

INSANITY

When I was young I clung to beliefs
and things that had no substance. I left
myself to look for the self of the world.
Fear came with all its complications.
I was at play in the world's insanity
until I was driven out of my mind and sane.
Friend, do not get too complicated.
The mind is full of arrows without substance,
yet they wound and weaken the heart.
I have doubted, and doubt is foolish.
Full of doubts, I cast them out, full of fear,
yet each heart is the beating universe.
Nothing can harm that. Full of despair,
I shake with joy. Wisdom walks among us.
She will test your mind, your heart, your fears,
your cherished common sense.
There are those who live who walk as the dead.
Do not be among them. I never leave
the reality of God's presence in me.
Inner reality will give you wisdom.
Act from it and be free. Let your ego
fall on the floor. To be with us, you must
leave behind the small thing you think you are.

~the voice of Francis in *Holy Madness*

HOW FRANCIS AND LEO PONDERED PERFECT JOY

Francis and Leo were walking the long walk from Perugia to St Mary of the Angels. Francis' unshod feet were so cold they alternated between sharp pains and numb stump like feelings. His hands were stiff, his back hunched over to protect him from the icy air. Leo walking before him did no better. It was a long night.

Francis called to Leo, "Brother Leo, if it were to please God that the companions should give, in all lands, a great example of holiness and edification, write down, and note carefully, that this would not be perfect joy."

Later Francis called to him a second time: "O Brother Leo, if the companions were to make the lame to walk, straighten the crooked, chase away demons, give sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to the dumb, and if they should even raise the dead, write with a firm hand that this would not be perfect joy."

Even later, he cried out again: "O Brother Leo, if the companions knew all languages, were able in all science, could reveal the hidden meanings of all Scripture, if they had the gift of prophecy, and could see, not only the future things, but also the very heart of all consciences and all souls, write again that this would not be perfect joy."

A few steps later, he cried out again with a loud voice: "O Brother Leo, you little lamb of God! If the companions could speak with the tongues of angels, explain the course of the stars, knew the inner qualities of all plants; if all the earth's hidden treasures were revealed to them; if they were acquainted with the various qualities of all animals, of men, of trees, of stones, of roots, and of waters - write that this would not be perfect joy."

Shortly after, he cried out again into the cold night: "O Brother Leo, if the Friars Minor had the gift of preaching so as to illuminate the hearts of all beings, write that this would not be perfect joy."

Brother Leo of the open heart and the frozen fingers, faithful companion, smiled within himself, "Francis, if these great things are not perfect joy, teach me then the true way of perfect joy."

"Brother Leo, if, when we arrive knocking at our companions' door, cold and trembling, dirty, tired and hungry, the doorkeeper does not recognize us and asks us who we are. If, when we tell him, he does not believe us but shouts, 'You liars and impostors, you go about deceiving the world and steal money from the poor!' If then he slams the door leaving us outside, exposed to the elements, suffering cold and hunger, and we are not ruffled and do not murmur against him, and accept this injustice, this cruelty, this contempt with patience humbly believing that the doorkeeper really recognizes us, and in truth God makes him act in this manner, write down, O Brother Leo, that this is perfect joy!

And if we knock again, and the doorkeeper comes out with a knotted stick to drive us away with oaths and blows saying, 'I will send you two thieves to the hospital!' And if we entreat him with many tears to open to us and give us shelter for the love of God, and, he seizes us, and throws us on the snowy ground, if we bear all these injuries with patience and joy, thinking of the sufferings of our Blessed Lord, which we would share out of love for him and love for our own true selves, write, O Brother Leo, that here, finally, is perfect joy!

Despite the bone chilling cold, Leo broke into a perfect smile.

"Brother, listen to this. Above all the graces the Holy Spirit grants to her friends is the grace of overcoming the ego, knowing the core of who you really are, and accepting willingly, out of divine love, all suffering, injury,

discomfort and contempt like the good Christ who emptied himself in union with all beings, that all beings might know peace, that all beings might be freed. Free. No separation. Perfect joy is when we become like this.”

And so it is that two men made their way through the icy cold to the gates of St. Mary of the Angels.ⁱ

STATES OF BEING

Most of us cannot consciously bear naive `niceness' or arrogant righteousness, but these things are often subtle, creeping into our lives without our awareness. Niceness disembowels the fierce essence of loving-kindness. Righteousness mocks mercy and compassion. Through naked intent, the ruthless practice of presence and the contemplation of states of being companions avoid the sticky pallor of `niceness' and the hypocrisy of righteousness.

As humans we do little that is not self-seeking or offering us some sort of pleasure. Pleasure is a prime motivator of human beings. Even the most giving and generous act offers the giver the reward. If we were to examine ourselves we might find at such moments elevated self esteem, a sense of meaning and purpose, freedom from guilt or fear. This is the human condition. A cultivated awareness of our own motives leads us to humility and humor.

