

The Other Side of the Pulpit

February 2012

Over the past while, I've written much about contemplative practices, prayer, deepening our spirituality, connecting with God and seeing reality from a different perspective. But if these practices and new ways of experiencing God are not grounded in the stuff of our everyday lives, all of this thinking and praying becomes meaningless.

It has been said that human beings are the only creatures who have been created with the faculty of reflection. We are able to raise our experience to consciousness. Rocks and sand may also have experiences but no ability to reflect. In reflecting on our experiences we begin to realize that we are not only created, but also creators. In reflecting upon our experiences, we find our purpose.

Our purpose is rooted in our relationship to God. The work of spirituality is to rejoin the one. God is one. Thomas Merton, a modern contemplative, discovered in his reflections that people are inseparable from God and from one another. In becoming aware of this unity in God with all peoples, Merton had a deep experience of nondualism. He found that he could not separate God from God's creation, but also could not separate contemplation from concern for, and engagement in, the needs and problems of the age in which he lived. God became incarnate and this created a bridge between divine and earthly.

Our ability to reflect allows us to become aware of our experience of life at the level of ordinary consciousness – a kind of “one thing at a time awareness”. But our reflective ability also

allows us to center ourselves in the midst of an unconscious awareness at both the personal level and the collective level. Getting to know God begins with getting to know yourself. Richard Rohr reminds us in his book, *The Naked Now*, that only transformed people have the power to transform others, as if by osmosis. Usually, he says, you can lead others only as far as you yourself have gone. Too often we try to push, intimidate, threaten, cajole, and manipulate others. It seldom works, because that is not the way the soul works. In the presence of whole people; or any encounter with Holiness Itself, we simply find that, after a while, we are different – and much better! Mature religion, Rohr says, involves changing ourselves and letting ourselves be changed by a mysterious encounter with grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

God has given us a new consciousness in what we call “prayer” and an utterly unexpected, maybe even unwanted, explanation in what we call “the cross”. Part of that new consciousness involves using our faculty of imagination as a first step in creating a better world. We see imagination being used to span the reality between heaven and earth in the New Testament book of Revelation – in John's description of images while on the Isle of Patmos. Great artists create visual images using the faculty of imagination. The visual images artists create are a bridge between their inner world of image and form and colour and the outer world of art medium – paint and clay. The images they create are a bridge between inside and outside – materiality injected with

spirit. Images are messengers – angels perhaps – places we have forgotten about.

The purpose of art is to move us. Creative imagination moves us to action.

All of this reflecting about image and imagination, the tension between inner and outer is rooted and grounded in our relationship with Christ. This relationship is described by William Barry as being analogous to the kind of friendship that develops over a long time between two people. They are aware of each other even when they are apart or not engaging directly with each other. Although they may not be talking, at some deep level they are in touch with each other. Ignatius's idea of contemplative-in-action has such a relationship with God. Engaging closely with God over time, we allow the Spirit to transform us into people who are more like the images of God we are created to be—that is, more like Jesus, who was clearly a contemplative-in-action.

The first step in creating a better world is imagining a better world. We must spend time on the bridge of our imagination and be open to the energy God is creating to move us to action. Use your imagination to create the world God is calling us to live into. And then move -- breathe life into your images of hope and healing and wholeness .

Blessings,

Nancy

Called to Say Yes

*We are called to say yes
That the Kingdom might break through
To renew and transform
Our dark and groping world.*

*We stutter and we stammer
To the lone God who calls
And pleads a New Jerusalem
In the bloodied Sinai Straits.*

*We are called to say yes
That honeysuckle may twine
And twist its smelling leaves
Over the graves of nuclear arms.*

*We are called to say yes
So that nations might gather
And dance one great movement
For the joy of humankind.*

*We are called to say yes
So that rich and poor embrace
And become equal in their poverty
Through the silent tears that fall.*

*We are called to say yes
That the whisper of our God
Might be heard through our sirens
And the screams of our bombs.*

*We are called to say yes
To a God who still holds fast
To the vision of the Kingdom
For a trembling world of pain.*

*We are called to say yes
To this God who reaches out
And asks us to share
His crazy dream of love.*

*From There Was No Path So I Trod One, by E. Gateley
(1996)*