



Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

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Little Ones to Him Belong

*My heart is not proud nor my eyes
haughty.*

*I do not busy myself with great matters
or things too marvelous for me.*

*But I have calmed and quieted my soul.
As a weaned child clinging to its mother
like a child that is weaned is my soul.
O Israel, hope in the Lord
from this time forth and forevermore.
(Psalm 131)*

The little one stood waiting. Its whole life had led up to this moment. While the One Who Is Greater than All, most gracious, almighty, mother and father, reached down and down and through and through, lifted, and kissed the little one and held it tight. The little one nestled into the arms of the One Who Is Greater Than All and lay back, gazing into the dark face with starry eyes. And

the two began to rock.

We cling to the earth's smooth furrows with tiny fingers, as it makes its daily rounds. We feel the beat of creation's pulse against our cheeks. We walk upon the bones of ancient ones.

Who feels this world, breathes in this air? What child is this? Whose lullabies are these? Whose nursery is this – this universe of blazing flame and splashing water? Souls, spilled across the Milky Way, find their way in a manger, and sway swaddled in the earth's sweet clothes of winter snows and summer hay. Who rocks us here, while our eyes, transfixed by Love's pure light, discover our image reflected in the holy face?

The little one stood waiting while the One Who Is Greater Than All spoke:
Come sit with me and rock a while and

I will sing you lullabies that Sarah sang to Isaac. I will tell you stories, wondrous tales of adventure, danger, miracles and love. For these songs must be sung, these stories told. Not kept on shelves like jars of pickles in a darkened cellar. No spice can preserve us, but these stories can save. In the telling is new life. In the singing is good news.



How did we come to this place, this rocking on God's lap and listening to these stories? Go back to the beginning of the beginning, before we were intricately wrought in the depths, before the forming of our inmost parts, before we were knitted together in our mothers' wombs to when our unformed

substance was first beheld. For we were held before we were even something to behold.

We began as babes, smacking, sucking infants grasping and gasping at the source of life, gulping in the Spirit's breath like ones nearly drowning in the rushing waters of the world:

O Lord, get me through this, help me, heal me, save me, free me, show me what to do! We lift to you our many hungers and concerns – our finances, our new addition, the Middle East, climate change, the economy, the droughts, the disasters, the refugees, the poor, those in prison, those who mourn, the sick and lonely, the persecuted and enslaved. Lord, hear our prayer - and don't forget the little children!

And God continued to hold us, while Mary held God's squirming son. The nursing infant is too weak to hold onto its mother. She must lift the child and support its back. She must turn its head and draw its fingers from its mouth and place it on her breast. It knows not how to feed itself.

We rocked with God under a cloud of violence, whose mists seeped into our lives as ghostly fears. Dread dogged our dreams. Life, never a certain thing, seemed like a runaway kite in a storm, while we grasped frantically to its frayed and thinning string. We denied and argued and pleaded and bargained with the menacing cloud, until spent and weary with making peace with death, we learned there is no peace with death and we did not go gentle, but wore out our rage in colic screams. All this while our patient God walked us in our dark nights and bore against our stiff-legged kicking.

Then came the weaning.

The Hebrew word for wean means also to ripen and repay. Wean is not a sudden loss of sustenance, but a ripening toward greater fulfillment and profound nourishment.

O Lord my heart is not haughty, my eyes are not raised too high. I do not occupy myself with ambitious desire or things which are too marvelous for me.

Done with getting and spending and proving and earning.

Done with seeking and striving and the thin piercing whine of urgent need. Done with bawling hungers and waking in the night with stomach cramping and the terror screams that know no hope nor appetite appeased.



Then came the weaning, the ripening.

An early evening rain splashed gently on the apple blossoms, sending white petals sifting to the glistening grass. We heard the wet whistle of the cardinal and watched a robin listen, head tilted, for the soft rumble of earth worms. We saw the drops slide down the glass.

"The window crying," you said. It was dusk, the color of plums. Teddy slipped from your lap. You gazed into my eyes and smiled. And before I offered you to suck, you fell asleep. And thus, you ripened. And we rocked all night, past striving, past approval seeking, past

demon whispers of ambition. And in the morning you bit into the Spirit's fruit.

The weaned child has attained strength and muscular control. It climbs onto its mother's lap without help. It pats her face and nuzzles its head against her shoulder. It delights simply in the mother's presence.

Like a weaned child on its mother's breast is my soul.

No longer consumed with consuming,
no longer gulping and choking on life,
but content
content to rest in God.