Tony DeMello, SJ, the Indian priest, mystic and psychologist, used to belly laugh as he told people he wanted to write a book in response to the title I'm Okay. You're Okay. DeMello's imagined book was I'm An Ass. You're An Ass. He would laugh wildly, “What a relief to finally be free of trying to prove you are not bad or good.” The root for the English words human, humility, humor is humus, the earth we are made of. DeMello was silenced by the Vatican after his death. DeMello would appreciate the humor of this. The jokes we tell on ourselves are the best cures for niceness or arrogance.

States of being whether mental, emotional, physical or spiritual are not the truth about anything. They are passages in life's journey. Rooms in a castle. Boxcars in a long train riding a track from here to there and back. They may be waves of the sea, wild or calm, coming in or receding, but they are not the ocean. The Hindu saint, Kabir, says, “I laughed when I heard the fish in the sea was thirsty.” So it is with states of being, they are only states and not reality. A mood, an attitude, a perception may block the authentically precious present with its outrageous possibilities.

We define ourselves through occupations, education, relationships, religions, citizenship, roles, qualities, emotions, status, all of which are subject to change. Many of us experience identification with the crimes and sins of our past. Others are addicted to images of their accomplishments or goodness. Many of us find ourselves identifying who we are though the experience of a particular grief, pain or hurt as if we were that grief, pain or hurt. We say, “I am depressed”, identifying with the condition. We are not the state of being of depression. We are simply experiencing it. Who are we? Who is the mysterious one who witnesses the states of being?

Our differing cultures, religions, nation states, even our bioregions condition us to experience the world in particular states of being which are then called the truth. From these we derive what a man is and a woman is and how they both are supposed to feel and act. From these we understand our relationship to the earth and other creatures. The economic class we were born into gives us differing lenses of perception, which we call real. The terrorist and the antiterrorist each experience themselves as in service of the good and the true. Only through the

open practice of presence to the great silence and to ourselves and others can we break the spells of our conditioning.

What is at stake is our freedom and our joy. A companion in the practice of presence to self or others contemplates and recognizes the states of being for what they are. States of being can hold us hostage. If we identify with them they tell us who and what we are. They tell us that joy is a blip on the screen of life, occurring only under certain inner and outer conditions. Remember the disciples at the transfiguration of Jesus. They wanted to remain in that ecstatic state. When we cease to identify ourselves with or be held hostage by states of being we attain our freedom to act spontaneously and experience joy as the great underground river, our natural state.

Does this mean we don't experience the full range of our feelings, or have opinions and attitudes about values, politics, a philosophy of life or act in a creative way to express these things? Certainly not! It simply means our identity does not rest in these things but in the great I AM of Jesus or the Suchness of Buddha or the Union with the Beloved of Rumi or the great yogic mantra, Hamsa, I AM THAT.

As we are present to ourselves, witnessing with awareness the states of being through which we journey, we watch ourselves constantly changing. We may ask, "Who is doing this watching?" We might observe, "When I was a child I was totally myself. When I was a young adult I was totally myself. Now I am older and it is still I." Who is that I?

Our way requires a naked intent pressing on the heart of great silence within and about us. Most of us verbalize this desire but in actuality we prefer our own limited understandings, addicted to certain states of being, ideas, feelings, judgments. This is the human condition. We do not get to escape it by fighting it. We witness it and accept it, holding the paradox with awareness.

Our traditions and the experience of our ancestors recount the various challenges, illusions and delusions of the spiritual life. We can expect them. In the fourth order we embrace these challenges as teachers and guides on our journey. In the Appendix of this book you will find an outline and brief discussion of these.

We are embodied persons as well. Mental, emotional and physical health require our loving attention. A spirituality of compassion does not ignore these, but attends to them with healing intent, and/or manages the symptoms of chronic conditions. In the Appendix you will find a discussion of mental health and chronic stress issues that may affect the spiritual life. Again, they are our teachers.

Witnessing and accepting in the circumstances of our lives are disciplines, yet the ability to enact them is a grace. Love and passion for the heart of life are motivators. We cannot create these. They are a grace. Any attempt to explain this is imagination. We do not know. But many experience that in powerlessness and in the acceptance of our situation; actual naked intent may arise and surprise us. We find ourselves pressing upon a blessed cloud of unknowing. These words could go on forever and still fall short of their meaning. You must take it from here.

COMING INTO SILENCE

Cultivating the Witness – A Body Meditation

"All my being is alive with the hum of God." Breathe, lift hands slowly from the midsection as if to scoop up water, bring hands over head and face, down the body to the feet as if washing with invisible waters. Do this three times.

Repeat the mantra with each movement as you place hands over the ears with fingers touching the back of head, then on the face, the heart, the midsection, and the abdomen. Remember to be particularly compassionate toward those places of pain. If desired quietly repeat extended hums for a little bit until it resonates in the body. Then fall into silence.

Remember:

I make my mind to hum like a bee.

I rest in the sound of the breath of blessing.

So hum is the deep silent song of my lord.

So hum is hymn the flowers in everything.

SOUNDS

If you have a fourth order group sing together your chants, sounds, or hum, allowing the sounds to blend with each other and transform. If you are alone in practice, continue your humming and chanting as a way of allowing the silence to sing with you.

