



# Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

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## **Partners in Creation: Creativity and Joy**

"Maybe I ought to change my route. I go this way every time I go for a walk," I thought to myself. I stopped on the path to look for an opening in a new direction. Out of the quiet woods came a rustle in the undergrowth to my right. Something was thrashing around in the leaves, whimpering and grunting. I stepped off the path and into the woods toward the sound. "Hey there, friend, do you need any help?" I asked.

I knelt down on my knees and reached to push apart some sticks and leaves in the undergrowth. There among the vibrant green fists of fern shoots, lying on his back, I saw a small creature in a green jacket and peaked red cap. He was huffing and puffing. Sweat and tears stained his round face. One of his legs was wedged into a small space between two large rocks. He flinched, when he saw me and began to struggle and wiggle more, trying desperately to get

free. "May I help you?" asked.

"Aye, Miss, if only ye would," he said. "All me fellows is gone on ahead, a-leaving me here to perish!"

"Let me see what I can do," I said, as I carefully edged one of the rocks away from his leg. He sat up slowly and rubbed his sore thigh. Taking my hand with his scraped and dirty hand, he hefted himself to his feet. His eyes were gleaming, as he whistled and said, "Ah thank ye, lassie." Then he straightened his jacket and belt buckle, and bowing stiffly, introduced himself. "I'm Forest Spryte, Esquire, as you may see," as though such fantastical encounters were commonplace. "Now that me fellows are gone, may I walk a ways with you? I would like to pay ye a favor for listening and turning aside to find me in my peril. And I'd take a bite to eat, if you have a morsel or two in your bag."

Truthfully, this little fellow first showed

up at a writer's workshop, which I attended earlier this year. The class was led by Debra Landwehr Engle and titled, *Be the Light You Are: Writing Yourself into Being*. One of the exercises she gave us was to imagine our creativity, or our muse as a person. What would that person be like? How would they dress, talk, and look? What kind of a roommate would they make?

I went off to sit in a cozy corner at the Iowa Writer's House and wrote myself into an encounter with the fellow above. He really wasn't a totally new acquaintance. I admit that some years ago, someone told me that I reminded her of a Forest Spryte. Her appraisal seemed to fit somehow. But I had lost touch with the fellow over the years. He was only a dim memory.

In times of crisis, change, or loss, one of the first things we may lose touch with is our joy, whimsey, silliness, and childlike play. In the year after my dog, Elijah, died I was feeling heavy and burdened with the sorrows of our day. A few days before this workshop, I described myself as "being stuck between a rock and a hard place." I had not realized how much my pup and his goofy nobility brought out my own sense of play and creativity.

It is no wonder that my teacher's invitation conjured up this encounter. Debra invited us to nurture our relationship with our muse, to explore what this creative part of ourselves needs in order to flourish. She suggested we find something concrete to represent the creative figure we described and put it in a place where we will see it. I chose two rocks and placed them apart on my fireplace mantle. In the space between I put a beeswax votive candle. She also suggested making a collage of our creativity or an interest board on Pinterest to further flesh out and develop the character of creativity in our lives.

Forest Spryte, Esq. came home with me. He spent a few days lounging on my couch as his leg healed and the swelling went down. In the evenings he sang songs from his childhood in a lilting tenor voice. I did not recognize the language. And he ate cookies. He prefers the crispy burnt sugar delight, Bordeaux, made by Pepperidge Farms. He goes to work every day in the ravines in my neighborhood. He won't tell me what he does. "It is the secret work of the forest spryte. There is no need for you to know, miss." He always returns promptly at supper time.

One day I asked him, if he was related to Chokma. You may recall this figure of wisdom as a companion to God in the creation, delighting and playing like a child at the Creator's side. Chokma is a feminine noun, which in Greek is translated as Sophia. Proverbs depicts Wisdom, as a girl alongside God, co-creating with God like an artist or master craftsman.

"Are you one of Wisdom's children?" I asked.

Forest smiled and winked, "Ye are correct." Munching his Bordeaux, and brushing the crumbs off the couch, he went on, "Indeed, I am one of Wisdom's sons. I am most grateful to have such a merry, bonny woman for my mother. As we are fashioned in the image of the Great One, so are we called to create as well."

