lenten journey.



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