CONTEMPLATIONS

Troubles

"I have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened."~ [Mark Twain](#)

The Dream

In your dream there are six paths,

but when you awake

they will be reduced to nothingness.ii ~Yokadaishi

The Lesson

Word, Thought, Kula and Akula cease to be there!

Neither silence nor yogic postures gain you admission there;

Neither Shiva, nor Shakti abide there!

Whatever remains is That; this is the Lesson!ⁱⁱⁱ – Lalla-Ded

On Francis' Perfect Joy

We misunderstand a passage like this if we think Francis is saying we should "put up with" suffering and indignity. He also does not mean we should cultivate some sort of immunity to pain. He means that when such discomfort does not disturb our joy, then we will know that our joy is "perfect." Perfect joy is the gold standard. We know we have gained access to the sacred cosmos when our joy is imperturbable.

Clearly perfect joy is no ordinary emotion, for the joy we have in completing a project, besting an opponent, or making love to our spouse always dissolves in the face of frustration, indignity, and pain. Perfect joy is immune to the ups and downs of the conventional world because it lives elsewhere. It is the distinguishing mark of our entrance into the sacred cosmos. When handing over our cloak or automobile brings us perfect joy, we have dissolved the everyday world into a larger reality. If we pay attention to what is stirred up within us while these events are taking place, we begin to appreciate that yielding in poverty changes the world and keeps our body-and-mind in a blissful state. We are no longer "there" in the world of public opinion, but on another plane entirely. The spiritual practice of poverty is a genuine sadhana because it changes our consciousness, revealing a joyous reality beside which the everyday world appears cramped and depleted.^{iv} ~ John Ryan Haule

Mindful Breathing

Do not lose yourself in dispersion and in your surroundings. Practice mindful breathing to come back to what is happening in the present moment. Be in touch with what is wondrous, refreshing, and healing both inside and around you. Plant seeds of joy, peace, and understanding in yourself in order to facilitate the work of transformation in the depths of your consciousness.^v ~ Thich Nhat Hanh.

A Free Mind – A Free Heart

This then is what it means to seek God perfectly: to withdraw from illusion and pleasure, from worldly anxieties and desires, from the works that God does not want, from a glory that is only human display; to keep my mind free from confusion in order that my liberty may be always at the disposal of His will; to entertain silence in my heart and listen for the voice of God; to cultivate an intellectual freedom from the images of created things in order to receive the secret contact of God in obscure love; to love all men as myself...^{vi} ~ Thomas Merton

Bell of Mindfulness

Sometimes I wake up in the morning; I am consumed by suffering, full of fear, full of doubts, full of shame. But then I feel this shame as a bell of mindfulness. I breathe in and breathe out, and I am grateful to be free to touch these emotions, to establish a different relationship with them, to be able to have the possibility to make different choices in my life. When I live in forgetfulness, I have no choice. My conditioned nature is deciding for me."^{vii}

~Claude Anshin Thomas

Really Beginning to Live

The deep secrecy of my own being is often hidden from me by my own estimate of what I am. My idea of what I am is falsified by my admiration for what I do. And my illusions about myself are bred by contagion from the illusions of other men. We all seek to imitate one another's imagined greatness.

If I do not know who I am, it is because I think I am the sort of person everyone around me wants to be. Perhaps I have never asked myself whether I really wanted to become what everybody else seems to want to become. Perhaps if I only realized that I do not admire what everyone seems to admire, I would really begin to live after all. I would be liberated from the painful duty of saying what I really do not think and of acting in a way that betrays God's truth and the integrity of my own soul."^{viii} ~ Thomas Merton

STORY

What story about who you are do you buy into most frequently?

Tell a joke on yourself! Share your most embarrassing moment! Remember when you lost your sense of identity, a time when your whole idea or image of yourself was turned upside down! What do these stories say about you?

BLESSING

Don't look back. Something might be gaining on you. – Satchel Paige

ⁱ Flaherty, Barbara. Contemporary adaptation from *The Little Flowers of Francis* by Fra Ugolino da Santa Maria, 14th century.

ⁱⁱ Yoka-daishi, Sho-do-ka, *Song of Realization*. From "*Buddhism and Zen*". Edited and translated by Nyogen Senzaki and Ruth Stout McCandless. Philosophical Library. Escondido CA 1953

ⁱⁱⁱ Yoka-daishi, Sho-do-ka, *Song of Realization*. From "*Buddhism and Zen*". Edited and translated by Nyogen Senzaki and Ruth Stout McCandless. Philosophical Library. Escondido CA 1953.

^{iv} Haule, John Ryan. *The Ecstasies of St. Francis: The Way of Lady Poverty*.

Lindisfarne Books. Herndon, VA 2004.

^v Thich Nhat Hanh. *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*. Parallax Press; 3 Sub edition, Berkeley 1987.

^{vi} Merton, Thomas, *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New Directions Publishing Corporation; Revised edition. New York 1972.

^{vii} Thomas, Claude Anshin. *At Hell's Gate*. Reprinted by arrangement with Shambhala Publications Inc. Boston, MA. 2004, 2006. www.shambhala.com.

^{viii} Merton, Thomas. *No Man is an Island*, Harvest/HBJ Book. New York 2002.