

COMMUNITY AS TEMPLE

The Temple of My Beloved

*The temple of my beloved
is extravagant with color,
leaf shape, pistil, stamen and seed.
Children play in garden path and spring.
Lovers lay in the green or walk hot
in their own heat toward the holy.
Each is a teacher to bow toward,
to lean upon in silence,
to drink from their liquid speech.
Songs are in the honeyed light like bees,
for in our breath my beloved breathes.¹*

voice of Francis in Holy Madness

COMMUNITY AS LOVE

Some old men went to Abba Poemen and asked,

"If we see brothers sleeping during the common prayer, should we wake them?"

Abba Poemen answered,

"If I see my brother sleeping, I put his head on my knees and let him rest."

Then one old man spoke up,

"And how do you explain yourself before God?"

Abba Poemen replied,

"I say to God: You have said, 'First take the beam out of your own eye and then you will be able to remove the splinter from the eye of your brother.'"ⁱⁱ

COMPANIONS ON THE WAY

In a community where there is great diversity the fundamental roots are respect and compassion. We bring to each other such joy and such opportunities for growth.

Prejudices and preferences of personality, culture or style are like the hard seed casing that covers our hearts and minds. They must be cracked open for the flower to bloom.

However we live, as hermits or in community, we experience a depth of relationship and unity with all that is. We honor all beings as the manifestations of the Unseen Source. We do not badger our companions with fault finding, or complain of them to others. We experience the beauty of the *heyoka*, the backwards teachings of Holy Wisdom, how others kindly mirror for us the dark side of our own moon. The gift of community is wholeness, the nakedness of God in our own naked selves.

To love one another is an action and a non-action. By non-action we mean the gift of simple and vulnerable presence to ourselves and to each other. This is the basis of our life together and from it all else proceeds. Without this we are empty vessels and our actions are only impersonations of love.

The Sufi, Al Ghazzali, reminds us to uplift each other by offering friendship that is dependable, praying for each other with the same intensity we pray for our own well-being, letting each other know we care, expressing affection, praising one another for his or her good qualities. We do not hold grudges and resentments, but seek inner and outer reconciliation. Grudges and resentments are harmful to ourselves and others. It is helpful to forgive.

We refrain from causing harm or discomfort to our companions. We do not burden, weigh down or put a yoke on them. We do not give them advice when we know they are not able to act on it. We take care not to place our companions in awkward and difficult situations.

We should be attentive to cultivating skills, which are useful to our own support and to the work of Holy Wisdom. We are responsible to work. Sometimes we will work and still have unmet basic needs. We assist each other in time of need with basic survival requirements, such as food, housing or money, as well as assisting with various opportunities for serving the call of the Spirit. Francis was humble and open to receive from this bounty of 'the Lord's table'.

Always and everywhere we remember the great law of compassion: "If they are sick, visit them; if they are busy, help them; if they have forgotten, remind them."

In the garden of Divine Madness love plants its wild diversity of seeds. The seed of light is cast in the dark soil, and will flourish when that soil has been tilled by respect, humility, tolerance, humor, compassion, and forgiveness. This holy madness of community is the water that softens even the hardest ground.

COMING INTO SILENCE

Sit quietly with your breath, breathing deeply a few times and then allowing the breath to take its own natural rhythm. The goal of this meditation is simple – to experience community - com (with) unity. Take the inner sword of discernment and cut through the veils of the illusion of separation into the core reality of our unity. In your imagination allow the images of your present community, including family, friends, co-workers to come before your inner eye. Allow the images of those you love and those who irritate and annoy you. With each image and on the breath, allow the inner truth to arise, saying, "Thou." Breath the truth of it until you feel the connection, but don't force. Know that if you cannot come to "thou" with a particular person there is simply inner work to be done on your part. Let the meditation continue until it subsides on its own allowing you to come into silence.

SOUND

Find time each day to allow the words of the Simple Prayer to resonate within you. Let yourself hum.

Great silence, may we hear you this day.

Great humming sound, may we feel you this day.

Great seed and hidden source, illuminate our hearts and way today.

May we honor ourselves and each other, as children of the unseen source.

May we walk in deep peace and know all creation, as our deepest relations.

May we honor all creation, as the manifestation of the unseen source.

May we live in loving kindness and simplicity.

May we live in holy freedom, responsibility and obedience
to that seed and hidden source.

Great silence, may we hear you this day.

Great humming sound, may we feel you this day.

Great seed and hidden source, illuminate our hearts and way today.

