

“High on a Mountain Top”

Mark 9:2-9

February 22, 2009

There is an Indian parable in which a guru had a disciple and was so pleased with the man's spiritual progress that he left him on his own. The man lived in a little mud hut. He lived simply, begging for his food. Each morning, after his devotions, the disciple washed his loincloth and hung it out to dry.

One day, he came back to discover the loincloth torn and eaten by rats. He begged the villagers for another and they gave it to him. But the rats ate that one, too. So he got himself a cat. That took care of the rats, but now when he begged for his food he had to beg for milk for his cat as well.

“This won't do,” he thought. “I'll get a cow.” So he got a cow and found he had to beg now for fodder. So he decided to till and plant the ground around his hut. But soon he found no time for contemplation, so he hired servants to tend his farm. But overseeing the laborers became a chore, so he married to have a wife to help him. After time, the disciple became the wealthiest man in the village.

The guru was traveling by there and stopped in. He was shocked to see that where once stood a simple mud hut there now loomed a palace surrounded by a vast estate, worked by many servants. “What is the meaning of this?” he asked his disciple.

“You won't believe this, sir,” the man replied. “But there was no other way I could keep my loincloth.”—Mark Buchanan, “Trapped in the Cult of the Next Thing,” *Christianity Today*, September 6, 1999, 66.

In this wonderful mystical story from Mark it seems that Peter is in danger of losing his loin cloth and ruining the divine experience because he feels the need to build something permanent, something visible and tangible. The mountaintop experience was too much for him. It was a thin place where earth and heaven meet and it overwhelmed the disciples to see Jesus wrapped in divine glory.

According to the tradition of Celtic Spirituality there are places on this earth where the veil between the mortal and the divine is gossamer thin, places where one can get a peek of heaven. In Ireland caves and water wells are considered holy places, as are certain mountains, trees, rocks. In these places ancestors met with gods. In these places still modern Celts, Christian and pagan, meet with God and are filled with divine light. Certainly the mountain of transfiguration was a thin place where Jesus and the disciples were filled with divine light.

“On this arid summit, where the winds blow hard, where no root takes hold, where distance seems infinite and heaven close, the spirit is tested and replenished ... for the pilgrim has reached a thin place, where one steps into the highest dimension of one's existence.” Michael Mullen, [Croagh Patrick, A Perspective](#)

“Truth abides in thin places; naked, raw, hard to face truth. Yet the comfort, safety and strength to face that truth also abides there. Thin places captivate our imagination, yet diminish our existence. We become very small, yet we gain connection and become part of something larger than we can perceive. The human spirit is awakened and will grow if the body and mind allow it. Simply put, a thin place is a place where one feels that mysterious power take hold of one’s being.”

In every spiritual tradition there is an understanding of these thin places of the soul where we can have access to the divine. In the Hebrew bible, almost every spiritual encounter with a man and a woman happens at a well. Jacob finds Rebecca; Jesus converts the Samaritan woman at the well, near the access to the divine. Even our own tradition recognizes thin places. Henry David Thoreau during his sojourn at Walden Pond wrote of this magical pond that “earth’s eye looked into the beholder measuring the depth of its own nature.”

From our Native American experience: *“Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.”*— *Black Elk, Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Ogalala Sioux As Told to John G. Neihardt (Flaming Rainbow, 1933).*

It seems to me there are other aspects of life, not limited to the geographical, where we encounter God.

“A thin place is anywhere our hearts are opened,” writes Marcus Borg. “They are places where the boundary between the two levels becomes very soft, porous, permeable. Thin places are places where the veil momentarily lifts and we behold (the “ahaah of The Divine”)...all around us and in us”. (Borg’s *The Heart of Christianity*, 2003)

Thomas Merton, the great Trappist Monk wrote: “Life is this simple. We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through us all the time.”

Jesus was transfigured, transformed on the mountain, as were his disciples. None of them could ever be the same again. When we touch the divine, we are also transformed. We see the world differently—no longer a place of tribulation, of war and disease, but a garden filled with divine delights, a land ruled by the graciousness of God. We no longer see strangers and enemies, but sisters and brothers, children all of the same God.

