

THE CONTEMPLATIVE WAY

Over the last three years my life has been changed by encountering what I'm calling "the contemplative way". As I look back, this new awareness began around spring of 1982. It was catalysed by my encounter with one in the tradition of the contemplative way, Marie of the Incarnation is her name. She produced the first imagery and description of my depth existential experience since St. John of the Cross that I found releasing. I continued to be impacted by this dimension through visits to Rome and India as I became aware of the depth socio-spirit residue of the contemplative way in those societies.

I finally began to understand in my being the first commandment in the Christian Ten Commandments -- that to make an idol out of any image of the Imageless One is to cutoff the depths of my human identity. Sacred space and time have taken on new meaning, my interior universe has expanded beyond the confines of logic, routine, and cultural beliefs. My world has been stopped by the Mystery itself -- the Mystery has come alive in a new way in the centre of mundanity. Let me give you 3 recent encounters I've had that illustrate this new awareness.

I remember arriving at the mid-way point of the Continuum last year and encountering experimentation going on with meditation, tai chi, and other forms of spirit exercises. I was startled, caught off guard, and yet intrigued. I had an intuition that something here was worth exploring. Then one Sunday morning we decided to attend a Zen Buddhist Temple. I remember taking off my shoes at the front door, receiving instructions to locate a zafu (hard cushion on the floor) or a chair and get seated. We began with a chant, with drums, incense, bells, and then began our sitting meditation for 40 minutes. I had the most difficulty getting my posture stable (that's interesting, isn't it?). Now life has dealt me many experiences -- I've been stabbed, shot, had operations -- but I've never had such pain throughout my entire body. I just experienced disbelief at the power of such a simple gesture. I said to myself, "You're an adult and you can't sit still for a few minutes." I started to get up -- no crawl out -- of the nearest door, and then I realised I'd probably never walk again -- I felt crippled for life. And then the strangest thing happened. I decided I didn't have to walk again to be human -- that my humanness was more than my pain. I discovered that I was being called from within to a new level of discipline, the discipline of my total being. I experienced the refreshment of silence and yet heard more sounds than ever. My awareness of my breathing became a witness to life's unconditional sustenance of my life -- my participation in Being itself.

During a recent Solitary Day here in Hong Kong, Mary and I wanted to see more of the New Territories. So we mapped out a plan and decided during our travels to visit the Temple of 10,000 Buddhas. We got off the train in Shatin and began to find our way to the site. There were no big signs showing the way. We knew the general direction and started walking through this muddy, damp field. We finally found a small sign pointing the way to the Temple and we began to climb the 500 steps leading us there. Up - Up - Up we went until the pagoda and central temple were a few feet away. My, what art work. Such large and colourful symbols -- the smell of incense was thick. We watched as people did the bows, got on their knees (everyone seems to know that being on your knees is important to humanness), said their prayers, offered their gifts. We stood in awe of intense ritual process going on. We then visited the rest of the Temple grounds and saw the 13,000 miniature Buddhas. We also visited the Founder's

Shrine, in which he still sits -- gold-plated and incased in glass. I kept feeling like I was visiting shrines in Rome. Any way, on our way down the hillside, we met another couple coming up. They were exhausted from their walk and wanted to know if it was worth the journey. And it wasn't until then that I realised something had happened to my being. We have a song about it -- "Stillness Lingers in My Soul" -- I had been to the centre and now was returning with the self consciousness of the Other World in the midst of This World as a gift to give others.

This awareness does not have to come to one so dramatically. It can be a very small thing that occasions it. I was on my way to a meeting on the 16th floor of our building, and while I was waiting for the elevator I caught myself staring at the fish tank behind the security guard's desk. I was struck by the size of the fish -- they are so large -- 7-12 inches long. They are so many different colours -- orange, black, blue, spotted. But it was the faces of these fish that startled me. "They look so real," I thought. Then I realised they are real faces. As I moved closer to the tank, one of the fish caught my eye. We were looking at each other's faces. Our eyes met and I felt a tremor. I became conscious that this fish and I are related. This tremor I experienced was the shifting of the fish from a thing in a water tank to a member of my family tree. The tremor of the common ground of all opening up.

In the days and weeks that have followed these 3 encounters, I've begun to realise some new reductionisms in my own being. I was brought up to distrust any way except the way of my tradition. I was raised with a very limited view of history -- like the last 85 years as my total context for the Human Experiment in spirituality. I was trained to bracket my right brain and trust my left brain, and I was practised in a liturgical bias that avoided the challenge of solitary spirituality.

And yet the history upon which I stand, we stand, had its birth and sustenance through the contemplative way. What is the contemplative way? The way of Mystery, the intimate, loving knowledge of the Final One -- the way of silence -- the void of sound in which one might hear the voice of Being -- the way of emptiness in which space is created for unlimited care for the world's suffering in the midst of its mystery, depth and greatness -- the way of stillness in which one celebrates being a participant in eternality itself.

The contemplative way is where the spirit movement is breaking loose today.