



Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

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She is sitting on a chair in her bedroom. I show her the new pants and blouse. “Try them on mom. I got them for you.”

“Oh, I don’t need any new clothes.” She gestures to a pile of folded shirts on her dresser.

“Mom, you are holding up your pants with safety pins. That blouse is worn thin.”

She slowly pulls on the new pants, then stands and hitches them over her narrow hips. I help her button the blouse. We both like the results. “You look great mom.”

She smiles, then announces, “After ninety the worst is over.” We observe a thoughtful silence, and then burst into laughter. Eyes twinkling, she says, “Then they dress you. They fix your breakfast.”

The good news from Irma: if you are over ninety, relax. The worst is over. If you are not, take heart, the best is yet to come.



At ninety five my mother knows her memory is impaired, but is not particularly

bothered about it. She listens to our concerns about her health and safety, but does what she pleases. Occasionally she gets angry, hurts and grieves. At a recent family gathering when I reminded her she was telling us the same story, she scolded me, “Well I will just be still. I will just crawl under the table.” I smarted, as if she had slapped me. But overall she possesses no self pity or entitlement, and has been released from the burden of ambition. She often says, as her Uncle Lem once did, that she now works for Dolittle and Setmore.

Mother lives embraced by grace that is as common and generally unnoticed as breath. Her home is full of light and what I think may be angels. I came upon one once, unannounced. My family was all out attending an art festival, where my mother was being honored. I had returned to the house to fetch something. As I rushed into the living area intent on my errand, I was stopped in my tracks. A golden light filled the room. A pulsing stillness held me. The air was alive with unseen movement. The newspaper on the couch, the painting on the wall, the pile of letters on the bench were glowing as if lit from within. A swoosh of wings disappeared around the corner, and

from somewhere deep in the house I heard a stifled giggle.

In this home where I grew up and where my mother has lived for over sixty seven years, wood carvings line the cupboards. Books of poetry, art, history, and natural science spill from the shelves. Scrapbooks pile in the corners. Photos albums, journals, pages of stories, history, and poems cover the tables. You will find stacks of paintings under the beds and shelves of apple dolls with droll expressions. A glass case holds some of the finest artifacts from dad's collection of spear points and arrowheads.

A vertebra from a mammoth elephant, stone ax heads, and a tooth from a mastodon elephant await you in the basement. Somewhere in a box wrapped in cotton rests a mean incisor from a saber toothed tiger. All of these were found by my father in the fields and streams of southeast Iowa and are neatly cataloged by date, county, township, section number and field details.

Things were always more than met the eye in my household. The land, place, people, and language held deep meaning and fascination for my parents. On drives in the country my father would say, "From here north to Iowa City was a huge glacial lake that covered 100,000 acres and lasted for anywhere from 10,000 to 120,000 years." I tried to imagine all the fields, hills, trees, and towns covered by

water. "Before the lake there was ice. A glacier came down from the northeast through here and left behind these rocks. That was over 150,000 years ago. Now, over on that bluff prehistoric people and Indians had campsites. This ax came from there. See how it was worked and used?" A quiet hilltop pasture shifted into a village of tepees. I would try to catch a whiff of smoke from a campfire and imagine people chipping away flint to make spear points.

My father's sense of history was vast. I can hold in my palm a Thebes spear point from 8000 – 3000 BC he found, and think about the human who shaped and used this tool. I can also recall stories Dad told from his youth: the Merrimac witch and the boy who was killed when he was caught in an auger at a mill.

As a child I was fascinated by mother's drawings of fairies. We share the same middle name, Fay, which means both fairy and faith. I remember gathering around the radio to hear a man's voice come from that wooden box reading her poems. Was there a fairy in there?



In a bedroom upstairs is a framed collage mom made in the sixties. The art protests the money spent on the moon race, while

the world was full of suffering, hungry people. A small globe of the earth is attached to the painting. Dozens of tiny plastic babies cling to it, while others are falling off the overcrowded planet. Grasshoppers painted silver head through the starry space toward a moon in the upper left corner. Tiny monkeys ride the backs of the grasshoppers.

In the height of the cold war mother and others held signs protesting the transport of nuclear weapons on the White Train that went through our town. Her Irish mother, a Quaker and a member of the WCTU worked to change the Constitution so women could vote.

Mom grew up on a farm outside a town which was a way station on the Underground Railroad. When I was young we visited a house in the town. In the kitchen under a rug, a trap door lifted to reveal a small space where slaves found refuge on their passage north. I imagined them hunched in the dark, holding their breath under that door. Mom tells that once the sheriff came and the woman of the house talked to him from the rocking chair she had pulled over the rug that hid the trap door. “Forgive me for not getting up, Sheriff, but I am a little under the weather. Go ahead and look around,” she said.