He leaned in and gazed into my eyes. "You see, Hickory, you lost track of me, because of the cares of the world, the distractions, fear upon fear, and constantly comparing yourself, and checking yourself in the mirror. Your vanity, you see, miss. Further, the loss of your pup, in whom I delighted in large measure, broke your heart, you know."

"You knew about my dog, Elijah? Who is Hickory?"



Shaking his head, he reached for another cookie, "You have much to learn before you will be young enough for this whimsical work of creation.

Elijah and I go way back. I knew him before you did. Mama Wisdom has many children. Hickory is your name, sweetcakes. Do we have any more cookies?"

#### CHOKMA'S SONG

*The Holy One created me at the beginning of his way,  
before his deeds long in the past.  
I was formed in ancient times,  
at the beginning, before the earth was.  
When there were no watery depths, I was brought forth,  
when there were no springs flowing with water.  
Before the mountains were settled,  
before the hills, I was brought forth;  
before God made the earth and the fields or the first of the dry land.*

*I was there when he established the heavens,  
when he marked out the horizon on the deep sea, when he thickened the clouds above,  
when he secured the fountains of the deep,  
when he set a limit for the sea,*

*so the water couldn't go beyond his command,  
when he marked out the earth's foundations.  
I was beside him as a master of crafts.*

*I was having fun, smiling before him all the  
time, frolicking with his inhabited earth  
and delighting in the human race.*

Proverbs 8:22-31 CEB

## **What happened to joy?**

“Our society has become a conspiracy against joy,” says New York Times columnist and author, David Brooks. Perhaps you have noticed this as well. We as individuals, communities and nations find ourselves at impasse, stuck between a rock and hard place. Political stand-offs, where neither side will budge are the norm. Resorting to the use of force, condemnation, power, money, or deceit is seen as the only method for ending such impasses.

What I see here is a scarcity of creativity and imagination in the souls of some of our brothers and sisters. We behave as if our only options to impasse are passive resignation and despair, or to bludgeon our enemy with abuse or worse. When we can find no logical way out of our stalemates, we resort to attack, rage, and increasing anxiety and fear. The painful experience of impasse causes us to contract, hunch over ourselves focusing on our suffering, and form tribes with others of like minds.

We have not taught ourselves other ways to respond to the painful feelings of resentment and anger. In the spiritual life the experience of impasse is a wake-up call, announcing emerging new life. How does inspiration rise out of intractable polarization in our personal and corporate life together? How does healing enter our lives at the point of despair or rage? How do we expand and grow beyond our present limitations?

When we come to a dead end, when inspiration flounders, and creativity dies, try this: Stop. Sit down. Calm down. And wait. “Wait! What??? But the situation is dire. This can’t wait. Time is short. We are in great peril!”

Sit down anyway in the middle of the fear and uncertainty. Allow your mind to shift, to rest, to still itself. Accept that it may take a while. Accept it all - whatever is so. By dying to ourselves and our desires, we create the inner space in our unconscious for the Holy Spirit to offer new perspectives, insights, visions, and hope.

Such a period of turning inward in contemplation requires raw honesty, real suffering, and perseverance in faith. What has been hidden or denied must be seen and allowed to enter our awareness, no matter how painful. This

essential spiritual work is a crucible of chaos out of which only God can bring the new vision and consciousness.

As we sit in acceptance, our prayer slowly deepens into contemplation. We go beyond words and technique to the fecund matrix from which all words and all that exists emerge. We surrender to One larger than ourselves in faith and trust. Here is where we meet Christ in ever-renewing freshness in the dawn of each new moment. Here is where the Presence of God is present. We will not find the Shephard in the past or future, nor in our obsessing, but, rather, here, now, running toward us with outstretched arms, if we will only look and see.

*Someone asked me, "Aren't you worried about the state of the world?" I allowed myself to breathe and then I said, "What is most important is not to allow your anxiety about what happens in the world to fill your heart. If your heart is filled with anxiety, then you will get sick, and you will not be able to help."*

Thich Nhat Hanh

Creativity is the unexpected, unplanned, raw eruption of a previously unknown, unnamed factor that

redefines and rearranges previous conceptions of what is so. Creativity disrupts the status quo, inverts, subverts, and dismantles our categories of reality. Creativity brings forth, produces, begets, arises and grows.

