

Week beginning 16th August – Travelling Light (an extended reflection)

When we are travelling light, the divine light we carry within us is set free to travel as well. It is about the letting go of the baggage of our lives and also about the travelling light we bring to the darker places. This reflection is an attempt to explain how I understand one of the main processes for making headway along our often dim paths of pain into God's light . . . We have already touched, in previous reflections, on various ways of encountering and discerning the levels of darkness and light along the inner journey of our lives. These ways and skills, all have, in general, a number of common characteristics. Among such 'givens' I emphasise the following:

- I. Noticing/awareness
- II. Separating/distancing
- III. Holding/waiting
- IV. Understanding/enlightenment
- V. Loving/compassion

After many decades of trial and error, what follows now is one person's tentative attempt to weave together into a seamless robe, these redeeming and liberating graces of healing and growing.

As I watch myself, the first thing that happens as a result of a disturbing and hurtful experience is the perceived impact (charge) of my defensive resistance – that is, denial, fear, shame, anger, hurt, impatience, loss or frustration . For a moment it is all one flash of experience as mental, physical and emotional reactions come together. What happens next is my conscious awareness of what is happening in me. Sometimes in the past this awareness, this noticing took ages . . . Now, on a good day, I notice my agitation, jealousy or resentment straight away.

To notice so as to separate

The moment the negative emotion is recognised the true self returns to the centre . . . Now I can choose. Now I can be compassionate to myself and others. The awareness of the fact that 'I am angry' meaning 'I have anger', 'I am afraid', meaning 'I have fear', rather than 'I am the anger', 'I am the fear' breaks the awesome power of sudden rage. What is to be avoided is our becoming identified with the emotion, our being taken over by the strength of our reaction . . . Without the alchemy of awareness, this is the blind moment when awful and irrevocable things are said and done. What is not owned will be dangerously and wildly projected. . . Through observing, noticing I no longer identify with my negative emotion, I am more than it . . . This is a crucial moment in the process. Once I have choice I am free . . .

To separate so as to hold together

It is important to remember that, by holding it in patience, the negative or hurting emotion in question may turn out to be quite different from the first diagnosis. It is as we wait for the layers of surface meanings to be replaced by more authentic ones, that much essential disclosure takes place. This exercise of 'breathing into' the jealousy or fear or shame is the surest place for transformation to happen. It can be a mistake to name the emotion too definitively too soon. We close the door on vital, personal discovery when we are too sure of our conclusions. What at first feels like the energy of anger, when held for a time of non-judgement, may regather itself under a more accurately named emotion. When this kind of awareness is happening, true revelation is taking place. . .

(What is recommended by the wise ones we trust is to simply 'sit with' the feeling without explaining, vindicating or blaming. 'Breathe into it'. Stay with the breathing. Allow the connected thoughts, memories or feelings back into your meditation for as long as it takes. Do not wish or force them away. This only puffs them up. Neither should you feed or empower them, by wrestling with them, denying or distorting them. Have no expectations. Just calmly continue to observe, as

though at a distance, all that is taking place in your head, heart and body. The anxieties, fears or resentments will return again and again, to knock on your door, to repossess your house; you do not have to invite them in. Neither do you argue. You keep your peace and courteously respect the distance between you and them.)

To hold so as to understand

Sometimes I imagine myself sitting in a clearing in the forest. I am quite still, waiting for what may emerge from the dark places between the trees around me. It is not a comfortable place to be. It requires courage and confidence to face the empty void . . . This threshold-time of holding or sitting with the disturbing feeling is about giving life a chance to teach us something new and maybe very necessary for our inward growth. . . To escape from the pain too soon is to miss the inbuilt possibility for healing and growing, waiting to reveal itself. At this point, we now move on to another significant opportunity for growth in grace to become available.

We need to learn to live with ambiguity. Richard Rohr has much to offer about the blessing it is to be able to hold together the opposites in our lives . . . Somewhere along the time of our lives we have been led to believe that things should be otherwise, that our days ought to be lived out beneath a cloudless sky! Somewhere inside us we expect our existence to be always happy, that unhappiness is a foreign body to be neutralised and excluded as totally and finally as possible. Reality, however, is different. Nobody promised us an everlasting rose-garden. And even the rose-garden contains weeds and flowers. Getting rid of the weeds may damage the roses. Let them all grow together, said Jesus, the wheat and the tares. A healthy garden can hold them all. There is a night and day in every twenty-four hours. There is a dark side to every ray of light. Each moment of joy has its suffering twin. This is the way it will be. It is the way it is. There is a world of wisdom in the acceptance of this truth. The way it is. . .

