



Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

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I gave a hug and a kiss to the king of the fun times and said goodbye. While feeling lonely and at loose ends one Sunday afternoon, I grabbed hold of the wrong end of desire. I lost my head, and succumbed to a brief fling. Weekends are difficult for some hermits. Perhaps that's when it hits the hardest what a strange and unconventional thing one has done with one's life. So like others before me, I turned to the internet for comfort. Several of my friends have found satisfactory relationships online. I figured the global mall might have someone for me.

When I saw his photo I was a goner - big, broad grin, dark twinkling eyes, great hair, and drop dead gorgeous. His name, Jasper, sounded like a rugged cowboy and his profile tag line, "King of the Fun Times," closed the deal.

Exercising a bit of caution, I forwarded Jasper's photo to a friend who typed him as "a man of the west, the kind with old school manners, a black felt hat and a hankerin' for the company of a lady." She encouraged me to get dressed and pay him a call. So Jasper and I worked out a time and place to meet, while I fretted about

what to wear. My friend voted for a "sort of refined prairie look with sneakers (so he knows you'll be a good walking partner). Rub a milk bone on your neck instead of perfume: you'll be irresistible!"

I was so smitten on our first date that I overlooked the obvious difference in our age. Before I knew it, I had invited him for the weekend as we took things to the next level, so to speak. We really connected and just couldn't get enough of each other. He was a beautiful, exuberant, tender lover, loyal, smart, and doted on me, seeking only to please and satisfy my merest whim.

However, I learned to my dismay that a year and half old Australian Shepherd is too young for me. In the end, I just wore out. We both had to come to terms with our breeding - those immutable, nonnegotiable aspects of ourselves. Like a few other males I have known, the king of the fun times had some issues with impulse control. Nothing that an obedience class and a few years couldn't tame. Yet I had to face the truth of whom I have become and that my days of a quick romp in the backyard - every ten minutes - are over. If I look for a dog again I will need to type in my search engine:

queen of the laid back and mellow times.

Some of you have been here and understand how hard this is to accept. Such an awareness falls into that category of dismaying things that happen as one ages, such as the distended flaccid earlobe, the curious horn-like toenail, a fascination with fiber, and a growing taste for milk toast. I was appalled to discover that this animal lover just didn't want to be bothered with a young dog, no matter how handsome.

So Jasper and I split. After his foster family came to pick him up, Seal, the cat, Russell, the rabbit, and I sprawled on the couch, panting and mopping our brows, giving thanks for the intervention of good sense.



The story ends happily for our rambunctious sweetie. A family in Western Kansas with a ten year old boy, who had recently lost his dog, adopted Jasper. I am sure they will all live happily ever after, riding off into the sunset with the king of the fun times herding and nudging them all the way to glory.

God, like Jasper, is so much more spontaneous and free than I am. The Holy One is ready to make love at the drop of a hat. I say, "No, you old fool. I need to

finish mowing the lawn. Let me do the dishes."

Holiness moves toward us and we put out our hand and say, "Wait. Let me take a picture of this beauty." We tell our Beloved to hold still. We fix her hair and arrange her skirts. Then we set up roadside stands and sell snapshots of the divine. Few can stand more than a few minutes of bliss before they become side show barkers, hawking bags of freeze dried God experience for the busy homemaker.

Isn't that what I am doing here in this little essay? You ought to toss it aside right now and go climb into God's arms yourself. Chase a Frisbee. See how high you can jump. Taste for yourself the ecstasy of Love.

I am telling you this Lover is wearing me out. I can't handle it all by myself. Go ahead. Drag yourself away from the arms of worry and fear. Walk out on nagging to-do lists. Have a fling with joy. It takes a whole universe of god sick fools to satisfy this hungry lover of our souls. Do your part. Don't expect just a few of us to have to have all the fun.



Let's go back to the beginning of this little tale. As you may recall, what got it going was desire and my taking hold of the wrong end of it. I felt lonely and desired companionship. I considered *match.com*, but, forgive my prejudice, I

figured a dog would be less trouble than a man. (See how quickly desire moved me to seeing the things of God as a means to my ends?)

Our consumer driven culture urges us to immediately satisfy needs, as it constantly creates more desires. This is called the global market and this, rather than Love, is supposed to be what makes the world go round. However, in times of economic distress (which is all the time for most of the world), this doesn't work very well. All these desires begin bucking, rearing, pawing, and whinnying like a bunch of wild stallions trapped in a corral. Without a good Australian Shepherd to wrangle them, we are clueless as to how to manage all this unruly energy.

So here is a suggestion for handling desire in hard times. You can file it under fuel economy and energy saving tips. I call it *desire offsets*. Here is how it works.

First, you identify a desire - that insistent prick, nagging need, or longing ache that says, "Hey, fix this. Get rid of this unpleasant feeling. You need - a better job, a new car, a new relationship, more money!" Now you have an object for your desire, so you can fixate on that. The desire may bring with it a sense of deprivation, loneliness, sadness, low self esteem, envy, bitterness, or anger. Like a candle flame on the patio at night, desire draws a lot of annoying bugs.

