



Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

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Like a Trap

Dusk settles over the land and quiets the ravines. Leaves soften in the rain, surrender to their decomposition, and like a sigh, release the fragrance of their compounds – mold, decay, moist earth.

“What is true? What is real?” I ask the deer moving their soft lips over the ground, turning up leaves, lifting their heads, ears alert, eyes – dark oval pools of knowing. My mind is full of clanging slogans, trite jingles and the drone of talking points. Can I tell the difference between my own native perceptions and those fashioned in me by robots, hackers, marketers, opinion makers and the tools of the vast toxic armory of consumption?

The Lord said, “Move.” And for a year I did. I moved, shimmied, shoved, hauled, lifted, sorted, packed, unpacked and said goodbye until my heart ached.

Now I cannot sit still enough.

I am met here in this city of deep ravines and its own herd of deer by a vast under current of silence, like a wide river continually washing over me. These ravines give way to creeks which make their way to rivers. “Patterned like the branching veins in a leaf, this dendritic network has drained the postglacial wetlands, erased the ice-contact landforms, and through time has reshaped these old glacial plains into the deeply creased landscapes so familiar in this region today.” So reports the Iowa Geological Survey in its description of the Southern Drift Plain, where Iowa City is located.

This part of Iowa exists on Devonian bedrock. The Devonian period began 416 million years ago, at a time when the earth was changing its appearance in major ways. A continent was moving north away from the south pole. Other landforms were coming together in new configurations. The Devonian, part of the Paleozoic era, is known as the Age of Fishes, as it spawned a remarkable

variety of fish. One species that developed measured 33 feet long.

Today the Iowa river flows over the Devonian bedrock southeast from north central Iowa then spreads out like a bulbous serpent, where it is impounded by the Coralville Dam in the Coralville Reservoir. It is released to snake through the town, kept in check by a sprawling university and busy downtown. Then it escapes the city to join the great Mississippi in the southeast corner of the state.

How did I come to sit on the edge of this ravine in the Southern Drift Plain, where strange fish once swam?

I am a stone in the riverbed of silence as it moves around me, smoothing and soothing, soaking into my skin. I leave behind my lists, language, and all the names for Mystery. I discover myself being prayed for purposes beyond my knowing.

Warning

It begins with a fault, a tiny crack spreading along a wall, slowly widening. A beam creaks, sinks, settles. The mouse scurries in and begins to gnaw along the floorboard.

Or, let us say, it begins with an unease,

a barely detected sickness, gathering its brutal strength, while our backs are turned.

- a missed call, a bad aim, a slight transgression, a hesitation too long
- the smoldering coals break through the brush in flames
- the tower collapses

The Advent season starts with apocalypse. Of course. It requires a great rending of the heavens, the fevered prophet's visions, the thunderous concussion of crumbling ramparts. A madman emerges from the wilderness. He cries out for repentance and pierces our denial with his bony finger pointing out our sins. He arouses us from our sleep with a harsh and sobering, inconvenient truth.

We may fold our arms and say, we don't believe the madman. We may scramble to blame and point fingers.

Here are the facts. Things end. Monuments crumble and fall. Life as we know it is impermanent. Actions have consequences. Justice will be done. Evil exists. We are held accountable. We matter. What we do matters.

Some may squirm and lie, hide. Others

stockpile food, water, guns. Disaster and chaos signal that the time has come to get off our high horses and fast steeds, to climb down from our tall buildings and walk in the rubble among the rabble, to gather up what we can carry, and join the lines of refugees.

I opened the door on apocalypse. I let it in and then kept draping throws and bright afghans on it. It brought news of my demise, my slow decomposition. I was weighed down with distraction and worry. It was like a trap.

Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap.

Luke 21: 34

When I was a child, my mother used an expression with her children, when we were about to go too far in our fighting. My brother and I kicking and pinching each other in the back seat of the car – someone’s whining going on too long – the toys not picked up, the dishes still not done. Irma, would say, “There’s a limit!” This was a clear warning, a change in the tone of our warm, forgiving, laughing mom. The words were spoken with a hard edged, no nonsense gravity that raised the hair up on our necks.

“There’s a limit.” she’d say. “There’s a limit.” And we were right up against the edge of that limit with our fingers and toes extending over the brink. It was clear that whatever we were doing must stop right then and there. Period.

She caught us up just as we were about to fall into a trap of ignorance, defiance, shame, loss, or some other foolishness we would come to regret.

The day of our Lord’s coming into our world and into our lives brings a confrontation with the consequences of our choices and accountability. Jesus, along with other Biblical prophets, wants to be sure that we are prepared and ready.

What is that trap we unwittingly fall into? Set in plain sight in the clutter of our daily lives, the trap suddenly snaps shut on us. Our movement is hindered. We, restrained and injured, are totally incapacitated for any effectual action.

Jesus is very clear of the nature of the trap: *hearts weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life*. We become distracted. We stop paying attention to the presence of God. We become entangled and enmeshed in our own disordered lives. We are self-preoccupied, fretful and afraid. We

live out of our fear, anger, or anxiety, rather from faith. Our attachment to the things of this world – power and prestige, possessions, relationships – tightens its grip, choking the air of the Spirit out of us.

So much comes down to what we give the gift of our attention to. What will I allow into my mind and entertain and hold there? What will I allow into my heart and what will I give my heart to? What is the poisoned bait we expose ourselves to? What tempts us to take the bait?

