



Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

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Try a Little Tenderness

You are reading the 108th issue of *Holy Ground*. When I wrote the first issue, I had no idea I might be at this for 27 years. Reaching out to readers with reflections on the spiritual life was a way to stay in touch with others, who were also seeking depth in their faith. Like the quarterly reports I send to the IRS, this publication became a way to be accountable for my practice of intentional solitude and prayer. *Holy Ground* is a connecting link of support and gratitude with those who make this ministry possible with their gifts and prayers.

I have a confession. Writing is hard for me. It is a severe spiritual practice, which often takes me out to the edge of myself. I walk a gangplank, stand on the lip of a cliff, and lean over into a chasm of emptiness time after time. I am like a spider dangling from a silk string of my own making. I swing out into space, lower myself, searching for a twig or outcrop. I grab on and spin a story to

catch grace. Why do I do this? Who does this? I wonder.

Another writer who needed to stay in touch was Paul who wrote to the church at Corinth, “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” To be a steward of the mysteries of God sounds stately and majestic to me. Surely such a noble task merits a robe with an ermine collar and a gold scepter to keep the mysteries in proper order. Yet grandeur was not an attribute of Jesus or any of his motley, lowlife followers, including sputtering Paul, never quite the same in his head after that episode on the road to Damascus. Almost 28 years later I am still a dull steward scrabbling after scraps and leftovers. I arrive with my pockets turned inside out with a few crumbs in my palm. Here take this morsel. Will it soothe your heart? Will it ease your suffering? Will it roll away the stone, be a rope within your reach, a raft, a shelter?

Here is the truth. I know little, except this desire for God that will not let me go. I can only hope my weakness serves Christ and serves the task of stripping me of pretense and glib spiritual junk food. I tell you this because I believe the best gift we have to offer each other is not our strength, but our weakness, which is to say, our tenderness.

Tenderness was trending recently on social media. Pope Francis in his unprecedented TED talk called for a revolution in tenderness. TED stands for technology, entertainment, and design. TED talks are short talks on a wide range of topics from science to business to global issues. Francis, addressing a TED conference, described tenderness as “the love that comes close and becomes real.”

It is a movement that starts from our heart and reaches the eyes, the ears and the hands. Tenderness means to use our eyes to see the other, our ears to hear the other, to listen to the children, the poor, those who are afraid of the future. To listen also to the silent cry of our common home, of our sick and polluted earth. Tenderness means to use our hands and our heart to

comfort the other, to take care of those in need.

Pope Francis reminds us that the experience of tenderness inspires action, a physical response of caring, soothing, smoothing love. The physical response occurs in us, as well as in the objects of our tenderness. Our hearts and jaws soften as tenderness gentles us. The child sighs, relaxes and falls asleep in his mother’s arms. Tenderness begets tenderness.

The Bible also understands tenderness as a physical response. Tenderness is grounded in the physicality of human beings. The Hebrew word for compassion, love, and tender mercy comes from the noun *rekhem*, “womb.” Tender mercy is related to the capacity to create a baby, nurture life, give birth and care for children. Tenderness inspires us to care and respond to what is helpless. Another Hebrew word for tender mercy and love is *Hesed*. *Hesed* refers to covenantal love. This love is steadfast, true, loyal. “Your faithful love is priceless, God! Humanity finds refuge in the shadow of your wings.” Psalm 36:7. *Hesed* is fiercely protective love of an eagle or hen sheltering chicks.

Tenderness is the language of the young children, of those who need the other. A child's love for mom and dad grows through their touch, their gaze, their voice, their tenderness. I like when I hear parents talk to their babies, adapting to the little child, sharing the same level of communication. This is tenderness: being on the same level as the other. God himself descended into Jesus to be on our level. This is the same path the Good Samaritan took. This is the path that Jesus himself took. He lowered himself, he lived his entire human existence practicing the real, concrete language of love.

- Pope Francis

The root meaning of the Greek word for tenderness is also grounded in our bodies. Splagchnon means the inward parts – heart, liver, lungs, guts. Both Hebrew and Greek understand deep feelings of compassion and tenderness as emerging from our tender insides. We may discover tenderness first in the recognition of our own wounds. “Ouch!” “Oh my back hurts!” As a kid in the summer I loved to go barefoot and was always stubbing my toes on sidewalk cracks, steps, chair legs, and toys left on the floor. I wore bright red Mercurchrome painted on my big toes all summer long. Our wounds

and losses can teach us compassion for ourselves and others. Our life experience tenderizes us, breaking down hard hearts, stubborn attitudes, unyielding egotism, and leathery pride.

*By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break
upon us, to give light to those who sit
in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

Luke 1: 78-79

These words of the old priest, Zechariah, soften and soothe me with the kindness and gentleness of God. The father of John the Baptist lost his ability to speak, when he doubted the angel Gabriel. Gabriel appeared to him in the temple to tell him his barren wife, Elizabeth, would bear a son, whom he should name John. “Know this: What I told you will come true at the proper time. But because you didn’t believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen.” So Zechariah did not speak until eight days after his son’s birth, when he was asked to name him. Zechariah, tenderized himself though the loss of speech, breaks forth in a prophecy about the role his son will play in the story of saving, tender Love.

I do not think we are sufficiently aware

of our own fragility, the tenderness of our souls, and the gift in the vulnerability of being human. Buddhist teacher, Rebecca Bradford, says, “We all have hearts like feral cats – hidden, isolated, easily spooked, hunting in the dark for a meal.”