Next, ask yourself how you would feel if you actually possessed this object of your desire. Would you be feeling peaceful, proud, happy and content, loved and comforted? Imagine those feelings as vividly as you can, as if you already possessed the object of your desire.

Now, ask God to give you whatever sense or feeling you think you will have if you only had that million dollars, or job, or house, or thing, or relationship. After all why not go for the gold: the deep down possession of whatever well being you think gaining your heart's desire will give you? Why waste needless time, energy, and wealth pursuing something that is bound to fade, die, breakdown, or fail sooner or later in this universe of entropy?

In my experience God answers such prayers pretty quickly. Suddenly what had seemed woefully lacking, sparse, or meager is shot through with goodness, mercy, and gratitude. I believe this practice of desire offsets is what Jesus called *seeking first the Kingdom of God*.

Tom Sine in **The New Conspirators** writes, "When the rich crash and burn they don't just lose their wealth 'but their identity and their image.' Our new imperial global economy has persuaded not only the super-wealthy and the merely rich, but many in the middle class as well to increasingly derive our sense of identity, self esteem, and even more, our life purpose from our success in the marketplace of more."

Like little gods we bestow upon things - people, events, places, and positions the intangible life giving qualities only God can give. Jesus tells us: Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all these things shall be given unto you. (Matthew 6:33) In God we find the complete package, one stop shopping, all we need for the abundant life. What is the abundant life anyway, if not the capacity to connect with the Source of endless supply, strength, peace, and joy? And in that connection, we discover the capacity and freedom to give ourselves away.

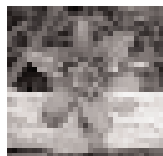
When we focus on our ego's solution to soothing the ache of desire with some object, we are taking hold of the wrong end of it. The front end of desire, the source and the initial yearning for wholeness before we attach it to some object, is simply and wonderfully our desire for union with God - Jesus, joy of our desiring. Christ, the ground, the source, of our beseeching, as Julian of Norwich called it. After chasing the wrong end of desire for years, St. Augustine finally concluded, our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.

Then I remember something
that fills me with hope.
The Lord's kindness never fails!
If he had not been merciful,
we would have been destroyed.
The Lord can always be trusted
to show mercy each morning.
Deep in my heart I say,
"The Lord is all I need;
I can depend on him!"

Lamentations 3: 21-26 CEV



When it comes to sheer joy and exuberance, Jasper is far more godlike than I. He leapt and bounded after the arching spray of hose water, snapping at the stream, twisting and turning in midair, his coat glistening in the sun. Watching the king of the fun times vault in that fountain of joy, I wondered at how tentative and safe I have become, how domesticated. I am so quick to marry my heart to the things of this world.



Consider the ditch lilies, also known as day lilies or tiger lilies. Poor cousins of hybrid lilies, these orange beauties lace rural

roadsides, spill over the foundations of ancient farmsteads, and pile up in bright cheerful swaths along banks and fence rows. Profuse and hardy as dandelions, they wave like kids straining out of their desks raising their arms in the air, hollering, "Here I am. Pick me. I know the answer!"

Russell Stover, likes to lie down in the shade of the daylilies next to the house. Oh, to live stretched out in the midst of such riotous generosity and abundance.

Rising up over Russell, hidden in the dense green leaves, the lilies lean out over creation and sing full throated, "Oh you beautiful world!"

Over the past thirty years of listening to

people's stories of their lives in the sea of God, some common themes emerge. One is a hesitation, a misplaced sense of shame on the shore of this love. Over and over we are drawn into the arms of love only to turn away, feeling we ought "to stop wasting time, and get back to work."

People called to contemplative prayer often struggle with this more than anything else: allowing themselves to love God wholeheartedly, unashamedly, prodigiously and to express that love in ways they find fulfilling. Noticing, delighting in, and tending to the Presence of Love in our midst seems so unproductive and inefficient to our egos.

I find a lot of my work is teaching people how to loaf and give themselves permission to lounge and loll about their lives, as if they were stretched out on a king size bed surrounded by every imaginable delight. Every day we ought to walk into the world as if our pockets are full of the most delicious treats to share with strangers - roasted cashews, fresh strawberries, rich dark chocolates.

We are fed a lie of scarcity and lack, which makes us miserly, pinched, sour, fretful, and fearful. On the other hand, contemplative loafing encourages generosity.

Listen to St. Theresa of Avila:
He desired me so I came close. No one can come near God unless He has prepared a bed for you. A thousand souls

hear His call every second, but most every one then looks into their life's mirror and says, I am not worthy to leave this sadness.

When I first heard his courting song, I too looked at all I had done in my life and said, How can I gaze into His omnipresent eyes? I spoke those words with all my heart, but then he sang again, a song even sweeter, and when I tried to shame myself once more from His presence, God showed me his compassion and spoke a divine truth, "I made you, dear, and all I make is perfect. Please come close, for I desire you."