Though I felt bored silly and embarrassed by my “old fashioned” parents when I was a teenager, their influence shaped

much of how I see and respond to the world. Learning to see more than meets the eye took practice. Hunting relics with my father, I often missed the obvious.

“Look. There is a flint point right there, by your foot.”

“Huh, where? I can’t see it Dad.”

“If it was a snake it would bite you. There was a campsite right here. All these flint pieces have been worked. The people who came here liked to pick spots on high ground near water. See how these stones have been in a fire. Here is a piece of pottery. These tiny ones, bird points, were used to shoot birds.”

My brother tells me it is hard to say for sure who these tribes were and what they called themselves. “By the time white men got here there were the Ioway, Sac and Fox, and Sioux. Given that people were in the area for ten to twelve thousand years, many different groups passed this way.”

There is something in the middle of mom and me which is a combination of faith and “fairies”: trust in an unseen God, and the capacity to imagine what seems impossible. Imagination is a key attribute of prophets, who must be able to think beyond the present reality in order to envision change.

Be less abstract in your writing, asked my

writing teacher and classmates, who identified themselves as unbelievers. Their comments were helpful. I want to be concrete and specific. At the same time, I realized that what appeared as abstract and unseen to my critics is in fact very real to me. “Don’t you see God? Holiness is right here. If it was a snake, it would bite you.”

After sundown mom sinks deep into the past and the distinction between yesterday and seventy years ago fades. Events from past and present become woven together in strange tales. She talks about the price of crops and the depression and tells stories I have never heard before. She only had one pair of black cotton stockings and it had a hole in the knee the size of a fifty cent piece. She didn’t know how to mend it and her mother was too busy to help. One of her classmates had nice stockings and her mother sent pie on a saucer for her lunch.

Mom grows quiet when we drive by the farm where she grew up. The land is bare without a trace of the old home place. The geese, the orchard, the corncrib, the windmill, the haymow, the chicken house – all have vanished.

When I was a child the word used for senile dementia was “childish.” Uncle Lou was “getting childish.” Grandpa “was childish.” That meant that they were older and acted young somehow. Because of this, we were to understand and watch

over them a little more. It was a gentle term, a matter of fact acceptance. When mother returned from visiting blind Aunt Ethel in the rest home, who, after she broke her hip, never got out of bed again, mom would say, “Aunt Ethel told me to go out back and get a chicken and dress it and make her some chicken and noodles. She doesn’t know where she is. She’s getting childish.” Mom would fix chicken and noodles with a store bought chicken and take them to her anyway.

The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.

John 1: 14 The Message

The house I grew up in is the kind of place where God shuffles around in his jammes and house slippers like part of the family – deeply loved and cherished, but not made a big fuss over. Mother grew up Quaker and married my Mennonite father, whose family descended from the Swiss Anabaptists of the Reformation period. In some kind of compromise they became Presbyterian. When I once told a seminary professor about my parents’ religious pedigree, he remarked, “Well it confirms what I have always felt. Presbyterianism is many people’s second choice.”

Perhaps that is why I had to have an affair with the Catholics, who to my way of thinking took God more seriously with

their holy days and guardian angels. They had interesting things to look at, statues and pictures of saints. They got to kneel, wear veils, smell incense, cross themselves, and carry a little missal with beads. The Catholic Church held a lot more possibility for passion and imagination for this young soul weary of the sterile, rational approach of my reformed ancestors. Though I returned to the church of my childhood, I still carry deep appreciation for many things Catholic. My affair ruffled family feathers, but it strikes me as a creative form of adolescent rebellion.

What eventually sealed the Presbyterians for me was my call to be a minister and this question asked of Presbyterians before they are ordained as elders, deacons, or ministers of the word and sacrament: *Will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?* If they ever take out the imagination part, I am back with the Catholics.

Mother's pastor brings her communion. She is grateful for the fellowship, but I wonder if the sacrament seems redundant to this old Quaker, already immersed in the Light. When she prays for me and my daughter before our Christmas dinner, she draws the words up from some deep place and forms them with a conviction that leaves me shaken.