An awareness - childlike, simple,
accepting -
came to the psalmist who sings to us
today,
an awareness that came to Job,
when God spoke to him out of the
whirlwind:
*there are some things too wonderful,
too marvelous for us*

that mere knowing will not save
us, that understanding will not end
suffering, that strategies and master
plans cannot ease our pain, that

psychological acumen, administrative
expertise, and a panorama of pretty
programs with flashy learning centers
and lesson books printed in three colors
will not root out the evil in our hearts

that dedicated scholarship, facile
exegesis, brilliant preaching, a new
economy, and all that we may do and
strive to produce will not ease our pain.

The way is in the manger.
Come, lift the child and hold it close to
your heart as Mary did.
Hush. Speak softly. Walk on tiptoe.

What is needed is persons with quiet
souls who cling to Holiness as the trees
cling to the earth.

What is needed is persons with humble
hearts who will mother the Christ
within them, who will speak gently to
all they meet for they know that each of
us carries Mary's sleeping boy.

Our work is of such utter simplicity
and ordinariness that we shrink from
it. Surely there must be more – than to
be a friend, to share another's burden,
and to be in love with Holiness.

We rush about anxious, agitated, and angry. Our plans and prayers are ill-conceived and sloppy. Our eyes are raised too high. We are occupied with ambitious desires. We presume to be absorbed in things too marvelous for us.

Climb on God's lap and rest. And a multitude of persons will find God's rest near you.

Fall deeply in love with the Christ child, care for it ever so tenderly, and your simple presence will nurture the Christ child in others.

At that time they came to him and said: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus took up a little child and placed it on his lap and said: "Unless you turn and become like this little child, you shall never enter the kingdom of heaven."

The little ones snuggle closer:
the humble singer of the psalm, you
and I, and Eve and Moses and Sarah
and Peter and Martha and that littlest
one of all with the holes in his hands
and feet.

The curve of time turns in on
itself, bends back and threatens to
disintegrate. Apocalyptic whispers
and end time sonnets play in bars and
senate chambers. Death watches on
the TV news announce more violence,
more battles, more destruction.

"We like the old songs best," the
people tell the pastor. "I sang
'Whispering Hope' at my mother's
funeral," the gentle man tells her on his
way out. "Thank you for letting us sing
it again."

Hope
a whisper so soft, we must be stilled
and quieted to hear it

Hope
a whisper so soft, we must be clinging
close to hear it

Hope
soft as the voice of an angel breathing a
lesson unheard.

Like a child that is weaned is my soul.
O Israel, hope in the Lord from this
time forth and forevermore.

Spiritual Practice

The glory of God is the human being fully alive, and the glory of the human being is the beholding of God.

Irenaeus

Last autumn I suggested the Welcoming Prayer as a spiritual practice. It is a rigorous prayer of purgation and self-emptying, which invites us to come to terms with our attachments to things other than God. This autumn I invite you to the practice of Beholding God or the Prayer of the Simple Gaze.

A priest observed a peasant man coming daily to the church where he knelt and remained in prayer for some time. One day the priest approached the man and asked, “What do you say to our Lord on your daily visits?”

“Oh, I don’t say anything,” the man replied. “I look at him and he looks at me.”

In Advent and Christmastide we often see the prayer of the simple gaze illustrated in images of Gabriel



and Mary, the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, and the holy family. The shepherds gaze at the heavenly hosts. Wise ones travel far to simply rest their eyes upon this child. The gaze of love lights up the faces of children seeing Christmas trees and St. Nicholas. When we allow our attention to be drawn out of our self-consciousness and give ourselves over to the more compelling gaze of love, we are changed and transfigured. We are freed, softened, humbled, healed, and glorified. We know ourselves as deeply loved. Only then are we able to love others, as Rowan Williams writes: “...as fragile fellow-creatures held in the love of

God. I discover how to see other persons and things for what they are in relation to God, not to me. And it is here that true justice as well as true love has its roots.”

May your year ahead be blessed with holy rest, whispers of hope, gentle delights, and profound joy. May you gather the strength and courage for whatever you face, secure in the knowledge of a love that will not let you go.

Loretta F. Reiss

Whispering Hope, hymn by Alice Hawthorne, copyright 1924 by the Standard Publishing Company

I wrote this many years ago, when my first daughter was around a year and a half old. Some of you may recall it. Lines from this piece began coming back to me this fall. I think it is a lullaby worth hearing again in these times of continuing uncertainty and suffering. May you find comfort here and deep assurance in the steadfast love of the One Who Is Greater than All.

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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To be converted to the faith does not mean simply acquiring a new set of beliefs, but becoming a new person, a person in communion with God and others through Jesus Christ. Contemplation is an intrinsic element in this transforming process. To learn to look to God without regard to my own instant satisfaction, to learn to scrutinize and to relativize the cravings and fantasies that arise in me – this is to allow God to be God, and thus to allow the prayer of Christ, God's own relation to God, to come alive in me.

Rowan Williams



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