Dear ones, I am here to tell you that *you are worthy to leave this sadness* and step into the arms of Love. There are places in scripture where the God of Israel is portrayed as a heartbroken, betrayed lover, pining away for his true love, who has run after some new novelty. (For starters see Isaiah 50,54,55; Hosea) Don't hurt him any more. The joy of your desiring is waiting for you.

Now you may be thinking, how can lazing about and seeking the satisfaction of our desires in God possibly be helpful in these urgent times of recession, war, global warming, and rising prices? Of course we have basic needs – shelter, love, food, rest, health, work, community. Just as God calls us to his arms, God also calls us to till the land, earn our keep, and serve the needy. What I am saying is that we are dangerously out of balance. We are so dominated and determined by the values of the marketplace: efficiency,

productivity, and profit, that we are losing our connection to the deeper, eternal, intangible values of the Kingdom of God.

More from Tom Sine:

A survey of 20,000 Christians in 30 countries over 5 years to discover how busy they were revealed the levels of busyness were extremely high in the lives of Christians, particularly in countries like the US and Britain, and particularly for pastors. Dr. Michael Zigarelli, described the problem as “a ‘vicious cycle’ prompted by cultural conformity.” He added that this extremely high level of busyness results in God being marginalized in our lives and “Christians becoming even more vulnerable to adopting secular assumptions about how to live, which leads to more conformity to the culture of busyness, hurry, and overload. And then the cycle begins over again.”

Someone recently spoke to me of how hard it was to take time off from work. “It takes me a week to get ready so I can be out of the office and two weeks to catch up after I return. It seems hardly worth the effort.” I can identify with my friend’s experience, yet something seems terribly wrong with this picture. Sabbath does require some preparatory work. One lays a boundary, sets structure around the time to protect it. Yet when taking Sabbath becomes a chore, costing more than it’s worth, we have surely become whole heartedly conformed to the world and its soul stealing, life sucking clutches.

Our times call for unshakeable peace and

radical faith in union with God.

I am not speaking here of composure, poise, good leadership style, or a non anxious presence, which are all good and, which can be rather easily faked. I am speaking of a deep down, well watered root system with God which will withstand the fiercest storms, the hottest fires, and the longest droughts. Such a root system is not established by a shot of Miracle-Gro Day Off, but rather, by a continually renewed connection and communion with the Source of Life, day after day after day. This involves the daily death of the ego’s demand for control, denial of the values of the Empire, and an embrace of our powerlessness in surrender to God.

How does one do this? Poet Mary Oliver offers this advice:

... I don’t know exactly what a prayer is / I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down /into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, / how to be idle and blessed, / how to stroll through the fields, / which is what I have been doing all day. / Tell me, what else should I have done? / Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon? / Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?

from The Summer Day, Mary Oliver

Keep thyself first in peace and then thou wilt be able to bring others to peace.
Have therefore, zeal in the first place over thyself.

Thomas a Kempis

Whatever is ahead for us, whatever scarcity, deprivation, or loss - God remains leaping in the sun, waving from roadside ditches, slipping up behind you and whispering in your ear, "Come to bed, dear." Build a pipeline of prayer to that everlasting resource, funnel it into the world through your heart, and the kingdom has come.

Folks, roll up your sleeves. We have some serious work to do in recovering the gifts of strolling in the fields, lingering over dinner, pausing to visit with our neighbor, deeply listening to one another, and dawdling about the world, smitten with love for the Lord of the Fun Times.

Loretta F. Ross

Sources quoted:

Tom Sine, **The New Conspirators**, p 149; Teresa of Avila, **Love Poems from God**, translated by Daniel Ladinsky, pp 274, 276; Mary Oliver, **New and Selected Poems**, 1992, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, p 94; J.P. de Caussade, **Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence**, 1987, Tan Books and Publishers, Inc, Rockford, Ill, p 250, Rob Bell, **The Velvet Elvis**, p 170.

Prayer ~ Reflection ~ Action

1. Connect with the Beloved:

Read and reflect on the second chapter of Hosea. What do you hear God saying to you in these words of the prophet? Are there other Biblical passages or hymns that come to you, which speak of God as a lover? Is it strange for you to think of God as your beloved? Choose a word, a phrase, or an image from scripture or song that speaks to you and carry it with you through your day. Take time to rest in love with your Beloved.

2. Respond to the Beloved:

What do you want to say to God in response to your reflection and prayer? Tell or write to God how you feel, what you are uncomfortable with, what you need from God at this point.

3. Connect with Another:

Out of the gift of your communion with your Beloved, reach out in generous love to someone else, engage in some kind of service, give some of your abundance away.

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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

“ Just these two words, He spoke
Changed my life,
"Enjoy Me."
What a burden I thought I was to carry –
A crucifix, as did He.
Love once said to me, "I know a song,
Would you like to hear me sing it?"

And laughter came from every brick in
the street
And from every pore in the sky.
After a night of prayer, he changed
My life when he sang,
Enjoy me. ”

Teresa of Avila, Love Songs from God



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