In our society - so quick to find fault, blame and shame - tenderness may be viewed with suspicion and contempt. Yet tenderness continues to show its face all around us – the image of Pope Francis washing the feet of a Muslim woman, news stories of compassionate acts in times of disaster and community loss. We cannot get enough of videos of sweet puppies, hedgehogs, bunnies, and kittens, the fawn who is raised by the Labrador retriever, laughing babies, or unusual animal friendships like the giraffe and the ostrich.

Hearts so fragile and shy

*I wanted to be a hermit and only
hear hymns of the earth,
and the laughter of the sky,
and the sweet gossip of the
creatures on my limbs, the forests.*

*I wanted to be a hermit and not see
another face
look upon mine and tell me I was
not all the beauty in this world.*

For many faces do that – cage us.

*The wings we have are so fragile
they can break
from just one word, or a glance
devoid of love.*

*I wanted to live in that cloister of
light's silence
because, is it not true, the heart is
so fragile and shy.*

– St. Catherine of Siena
(1347-1380)

The more I listen to people, the more I understand the truth of St. Catherine's words. I see the shy, tender quality of their hearts. I glimpse their souls, glistening like a white rose after a rain in the morning sun. Many of us do not see this reality within ourselves. We do not believe the given goodness of our being, which is loved and cherished by God. We thrash our arms, flailing our way through our lives, anxious and fretful. Then a touch of tender mercy halts, breaks us open, and mercy flows from our hearts.

I have begun leaving food out on my porch for the feral hearts. Trust grows in relationships in a process of respecting the distance an individual needs to feel safe, while still



offering bits of the food the person is hungering for. I believe it was my mentor at The Shalem Institute, Gerald May, who said, “We just can’t be too gentle with people.”

Can you recall an event, person, an image or music that touched your shy tender heart? Have you been ravished by tenderness? Such moments may totally discombobulate us, especially if we have been avoiding or hiding this part of ourselves. You may feel “undone,” out of control, weak, feeble – all those feelings you work so hard to overcome in a culture which prizes confidence and strength.

A wise teacher recently said to me, “What changes people most are emotions. That is why music, poetry and art are so important in our time.” We are at a stalemate in our society where facts are dismissed in favor of

personal opinion. Solutions dependent on human expertise and technology fail to address and solve our underlying issues of trust and resentment toward authority. One may argue, debate, prove, refute, and haul out trainloads of facts and data and we still remain like stags in mortal combat, horns locked turning and turning in circles. Could we calm ourselves long enough to hold still for the hand of the Tender Mercy from On High to reach down and untangle our knotted antlers?

Tenderness is not an abstract concept, an ideology, policy, dogma, or doctrine. Tenderness is a specific body initiated response that inspires actions of love and kindness. The English word, tenderness, comes from the Latin, *tendere* to stretch, extend, reach, hold forth. Tenderness stretches us out beyond ourselves to share something of ourselves with another. This intimate kindness of tenderness is given to us and shared by God and it is universal.

I close with a secular song made famous by Elvis Presley. Yes, Elvis. I remember when this song came out. Some of you probably do too.

Read it here as a Psalm. Hear it as an exchange between you and your God, as between you and all of creation, as between you and yourself.

*Love me tender, love me sweet, never let
me go,
You have made my life complete and I
love you so.*

*Love me tender, love me sweet, all my
dreams fulfilled,
For my darling, I love you and I always
will.*

*Love me tender, love me long, take me
to your heart.*

*For it's there that I belong and we'll
never part.*

*Love me tender, love me sweet, all my
dreams fulfilled,*

*For my darling, I love you and I always
will.*

Tenderly yours,

Loretta F. Ross

PAUSE FOR PEACE



A
WEEKLY
PRAYER AND
MEDITATION
GROUP

*A little music, a few prayers,
mostly silence.
It will do you good.*

Upcoming Sessions: June 2, 16, 23, 3

9:00 – 10:00 at

The Sanctuary Office

Free

Watch the Sanctuary Facebook page for notices of future
gathering dates, or call or email us.

FOR FURTHER CONTEMPLATION

Reflect

1. When or how does the tender mercy of God reveal itself in your life?
2. Do you see how a loss, injury, or illness has “tenderized” you?
3. Are you aware of ways you resist or condemn your vulnerability?

Act

Join Pope Francis’ Revolution of Tenderness. For example, set a goal for 3 intentional acts of tenderness each day, where you consciously give or receive tenderness. Do this for a week and then see if you notice any changes in your relationships or in yourself. Driving or shopping at the grocery store are good places to practice this virtue. How do you look after your shy, feral heart?



June 6, 2017, 8:00am – 6:00pm

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Look for our table with the
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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

Yes, tenderness is the path of choice for the strongest, most courageous men and women. Tenderness is not weakness; it is fortitude. It is the path of solidarity, the path of humility. Please, allow me to say it loud and clear: the more powerful you are, the more your actions will have an impact on people, the more responsible you are to act humbly. If you don't, your power will ruin you, and you will ruin the other. There is a saying in Argentina: "Power is like drinking gin on an empty stomach." You feel dizzy, you get drunk, you lose your balance, and you will end up hurting yourself and those around you, if you don't connect your power with humility and tenderness. Through humility and concrete love, on the other hand, power – the highest, the strongest one – becomes a service, a force for good.

Pope Francis



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