Does this sound too Pollyannaish for you? We need more Pollyannas, more people willing to live every moment as if they walk with God in every step, as if every breath inhales the love of God, every action we take benefits another of God’s children.

Thin places may surprise you: when we receive an unexpected kindness, a forgiving touch, when we offer a helping hand, when we see the first bluebird of spring, when we reach treeline and take in the magnificence of creation...

We may prepare our own thin places by our prayer life. When we pray are we not trying to talk to God, or listen to God? When we worship are we not trying to open up to God and express our love and praise?

Years ago there was a "Murphy Brown" TV episode in which for some reason she asks the staff about their thoughts or feelings about God. There were different responses from different characters - one was an agnostic, one was a Baptist, and so on. But the response of the character Jim stands out. He said he was a Presbyterian and went to church every Sunday with his wife. He said, "I haven't had any experience of God. I go because it is obvious to me that the people who attend are experiencing God, and I am hoping that one day I will too."

Sound familiar?

The mystics of old suggest that there may even be a larger purpose to our collective existence beyond what we see now. They suggest that we are actually in the process of remembering in these coming generations what we already know in our souls. Some call this remembering the God within. Some say these thin places are only the way home. In order to experience God we must stay open to thin places with a sense of awe and humility. And though we may be tempted to build something around the experience in order to capture it and preserve it, as Peter wanted to do, we will have to be always ready to return to our everyday world, to be led by the Spirit to care for God's creation and God's people.

There is a true story of a 33-year-old truck driver by the name of Larry Walters who was sitting in his lawn chair in his backyard one day wishing he could fly. For as long as he could remember he had wanted to fly but he had never had the time nor money nor opportunity to be a pilot. Hang gliding was out because there was no good place for gliding near his home. So he spent a lot of summer afternoons sitting in his backyard in his ordinary old aluminum chair - the kind with the webbing and the rivets, the kind most of us have. One day Larry hooked 45 helium-filled surplus weather balloons to his chair, put a CB radio in his lap, tied a paper bag full of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to his leg, and slung a BB-gun over his shoulder to pop the balloons when he wanted to come down. He lifted off in his lawn chair expecting to climb a couple of hundred feet over his neighborhood. But instead he shot up 11,000 feet right through the approach corridor to the Los Angeles International Airport. When asked by the press why he did it, Larry answered: "Well, you can't just sit there." When asked if he was scared, he answered, "Yes...wonderfully so." —Robert Fulghum, *Everything I Really Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten*, (New York: Villard Books, 1988) p. 139

Brice Hughes has been at the bedside of many persons who have had experiences of "seeing past the veil." He writes, "Among our hospice, we frequently explained this with the metaphor that as one nears death, the boundary between this life and the next becomes thinner, more permeable...We have had our patients report lots of visits. Several of them have reported visits from Jesus; others have visits from passed-on family members.

At any rate, after over three hundred deaths in our hospice, all of the Near Death Experiences have resulted in an increase of the sense of peace. One patient I became particularly close to had a typical experience. While in the hospital, (he was not a hospice patient), his heart stopped. Aggressive intervention returned his heartbeat. When I came on-shift the next day, he had been moved to ICU. As I entered his bay, his face broke into a big grin. The first words out of his mouth were: "I've seen the light." He described a fairly typical Near Death Experience: bright light, overwhelming sense of peace, etc. The upshot of this...was that he insisted his doctor issue a "Do Not Resuscitate" Order. To get his doctor to make him a No Code, he practically had to twist the doc's arm. He was THAT convinced by what he had witnessed.

While Jesus may be the divine son of God, he wants to unveil or unleash the divine child of God in all of us. Henri Nouwen: "The basis of all ministry is the experience of God's unlimited and unlimiting acceptance of us as beloved children, and acceptance so full, so total and all-embracing, that it sets us free from our compulsion to be seen, praised and admired, and free for Christ who leads us on the road of service."

The following prayer from the pen of Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, writer, and contemplative, expresses the uncertainty of the tunnel and the quest for light: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing."—Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1983), 83.

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