

Week beginning 3rd May - Look out! Beyond here be dragons.

The Search for Self, the Grail Quest, the Hero's Journey are all archetypal adventures imprinted in the human psyche through these and many other universal and national legends, folklore and myths of the human race. The journey takes us outside our conscious knowledge and learned behaviour. This is a dangerous and forbidding place. When cartographers of the medieval atlases reached the end of known territories, they would add some ominous words on the edge of their map: 'Beyond here be dragons.'

However, for some people and maybe for you, since you have persevered thus far, it is a journey you must take. After many decades, I am still trying to travel that journey, sometimes excitedly, often very frustratedly, I am often drawn to practise one simple yet profound exercise. This reflection is about becoming more conscious of my breathing. I collect and draw in my thoughts hanging like rags on every bush of yesterday, blown by every expected change of wind tomorrow, and try to be in that still place at the centre. At times, in spite of lurking dragons, it blesses me like a balm. As I breath in and out and pause between breaths, I approach that place where breath meets non-breath, where life meets non-life, by sense awareness first, as the rhythm of my heart-beat changes. Then, whether with a mantra or some kind of simple symbol, the crossing is made into the unexplored emptiness of the spirit . . .

Our breath is the universal life-force that sustains all things and unblocks whatever threatens the flow of life. We simply become more aware of its rhythm and pace, and follow where it leads us. When our daily dose of potentially negative experiences comes upon us, this reflection reminds us to breathe deeply into the blocked emotions or numbed-out feelings that we carry, mostly unknowingly, somewhere deep within us. . . . The healing power of breath, for instance, if we trust it, will find and stabilise our imbalances and unblock our energy . . . Part of my reason for believing this stems from the classical scriptural, doctrinal and devotional definitions of God as 'pure essence', 'pure being', 'source of life' . . . I simply believe that when I'm floundering around in there where my body senses things and when I consciously focus on my lungs filling and emptying, I'm very close to the 'origin of existence', to God . . . I believe it is the most loving, healing, redeeming and growing place to be. It won't always feel like that. In fact it is a form of what in classical theology is called the Via Negativa, the way of unknowing – a belief that darkness and emptiness are the safest and most secure definitions of God. It takes practice, patience and blind faith to persevere in such unfamiliar places.

It is around this territory of destiny that we find, at the boundaries, the notices we have already come across earlier on our journey so far – 'Beyond here be dragons.' When this happens it does not mean we have lost our way. More likely it means that we are nearing a threshold. . . . By that I mean that when, in our own uncertain spiritual journey, we round what looks like just another bend in the road and there, confronting us with frightening power, is a drove of dragons, it is only then we can be sure that we are approaching God. (Travelling Light pp88.89.90)

Follow-up - If you would like to explore mindful meditation, try this simple daily praxis:

Settle yourself for meditation in the usual way, by paying attention to the sensations in the different parts of your body. There is no better way to regain your peaceful centre than by doing this. Whatever the source of your unease, the focusing on the body in your meditation is the most powerful antidote to your distress. It is a safe and grounded place to meet your dragons. . .

Now move to your breathing, keeping in mind the intimacy with God in so doing – as we reflected above. Stay with each breath, one full breath in, one full breath out, keeping your heart and mind open and free. Then focus on your heart and its beating. Just by shifting your attention to its rhythmic pulsing, you will notice and feel its gentle power. Finally, sense the extraordinary ebb and flow of the blood to all the extremities of your body, moving out and drawing back in the most amazing way. As well as circulating health and energy all through you, visualise the stream of grace and blessings that are flowing into every crevice of your soul. Stay with this and let yourself be overwhelmed by the wonder and miracle that you are. (Travelling Light p91)