



Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

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Living Near to the Heart of God

There is a place of quiet rest, near to the heart of God.

A place where sin cannot molest, near to the heart of God.

Cleveland Boyd McAfee, 1901

There truly is a place of calm and repose in every heart. I believe you have been there, have been held in the stillness, and been quietly nurtured by a forgiving, healing Presence greater than yourself. You may not have spent hours in prayer or engaged in various forms of meditation or spiritual practices in order to be held by this grace.

More likely, you simply fell into it, that is, fell in Love. Grace appears to us, as we pause our doing, thinking, fixing, and planning in order to see and hear what is right before us. In the final words of the Gospel of Matthew are Jesus' great commission to his followers and this promise: "...and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

(Matthew 28: 20) That place of quiet rest is the Presence of God with us always.

Nearness to God's heart is accessible to all. There we enter into communion with the sustaining love that binds us together with all beings. Jesus called this place the Realm, or Kingdom of God – a radically different reality with its foundation in the eternal, creating Holy One and its corner stone, Jesus, the Christ. Here is the site of the ongoing healing, restoration, and renewing of the world.

The word salvation from the Hebrew *yeshu'a* or *yeshua* means to rescue, to set free from what binds or restricts, and thus results in deliverance. Eugene Peterson describes salvation "as comprehensive, intricate, patiently personal, embracingly social, and insistently political. Salvation is the work of God that restores the world and us to wholeness. And we are all in on

it. The Kingdom of God is Jesus' word for this." - Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way*.

Jesus also said this realm of the healing God is within us. When we live from the realm of God, our perception of reality dramatically shifts. How we behave and respond to the world around us changes. We discover that our sense of well-being and worth, inner peace, the end of our strife, struggle, and anxiety reside within us, and is available to us in each new moment. And further, we are not alone dwelling in this Realm, but are partners with a host of others sharing the abundance and goodness of God.

There is a place of comfort sweet, near to the heart of God.

A place where we our Savior meet, near to the heart of God.

In moments of stillness with God we are infused with the Spirit, healed, renewed, and molded into the image of God. Gifts are bestowed upon us: wisdom, kindness, creativity, energy, vision, devotion, faith. One does not need to make a pilgrimage to find it, or read lots of books, or learn some practice.

It asks only for our attention, a slight tip of the hat, a momentary pause in the

chatter of your mind, a sliver of hope that there might be something more than social media chatter and endless, breaking news. Turn toward that light, that beating heart of tender love, or just your desire and longing for it all to be true, and be still and know that God is love.

Yes, but!

Yet for many of us it is very difficult to do such a thing. A church pastor began each worship service by inviting the congregation to sing and sign along with him, the song, "Be Still and Know That I am God." It is a lovely way to begin worship – singing this verse from Psalm 46:10 – and bringing the words to life with the movements of our hands and arms.

When the song was complete, we got on with the order of worship. I am sure most people were fine with this. However, I wanted to say, "Wait, we sang about this. Now we need to do it. We need to be quiet together for a while." But the service was being videoed and broadcast, and there was much to cover in the spoken liturgy and much to be heard in the beautiful music. So, we were not still and did not follow the invitation silence offers: knowing and being known by God. I know many of us are uncomfortable with silence even in worship. It makes

us anxious. “How long is this going to go on. Will we get out on time? My mind is going in circles. This is so boring.” We fidget and cough. “Did the worship leader fall asleep? This does not make for a good video experience for our viewers on Youtube.”

My pastor is a fine fellow, a good preacher, and servant. He was as caught, as all of us are, in a way of being together, that is too often shaped by concerns for order, agenda, and time. Such concerns may override spontaneity and fail at fostering reverence and intimacy with the divine and with each other. Our liturgies may be beautiful, the choir superb, and our hearts moved by the sermon. Yet there is little trust in silence or time made for that pulsing surge and swell of Peace, shared in a community of hearts open to God.

Novelty, Shiny Objects, and Other Distractions

Any person questioning God or desiring some vision or revelation would not only be guilty of foolish behavior but also of offending God by not fixing their eyes entirely upon Christ and living with the desire of some other novelty. God could respond as

follows: I have already told you all things in My Word, My Son, and if I have no other word, what answer of revelation can I now make that would surpass this? ... in Christ I have spoken and revealed all and in Christ you shall discover even more than you ask for and desire.

John of the Cross,
The Ascent of Mt Carmel

My mind was jerking my nervous system all over the place. Like a puppy on a walk, I was pulling myself hither and yon by the scent of something interesting. Sniffing here and there on the internet, following up trends, social media posts, and my endless email had me overindulging my ego’s hunt to know and control, and assert its will into all facets of my life. “This new book, oh my! This album – gotta listen that. This movie, this podcast, oh a retreat, a workshop, catching up on the news. The football game? Of course! Then I need to do this, fix that ... run here.

The siren call for our attention pervades our lives, as we face real deadlines, real suffering, and real lives at stake, as well as our efforts to

find balance and peace. We are easily distracted from the Realm of God with us, and take off after “some new novelty,” as John of the Cross described. Somehow Jesus just doesn’t seem to be enough, and who has time to sit around and pray like a monk these days?