"The growth of the mind is the widening of the range of consciousness, and each step forward has been a most painful and laborious achievement," wrote Carl Jung. Belief is provisional. There will always be more than we can see or hold in the limited cognitive structures of our minds. Our idols crash and crumble. Concepts, of which we felt certain, lie in a heap of broken timbers and shattered glass. We are engaged in the agonizing, dismantling of rotting institutions, belief systems, and ways of living that no longer support and meet the demands these days require.

### **We are made to create.**

We are a species who make things. Some of us may shrug and say, "I am just not creative." Where did that notion come from? There are endless ways to make something new. It need not be a masterpiece or even "art." Perhaps it is figuring out a better way to fold your sheets, or wash your car. It may include that giddy moment of delight, when you try a new recipe, or



crack yourself up at your own joke.

Take some time to reflect. How does creativity show up in your life? What gets inspiration flowing in you? If your creativity was a person, who would they be? Is your creativity another species? What supports and nourishes your creativity? How do you feel when creativity moves in with you?

If nothing comes to mind. Move over and make room for whimsey, caprice, and disruption in your life. Stand on your head. Shake out the cobwebs. Do something you have never done before.

Or – you could get a new puppy. I did recently. He is a fine cattle dog/lab mix and is busy night and day upending and rearranging almost everything in my life. I am up in the middle of the night, bearing with his caterwauls, as he comes to terms with sleeping in his crate. He is a living embodiment of an undisciplined and feral mind, alternately racing around, attacking the dangling fringe on my shawl, growling at a stick, whimpering when he can't find me, biting me with his little needle teeth, and pooping in all the wrong places.

I named my pup, Dabar, after the Hebrew word for *Word of God*, who

calls new life into existence by naming it. “Dabby” is playing at my side most of the time.

*Loretta F. Ross*  
(aka Hickory)



*Truly! Truly! By God! Be as sure of it as you are that God lives: at the least good deed done here in this world, the least bit of good will, the least good desire, all the saints in heaven in rejoice, and together with the angels their joy is such that all the joy in this world cannot be compared. But the joy of them all together amounts to little as a bean when compared to the joy of God over good deeds. For truly, God laughs and plays.*

Meister Eckhart

## Wisdom from Brenda Ueland

*If You Want to Write – A Book about Art, Independence and Spirit*

*Ueland, who set an international swimming record for over 80-year-olds, and was knighted by the King of Norway, had a wonderful spirit of independence and joy. Walt Whitman called this book the best book ever written about how to write. Yet the book is about much more than writing.*

“But this joyous, impassioned energy dies out of us very young. Why? Because we do not see that it is great and important. Because we let dry obligations take its place. Because we don’t respect it in ourselves and keep it alive by using it. And because we don’t keep it alive in others by listening to them.

But the great artists like Michelangelo and Blake and Tolstoi – like Christ whom Blake called an artist because he had one of the most creative imaginations that ever was on earth – do not want security, egoistic or materialistic. ... Why it never occurs to them. So they dare to be idle, i.e., not to be pressed and driven all the time.

So you see the imagination needs moodling – long, inefficient, happy idling, dawdling and puttering.”

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

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*T*oday, instead of realizing that the impasse provides a challenge and concrete focus for prayer and drives us to contemplation, we give in to a passive sense of inevitability, and imagination dies. We do not really believe that if we surrender these situations of world impasse to contemplative prayer that new solutions, new visions of peace and equality, will emerge in the world. We dare not believe that a creative revisioning of our world is possible. Everything is just too complex, too beyond our reach. Yet it is only in the process of bringing impasse to prayer, to the perspective of a God who loves us, that our society will be freed, healed, changed, brought to paradoxical new visions, and freed for nonviolent, selfless, liberating action, freed, therefore, for community on this planet earth. Death is involved here – a dying in order to see how to be and to act on behalf of God in the world.

- Constance Fitzgerald