This, I think is what we try to do with the contrasting inhabitants of our hearts. We hold them trustingly. This is immensely difficult to do. . . There is, for instance no end to the sheer and subtle power of the ego that, at its most destructive, can totally distort the nature of reality. Neither is there any limit to the surge of pure energy and vision that makes us feel only a little less than the angels. . . Thus it was with Jesus. There are no shades or subtleties of personal or archetypal shadow that he did not encounter at extreme levels in this often-tormented soul. Holding the opposites together did not come easy for him. In his forty desert days he was wracked by his violent demons. He was no stranger to the painful ambiguity of his reconciling mission . . . In the midst of his night of holding on to the extremes he was destined from all time to carry, while devastated and despairing, he was obedient. He listened to the whisper of his divine Parent even when it faded into total silence. . . When we reflect on the image of the cross, we see Jesus, writhing in agony, physically nailed to his anguish, restrained and restricted by the conditions that have the power to end his journey and his life. He cannot avoid this awful place - but trapped though he is, he is still free to choose. He can choose to be disempowered by allowing the hurting and grief within him to turn outwards as an expression of bitterness, aiming to deflect away from himself the pangs of pain by blaming, indicting and condemning those who set out to destroy all that his holy heart had longed for. Instead he waits. He holds the disfiguring torments within himself by simply accepting it – accepting it without judgement, falling back into the arms of the One whose width and depth, whose height and length, surpasses all created understanding. It is from this waiting space of inner holding that the one response of Jesus is created – the powerful outflowing of unconditional love. His pain is still pain, his death on the cross is still a stark and deadly sin, but by accepting without resisting, by trusting in a mystery that transcends the awful horror of that moment, his death-filled agony is transformed into life-giving energy – the beginning of resurrection. . .

If, like Jesus, we can accept all, even though we may well feel that we do not understand anything; if we can trust enough to wait and hold the painful memories and emotions within us even though

something inside us is crying out for revenge or retaliation – then, and only then, (and eventually) a blessed peace, a greater understanding and a deeper insight into the meaning within the darker feelings is released within us – revealing the way through, into the growing, loving spaces of our liberated souls. This is the moment when we can truly know that Jesus Christ is raised from the dead.

To understand so as to love

The only end of this holy process is to increase the love in the world by humbly holding, and then transforming, the hateful and the hurtful. It is not easy to refrain from judging. When we judge we recklessly project our own blindness. To be non-judgemental is to be saved. From the raw material of the negative and fallen bits of every day's experiences, by virtue of our birth and baptism, we are called to be alchemists of love. This is the painful ego-death from which the summer blossoms grow. This is the winter-holding where, out of sight, the transforming miracles happen. It is the travelling with Jesus from our own Good Fridays to our Easter Sundays. It is the co-saving of the world with him, our co-creating of a new springtime for the churches.

In summary, the energy that initially draws us out on our inner journey, that sensitises our awareness to the sudden reactions that engulf us, that enables us to distance ourselves momentarily from those emotions so as to accept and hold them within our hearts, is the human-divine love of God. And the energy that reconciles the irreconcilable, that builds bridges across the hostile spaces in between, that holds together the seeming opposites both within ourselves and outside, that breaks down the fear of difference and breaks through into the light, that drives creation relentlessly onwards towards total intimacy with Being itself, is none other than the same uniting, incarnate, divine love that dwells in the heart of all things. (Travelling Light pp157 – 169)

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

Call all your angels now, as you begin this challenging meditation. Make the Sign of the Cross in honour of the Blessed Trinity dwelling within you. Light a candle and settle yourself into your favourite position. Imagine yourself in a thick forest. You are sitting in the middle of a clearing. Bring your whole self to this place – your forest of current fears, doubts and longings. You want to understand what is going on in your life . . . You do not know what will come out from the forest into the clearing. Will it be something threatening? Or will it be gift? You sit and wait. You do not judge or make assumptions. After a while you become aware of something emerging from the shadows. It draws closer. You are tempted to name it, you want to define it. Do not do so. Continue to sit there and wait. Let it continue to reveal itself. Breathe into the unnamed emotion that is still surfacing. Remain with this conscious 'breathing into'. Some insight or self-knowledge or piece of wisdom will disclose itself enough to be recognised and held. . . Gently ask yourself 'What was it that emerged from the forest? What did I learn? What enlightenment, what gift did it bring? . . . Do you feel that you can hold all these glimpses about yourself in calmness, even as you believe yourself to be held by your ever-loving God. (Travelling Light p 171)