In my sniffing around I remembered, Evelyn Underhill, the British no-nonsense spiritual teacher and mystic, writing in another century, (1875-1941). This Anglican laywoman addressed the challenges to faith in the context of the first world war. In *The House of the Soul and Concerning the Inner Life* she gives practical teaching about living in Christ. She places the call to deepening love and faith firmly in our own hands and asks us to take responsibility for our inner lives. She sees through hypocrisy and self-deceit and insists on a simple, yet rigorous approach to do what such a life requires.

Underhill assigns various virtues to the floors of our soul’s home. Prudence belongs to the basement and rules over the human power of choice. It is choosing what helps and what hinders, and fosters self-control.

On the first floor, human impulse and desire submit to the rule of Temperance, and our self-protecting mechanisms – sloth and softness - nervous to the bracing touch of Fortitude.

Temperance is the virtue of moderation, proportion, and reverence for conditions and is assigned to furnishing our home. Temperance requires a spirit of renunciation, checking the love of what is new, odd or startling, which so easily kills the taste for simple things and the tendency to assimilate odds and ends which swamp our few real treasures in a dusty crowd of devotional knickknacks. Temperance then is the teacher of humility and asks us to acknowledge the sacred character of the ordinary which was good enough for God to love and enter into in Jesus.

Evelyn Underhill

Underhill’s robust approach to the spiritual life may likely fall on deaf ears in the current religious marketplace. The bustling commodification of spirituality is producing many resources for spiritual and religious seekers. Like Arlo Guthrie’s Alice’s Restaurant, you

can get most anything that you want at the internet spiritual and religious smorgasbord. The growth of Christian and other spiritualities beyond the borders of the church is meeting the needs of some of those, who have left religion for various reasons, as well as those who remain.

Over the past 40 years I have seen phenomenal growth in opportunities for spiritual formation. Of the students that keep coming, the director said, “They are like sponges.” A spiritual director friend of mine tells me of the small group from church and community that meets in her home, “They are so hungry to go deeper.”

There are some cautions to note in the plethora of spiritual opportunities today. One is the temptation of an individualized focus on personal salvation and an egocentric “my spiritual journey.” Some call this *spiritual materialism*. Back in the 1970’s Buddhist teacher, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche used those words to describe grasping after material accomplishment. There is a tendency in some stages of spiritual growth to get attached to “spiritual glamour,” things, relationships, practices, one’s guru or teacher, and accomplishments. This is what Evelyn Underhill called “the dusty crowd of devotional

knickknacks.” Our hearts and souls are hungry for substance, for transcendence and hope, something no commodity or thing can offer in any lasting way. Some spiritual practices may foster our attachment to our ego, which is always wanting to distinguish itself, to compare itself, and find its worth and value in power, prestige and control.

Yet, as much as we may resist silence and discipline, and as many barriers that our egos, procedures, and institutions may present, I believe we are starving for both silence and the structures to support silence. We are starving for shared, sustained communion with Christ alongside others. We are missing out on the deeper reconstruction of our minds in order to align with Christ’s mind. And we need communal support for those times when we are called to die with Christ.

We are missing out on the softening and change of hearts in a community, who keeps silence together, as well as the sense of reverence and tender regard that emerges from communal silence. We design tag lines, mission statements, and slogans to describe ourselves, but do not ask how such missions will require our hearts to change, and how we shall hold each

other accountable to that change.

Our consumer economy constantly pommels us into believing that what we possess or know is not enough. There is always some new novelty. The danger occurs when we substitute the object or practice from the One it points to.

William H. Willimon, United Methodist Bishop and author, in an article on how he had changed his mind, wrote about his growing unease with an approach to Christianity which emphasizes practices. He said he regretted writing books describing Christianity as a set of countercultural practices. His thinking has been a source of much subsequent emphasis on Christian practices – what we *do*. Willimon's concern was that "attention to practices deflects our attention from the living God. With a focus on Christian practices, Christianity quietly morphs into a species of unbelief; we take revelation into our own hands."

Walter Wangerin, on the other hand, wrote, "We chirp theories because we can't stand the silence." From my point of view God is apt to use anything to get our attention - the neighbor's barking dog, the hawk in the tree, our own pain, the check out clerk who gives you a good day. God loves. Love draws us through creation to the Lover..

I do believe that some of the issues that swamp our churches might be resolved by simply practicing silent communion with Jesus together. As we become still and sit with our discomfort, we begin to notice beyond the cacophony of our words, and our anxious fidgeting the presence of Life itself, the spaciousness and beauty of God beyond form, concept, dogma, creed, and our grasping need to possess. Here we are transformed, healed, set free to discover ourselves in union with God in the joyful, courageous, sacrificial work of our time. Here, I, me, mine becomes we, us, ours. I become aware of my assumptions, projections, prejudice, bias, fear, and sin. We see and release our ego's grasping desire to control. We learn how to die to ourselves. We decrease that Christ may increase.

There is a place of full release, near to the heart of God.

A place where all is joy and peace, near to the heart of God.

O Jesus, blest redeemer, sent from the heart of God,

Hold us who wait before Thee, near to the heart of God.

Deep peace to you,

Loretta F. Ross

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Loretta

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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 Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence it must be heard by the soul.

Wisdom enters through love, silence, and mortification. It is great wisdom to know how to be silent and to look at neither the remarks, nor the deeds, nor the lives of others.

— *John of the Cross*



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

470 N. First Ave. #108, Iowa City, IA 52245 785-230-0365

www.fromholyground.org info@fromholyground.org

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