

Unity Church Sunday, August 2, 2009

Opening Chant: "You are the One" (Reb Nachman of Breslov, 1772 – 1810)

I was scheduled to speak this morning on "Mystical Perspectives on Personal Power," but today is my birthday, so I am going to ask your indulgence in altering our focus for a few moments this morning.

Some of you know that I have just returned from my regular pilgrimage to the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, the oldest Cistercian Catholic monastery in the United States. For the past few years, Gethsemani has been my place of refuge, retreat and revelation. You may wonder at a rabbi retreating to a monastery but Gethsemani has been a destination for thousands pilgrims of all traditions for over a hundred years and the monks make me feel very welcome in their home.

They wear a traditional Trappist habit – a white tunic with a black hooded scapular and either a brown or black belt, the same basic outfit the Cistercians have worn for centuries, except for the fact that these very hip monks all seem to wear Birkenstocks, Crocs or Texas nowadays. I admit this rainbow prayer shawl makes an odd splash of color in the church and around the grounds.

For years I have taken at least semi-annual silent retreats, usually, until recently, with Buddhists, who are skilled at holding silence. Jewish silent retreats, I must admit, are a little less strict and seem to involve a lot of whispering.

God intervened to send me to Gethsemani by literally dropping a book on my head at the Traverse Public Library a few years ago: the autobiography of Gethsemani's most famous monk: Fr. Thomas Merton. God came crashing down on me and the next week I headed to Gethsemani, and it has been my spiritual home ever since.

A story is told of the great 18th century Jewish saint, mystic and teacher Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak Horowitz, known as the Seer of Lublin. He was called the Seer because of his deep intuitive insight and ability to see into the life of things that others could not easily see. When the Seer was a young child of 7 or 8, he would daily venture out into the forest alone. His father was who was a tolerant and understanding man, didn't want to interfere with his son's excursions, but he was concerned because he knew that forests could be dangerous.

One day he pulled his son aside. "I notice that every day you go off into the forest. I won't forbid you to go there, but I want you to know that I am concerned about your safety. Why is it you go there, and what is it you do?"

“I go into the forest, he said, “to find God.”

His father was deeply moved. “That is beautiful. And I am pleased to hear you are doing that. But do you not know that God is the same everywhere?”

“God is the same everywhere,” said the young Seer, “but I am not.”

God is the same everywhere, but I find on retreat that I am more apt to meet Her.

So I want to share this morning a story of what occurred during my most recent visit to Gethsemani. In addition to meditation and study, and the daily round of seven prayer services, composed mostly of chanting Psalms, beginning at 3:15 AM and ending after 7:30 PM, I was blessed to participate in a ritual I had never seen before in a Catholic setting, and this ritual was called the Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.

Much like Buddhist mindfulness meditation, or a Jewish shiviti meditation, Exposition involves the placing of the host in a special holder resembling an upright magnifying glass, and sitting in complete silence while contemplating this offering that in the Catholic tradition is the body of God made manifest.

And so a few of us each day would gather silently in the cool, candlelit the chapel and Fr Damien would remove the host from the sacristy with great care, place it on the altar which was decorated with lovely flowers the monks had grown, and take his seat. For an hour together in the sacred silence we would sit, each with her or his own prayers and hopes, each with physical and spiritual eyes open, ready to receive the blessing of the moment.

Since I am not of the Catholic faith, I decided that for me the meaning of this moment was to sit in the awareness of the presence of God and to support the prayers of the people for whom this seeing was literal.

I had been preparing for my trip with copious daily Buddhist meditation practice, so I breathed in and breathed out, and simply waited and tried to open my inside eyes, the eyes of insight, the eyes can see immanent divinity we call the Shekhina, she who dwells within. I found myself praying that God would show itself to me, in a way that I could understand as a Jew, and for this I prayed over and over.

(Chant: “God please reveal your Torah to me ...”)

After a time of sitting, a holy voice, in my tradition called a bat kol, a divine whisper, came to me in the silence of the church: a rabbi, engaging Buddhist practice in a Catholic monastery.

Bat Kol in Hebrew literally means "daughter of a voice" a "whisper", an "echo." Within both Jewish and Christian tradition, *Bat Kol* refers to a heavenly voice that reveals Divine messages and intention.

The instruction to "listen to God's voice" is continuously repeated in the Biblical book of *Deuteronomy* (27:10). The assumption of spiritual direction is that a *Bat Kol*, an "echo" of the Divine Voice, is accessible and is always whispering to us the guidance, truth, and wisdom that we need and yearn for in our lives.

There is a still, small voice - a *Bat Kol*, a daughter of a voice - like an echo, calling to us at every moment. Sacred listening is the skill of sensing, receiving, and "hearing" the Divine Whisper within our hearts. Our task in ... life is to pay attention, to listen, to trust in, and to respond to this voice. (adapted from Dr. Daniel Berlin, www.batkolwhisper.com)

So I would like to share with you what the whisper said, and to pass it along to you, from the notes in my journal, for you to take or leave, treasure or question, whatever feels useful to you, then we'll sit for a moment in silence. I believe this is why God arranged for me to be with you this morning.

It is not that you need to see me, said the holy whisperer, but that you must come to see the world through my eyes. These flowers are as much my children as Jesus. These lights are my light. This whole world – see it as I see it. And as you are my eyes, also be my heart, my hands, my feet, my womb.

Wake up and see – this is your calling. It will take courage, seeing the world through my eyes -- that is the real exposition.

And too remember that the exposition is not so much for you to see me, as it is for me to see you and you to know it. I see you in all your triumph and in your imperfection. It is you who are exposed to me, so that you can know, even with what you see as flaws, I see you and I love you.

The challenge is not to contract, but to stay in broader, open awareness – to see all things through my eyes, in their true form, as expressions of God. Suffering too is my suffering, the exile of the Shekhina, she who dwells within.

Whenever you see any suffering, any opportunity to bless, any place that can grow in love and the greatest good for all – anything you see now with your eyes is your ministry in the world. Nothing you see – if you see it – is too large or too small to receive my blessing, my rectification or my healing.

The only spiritual practice for you now is to stay open and expanded, to keep the “I” in perspective. Everyone you see, see through my eyes, the eyes of love, not the eyes of judgment, but love.

Allow spirit to fill you. See the world as spirit sees it. Go the places of loneliness and pain, as the prayer says,

“Lead me to place of loneliness and pain. May your words shine in my mouth. May I trust that the way you have made me is the way that is needed.”

Be a minister of the broken places. Minister always and everywhere to the Shekhina in exile. Your path is not to avoid pain, to avoid noise or disturbance or annoyance, but to see those things so that you can be my presence in them.

This is detachment from ego, the process of ever decreasing the gap you experience between you and me. So that you see the world through my eyes, so that you see any pain or harm or sin for what it is: a denial, a closing off from me and my never ending love.

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The Real Lovers of God

They are the real lovers of God
Who feel others' sorrow as their own.
When they perform selfless service,
They are humble servants of the Lord.
Respecting all, despising none,
They are pure in thought, word, and deed.
Blessed is the mother of such a child;
And in their eyes the Divine Mother
Shines in every woman they see.
They are always truthful, even-minded,
Never coveting others' wealth,
Free from all selfish attachments,
Ever in tune with the Holy Name.
Their bodies are like sacred shrines
In which the Lord of Love is seen.

*Free from greed, anger, and fear,
These are the real lovers of God.*