CONTEMPLATIONS

Community as Presence

When I was young, I volunteered at homeless shelters and in street ministries. The impulse for this arose from my own brother's life. He lived on the streets frequently and eventually died there. I loved the men at the shelter as a sister loves her brother. But I had this uneasy feeling of the disrespect inherent in street ministry. "I am the put together giver and you are the down and out 'givee'." I saw this most clearly while visiting a shelter in a big city. Ninety percent of the people in line were black, and one hundred percent of the people serving were retired white people. The retirees were good people doing good things. But the visual for me was an overwhelming experience of separation.

One night when I was serving soup at the shelter, I felt the old discomfort. Was I just assuaging my guilt? Was I proving I was a good person by doing a good deed on the other? There was a sense of dishonesty. When a guy came up in the line for seconds, I just handed him the ladle instead of food. "You take this. I'm hungry, and by the line you can see there are plenty hungry with me." He took it, and I stood in line as he served me. I ate sitting on the floor with the others.

I cannot tell you the joy I experienced, the felt rightness to be sitting there in my inner poverty and grief laughing with the men who were delighted by my company. The other joy was looking up at the line and the man who had taken full authority of that ladle and the organization of the line. There was laughter in that line. Something changed that night. Some kind of power was overturned and everybody knew it. I had had a profound experience of right relationship – my community expanded as well as the felt experience of union. Over the years I have tried to avoid positions of authority when I can. I am only interested in cooperative empowerment. The joy of living in the truth of who we are is overwhelming. - Barbara Flaherty

Community as One Song

Once upon a time, wasn't singing a part of everyday life as much as talking, physical exercise, and religion? Our distant ancestors, wherever they were in this world, sang while pounding grain, paddling canoes, or walking long journeys. Can we begin to make our lives once more all of a piece? Finding the right songs and singing them over and over is a way to start. And when one person taps out a beat, while another leads into the melody, or when three people discover a harmony they never knew existed, or a crowd joins in on a chorus as though to raise the ceiling a few feet higher, then they also know there is hope for the world. – Pete Seeger

Community as Liberation

"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." - Lilla Watson, A Brisbane based Aboriginal educator and activist.

Community as Annihilation

THE LEPER'S SONG

Those rich boys sing and dance
in their blessed holy poverty.
They leave behind the brocade patterns
for humble tunics in simple tatters.

The rich boys, they live with us
in a preferential option for the poor.
We, we are their mentors.
We, we are their doors.
How we love them and protect them,
for love, it is the lure.

The rich boys feed us food.
They wash our sores.
They wipe our tears.
We, we watch their moods.
We see tenderness and fear.
How they love us and protect us.
This kind of love, it does sear.

If this song seems callous,
and on our pain does transgress,
if the rich boys seem narcissistic
then you are twice blessed.

The rich boys sit with us
in unseemly poverty.
We, we are their mirrors.
We, we are their keys.

Don't hold your hand in protest
you are no leper, no blessed boy.
Lady Poverty is not that simple
our blessed Francis rightly guessed.
Don't hold your hand in protest
you are no prisoner but are free.
Your jailer is not outside you
as we can plainly see.

The rich boys and the lepers,
we dance hand and hand.
In moments there is wisdom.
In moments life is grand.
The rich boys and the lepers
a fierce embrace we do avow.

Yes, appearance is deceptive.
Appearance is a ruse.
Flesh falls quickly from all bones.
Life has its basic rules.

Take off your wonderful notions.
Grab your partner hurry quick.
We have only this moment in time
for our fabulous famous magic trick.

Don't try to add this up.
It is subtraction you must do.
One and one embraced does not equal two.ⁱⁱ

STORY

Life in community invites continual nurturance, awareness, healing, risking, forgiving, growing, pruning, openness, sacrifice and communication. We revisit this lesson many times as we grow into a healthy community and as we share with each other what we see, how we feel, what we want and what we need from each other.

Draw a tree or other plant in your journal. Describe your tree or plant. Where are you in your life cycle? What other life forms surround you? How do you bless and nurture them? What have you received? What have you given? What trouble have you caused others? How did that make you feel?

BLESSING

May they gather around the lamp of guidance. May every portionless one receive a share. May the deprived become the confidants of Thy mysteries.ⁱⁱⁱ - Abdu'l-Bahá

ⁱ *Stories of the Desert Fathers*. Christ in the Desert Monastery www.christdesert.org.

ⁱⁱ Flaherty, Barbara. *Holy Madness*. Chanting Press. Anchorage, AK 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Bahá'í Prayers*. National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States. Wilmette, IL 1991.