Radical Acceptance

We all know moving is stressful. It requires hard work, attention to detail, and managing multiple changes. It also offers a great opportunity to embrace one's weakness, to entertain weariness, welcome my ignorance

and incompetence, and pull up a chair to humiliation, fragility, and being overwhelmed. I kept bumping into my resistance to moving and all that went into moving – the normal and abnormal missteps, miscalculations, and unforeseen snags and hassles.

I watched my resistance rise and fall, like a porcupine's bristly hackles. I gave it a name: the *pricklies*. Then I decided to take on the practice of Welcoming Prayer. You may have heard of it. This way of responding to our inner world developed as part of the centering prayer movement initiated by Fr. Thomas Keating. Thomas Keating died recently, leaving behind a tremendous legacy of contemplative practice throughout the world. This form of prayer was developed by co-founder and faculty member of Contemplative Outreach, Mary Mrozowski. She developed what



is now called the Welcoming Prayer spiritual practice. This practice helps those troubled with many anxious thoughts and feelings in their silence. Rather than pushing the troubling thoughts and emotions away, the welcoming prayer gently includes them.

The Welcoming Prayer is a form of radical acceptance of what is so, the present moment with whatever it brings. It is a way of confronting our resistance not by judgment, shame, irritation, blame, or force of any kind. Resistance persists with opposition. We may create, sustain, and perpetuate the realities we resist. So instead of being weighed down with the pricklies, we welcome them.

When I use the word *resistance* here, I am speaking of our inner lives, our internal response to some feeling, attitude, thought, event, experience. Resistance is a normal and necessary part of our experience. We often learn more from what we find ourselves resisting, than what pleases us. Resistance is a signal to pay attention. Something interesting is going on here. What does this have to tell me?

There are certainly external events, situations, events, even people, we ought to resist. We may be required

by our faith to resist. Here we look to Jesus for the way of nonviolent resistance. Once we learn ways to recognize, respond to, explore, and welcome our own resistance, we may find ourselves much more at ease with other people's resistance. We may find ourselves even curious and comfortable approaching their resistance without defensiveness or the need to confront and talk them out of it.

Welcome, Welcome, Welcome

I welcome everything that comes to me today

Because I know it is for my healing.

I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions, persons, situations, and conditions.

I let go of my desire for power and control.

I let go of my desire for affection, esteem, approval, and pleasure.

I let go of my desire for survival and security.

I let go of my desire to change any situation, condition, or myself.

I open to love and presence of God and God's action within me. Amen

The Welcoming Prayer is a method of consenting to God's presence and action in our physical and emotional reactions to events and situations in daily life. It invites self-emptying and the faith of Mary, whose yes to what seemed to her impossible allowed for redemptive love to flow into the world.

This is a bold, fierce prayer. You may find yourself cringing as you read it. It is also a potent statement of faith in a sovereign, all powerful God, who is present and active in the life of this world and your individual unique life. Our desires for power and control, affection and esteem, security and safety prevent the flow of the gifts of the spirit into our lives. We grasp and clutch our lives rather than releasing and giving them away.

This prayer is also an act of hospitality toward one's inner self. Everyone gets a seat at the table, including the whiny pricklies, kicking their heels on the chair, spilling the milk and chewing with their mouths open. We welcome the deep suffering and sorrow of our time. We receive it, hold it, breathe to it, and allow it to move through our consciousness to God. Our lamentation, our inner greedy tax collector, leper, egoist, along with our joy and delight sit down at Christ's expansive table, where everything belongs.

We learn to simply, gratefully receive our life in all its wonder, dismay, challenge, and beauty. We are enlarged and set free from narrow, rigid conceptions, the tension and stress of trying to control events and people. We are released from envy, resentment, and jealousy, when we stop seeking our needs for affection, esteem, and approval from the world around us and discover our infinite worth in Christ's unending, present love.

We stop reacting with fear at every headline and news story of disaster. We settle into a deeper sense of our lives held in God, our ever-present help and refuge. We surrender to processes beyond our control like the leaves in the ravine, like the ancient life that once animated the ground you stand on millions of years ago. We, like that 33 foot Devonian fish and the Devonian forest of the first trees, some reaching 100 feet tall, are part of a long stream of life reaching out for more life, each creature that proceeded us offering its particular gifts and wonder.

The transformative work this prayer fosters is the work Paul describes in his letter to the Galatians. *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified self with its passions and desires.*

Galatians 5:16-25

The universe is saturated and dripping with the power of Holy Love, oozing like sap from every crack and cranny of being. I trust the tenacity and persistence of life, pushing through crevices, pouring over dams, carving out canyons, and pulsing in our veins, drawing us to ever fuller expression of being. The Word – the creating energy of being – inhabits all that is, unfurling itself in kaleidoscopic formations and scintillating complexity. It flows through is like a river, like a blessing.

Oh, how can we not offer ourselves to such a river of life!

How can we not find our joy in this shining, ecstasy of being?

Loretta F. Ross

For more information on the Welcoming Prayer see the Contemplative Outreach Website.
www.contemplativeoutreach.org

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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 vision of a future beyond the contemporary horizon, therefore, calls the people of God to look beyond the present moment, with its violence, disintegration, and failed leadership, to the restorative end toward which the Lord is moving, and so to orient faith and decision making within the context of God's ultimate power and purposes, rather than clamoring demands of a paralyzed present. . . . The parable of the fig tree and Jesus' admonition to pay attention to the signs of his coming remind readers that God is not absent or inactive in the interim but, to the contrary, powerfully at work in every present moment to bring about the redemptive end foreseen by the prophets.

L. Daniel Hawk, Connections – A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship



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