My mother's house has many rooms of

treasures. If you come to visit, some of her childishness may rub off on you – her simplicity, transparency, and sense of humor. When two hip twenty-something graphic designers from a big city came for Thanksgiving, they were entranced by the carvings, the fifty year old book on design my father had, the advertising in old magazines, and the relics. The young men rooted around with my daughter in closets and basement, amazed and delighted. Because they had been raised well, they recognized “childishness” and listened to Mom's stories with kindness and gentleness. Mother showed the same politely curious interest in the tattoos, which covered most of one of the visitor's arms, as he did in her apple dolls. Then the visitors all went out to play across the street on the swings and toys in the school yard, snapping photos on their iphones to send to their friends. They arrived early for breakfast and stayed late. It was nearly midnight before Mom and I turned in on that magical day.

Sometime soon this house will pass away with all its treasures. The gentle spirits who fill it will move on. The house where angels live is nothing fancy and looks – well to me, ugly from the outside. Covered with faded yellow asbestos siding, which my father proudly installed to keep us warm and safe in the fifties, it is now an eyesore and an environmental problem. Perhaps one day I will bring a grandchild here and say, “This is where I grew up. Over there was a clothesline and

a grapevine. Your great grandma made the best grape jelly. Your great grandpa collected tools of the people who lived here long before we did. The house is gone, but the love and wit and wisdom which dwelt here runs in your veins, my child.”

A poem by Thomas Merton has been coming to me lately:

Come my love
pass through my will
as through a window
shine on my life
as on a meadow
I, like the grass,
to be consumed
by the rays of the sun
on a late summer’s morning.

The poem is based on St. John of the Cross’s poem, *The Dark Night of the Soul*. In the poem John compares the soul to a window. He sees the spiritual journey as the process of cleansing and removal of anything in us that might impede or distort the Light of Christ as it passes through our lives. In this process we become more and more transparent and childlike.

My mother drinks her tea this morning as she watches a squirrel and a cardinal at the feeder. “I am remembering,” she says. “I am remembering how when I was a kid and would get upset or complain about something, Pop would say, ‘Oh that ain’t nothing to worry about.’”

“Gosh mom, that doesn’t sound very empathic.”

“Well that is what he would say. ‘Oh, that ain’t nothing to worry about.’” And she smiles out the window.

I want God to pass through me like a window, to shine on my life as on a meadow. I want to be consumed as the grass on a midsummer day. I can ask for it, pray for it, but I think it ain’t nothing to worry about. In the end such childishness is given simply, quietly in the gracious surrender to growing old.

Mother puts down her tea cup and says, “After ninety three things get interesting. It is like reading a book backwards.

I never understood before why people would look at the end of a book and read it first. It is smooth going. You can do what you want. People don’t expect much of you. They think you are childish. They try not to laugh, but you can see they are just dying. I don’t let on I know.”



Loretta F. Ross

Works cited: The Passion of the Infant Christ, pp 85-86 in **A Child in Winter Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany with Caryl Houselander**, edited by Thomas Hoffman, Sheed and Ward, 2000, pp 46-47

The Merton poem is from a song on **The Lover and the Beloved**, a recording by John Michael Talbot, 1989, The Sparrow Corporation, lyrics based on “The Blessed Virgin Compared to a Window” from **The Thomas Merton Collection**, copyright 1944, Our Lady of Gethsemane.

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Prayer ~ Reflection ~ Action

Consider what role memory and imagination play in your faith life.

1. Ask God to bring to your mind some memories. Go back in time to savor and relive these events.

In your time of recollection does anything new emerge from these memories, an insight, understanding, appreciation?

Could God have been working in those events in ways you didn't see at the time? How might God be speaking to you today through these memories?

2. Faith and imagination are complementary to each other. We cannot achieve what we cannot conceive. What does it mean to serve others with your imagination, as well as your energy, intelligence, and love?

How do you nourish and express your imagination?

Think of something you want to come true in your life. Now imagine it accomplished in great detail. Allow yourself to feel and act as if this were already accomplished. Step out in faith.

3. Share your memory and your dream with someone else. Pray together for faith.

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

As we grow old we regain our likeness to little children even outwardly. It is in surrendering to this that we make our old age a thing of beauty and peace. We become dependent on others. Our pleasures become fewer and simpler, more and more like those of a child. We let go, at last, of the struggles of the complicated years that are over. The hopes that are no more, the foolish little ambitions, the forgotten griefs. Bereavements cease now to be a loss, and change to the anticipation of meeting our dead again very soon. Our values become true again; we distinguish as unerringly as a child between the essential and nonessential. Our memory goes back to dwell again in the morning of our life. Thus, when death comes we are able to accept this greatest of all experiences, and dying we are made new.

Caryll Houselander



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