

THE PULSE OF SPIRIT



FROM THE MOUNTAINTOP

23 MARCH 2009

I'd like to read something from a book that somehow got into our house. It's entitled *The Art of Doing Nothing*. This is from a chapter entitled "The Art of Procrastinating." The author says this:

"Too bad most of us postpone goofing off until Saturday or Sunday. In doing so, we put pressure on the weekend. Procrastinating on schedule creates yet another form of obligation. So try to waste time on the spur of the moment, on a Wednesday or a Thursday. Later—much later—when you get the hang of it, you'll be able to show off and fritter time away on a Monday.

"An hour of procrastination is equivalent to an hour at the gym. Granted, dragging feet looks a lot easier than lifting weights. But don't let appearances deceive you. Repressing productive impulses is just as much of a workout as indulging in them. Like low-impact isometric exercises that involve very small muscle contractions but result in a marked increase in muscle tone, working against the relentless pressure of our self-imposed guilt can burn a lot of calories.

"To test this theory, stand next to a big pile of unopened mail. Decide not to rummage through it. Maybe it contains the refund check you've been expecting or a dreaded notice of termination from your cable company. So what. No envelope, please.

"Feel the tension in your body as you hesitate. Just a peek? Don't give in. As you hold out, consider the following: Not opening your mail is tantamount to arm wrestling with one of the most powerful gravitational forces in the universe—the Puritan Work Ethic." (*from The Art of Doing Nothing, by Véronique Vienne.*)

This is probably good medicine for most of us. It emphasizes the need for balance and for really being present. If we're in overdrive mode, we may need to do some work to be fully present and let the main event occur. There is a place for priorities and action plans. There are things to accomplish. But there's a main event, and it's happening now, and it's always happening now.

We have been speaking about the pilgrim's journey as climbing a hill or mountain. And in the twenty-fourth Psalm the question is asked, "Who shall ascend...the hill of the Lord?" I think that has a lot to do with the very simple matter of being present to allow what is of real value and meaning to be known in and through us, so that we allow that to be the ultimate beginning and ending of everything that we do—the beginning of every cycle and the ultimate conclusion of every cycle in our life. But it's not just a temporal matter; it isn't just something that happens through time. The place we refer to as heaven is rightly the beginning and ending of everything right now, held by us in the place of true being.

I was thinking about this pilgrim's journey. On that spiritual path, we look to something that is seemingly separate from us, perhaps perceived to be above us in some way. We may long for the experience that we imagine we would have if we reached our destination, and that is a very natural, healthy thing to do in the course of our life. But I think the actual experience of arriving there is something of a surprise.

Many of us are familiar with our Little Chapel. The experience of walking into that chapel says something about the pilgrim's journey and what it is to ascend the hill of the Lord, and what it is to arrive there. Because when you open the door and walk in, what do you find? It's essentially empty. If you look in the door, there is very little there. There's an altar, and it has a triangle in stone on the face of the altar; there is beautiful stained glass on the gable at either end. But the chapel itself is essentially empty.

The search for God is something like that. We can have images in our mind of what heaven is like, or what an angel is like; we can have ideas and conceptions of what God is. For Christians, there's an image of a man with long hair and a beard and robes, or perhaps a man on a cross, and there are many images in the religions of the world that depict divine being in one way or another. And yet the actual experience goes to something quite different.

If you open the door of the Little Chapel and look in, it looks to be empty, but if you step into the Little Chapel it is no longer empty. If you go into the Little Chapel looking for God, you could look around that building and you will see four walls and a humble altar. You will not see yourself being in the building. If you walk in alone it will be empty, except for you.

The prospect of that can be shocking for someone on a spiritual path. It seems so much more comforting to look to something that is separate from you, to aspire to something, to have an image of something. If a person keeps walking on their path, they keep climbing a hill. What begins to be apparent is that they are moving toward an experience of solitude, an experience where they will no longer be looking up to the top of the hill, wondering if you're finally there over the next rise, but metaphorically they will be standing at the top of that hill, no longer looking up, but looking out into the world from that vantage point. From that place, what is clear is that your role and function is to be all of who you are in the world in which you live.

That has been a scary proposition for people. It has seemed to be more comforting and comfortable to be climbing, ever aspiring and ever learning. It has seemed to be better to put off that day on which you find yourself at the top of the mountain.

One of the things that postponement buys us is the opportunity to continue to believe that someone or something else has responsibility for our life—to believe that how things go for us and for our world is in someone else’s hands, so that we can praise someone else or something else if things go well, and blame if they don’t. In short, we have thus reserved our right to be a victim, to claim that we are a victim of circumstances and the actions of others. You will lose that right if you come to the top of your mountain. You will have to give that up, I can promise you. It is inherent in standing there that this is *your* world, and these capacities of body and mind and heart and spirit, these are yours. You’ve created them; they’re in *your* hands.

When we have climbed our mountain, we have joined with all of being. We can imagine mentally, I suppose, what that means. Religiously we could speak of the angels of heaven, wherever they may be, presumably related to this earth, but not only this earth. There is being related to this solar system, this sun, this galaxy, this cosmos. The solitude comes from the fact that there is one being. And in climbing our mountain, what is inescapable is that we are one with all of being. And so there’s something else to give up, coming to that place: the belief that we are separate from others, that we could advantage ourselves over others, that we could somehow win and others would lose. It is how it seems to be on the side of the hill. It is not what is ultimately true.

I’d like to read from the twenty-fourth Psalm:

Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? or who shall stand in his holy place?

He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully.

He shall receive the blessing from the LORD, and righteousness from the God of his salvation.

This is the generation of them that seek him, that seek thy face, O Jacob. Selah.

Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. (Psalm 24:3-7)

“Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.” Are these not our words? When we ascend the hill of the Lord, as it’s put here, as we stand in the highest spiritual place in ourselves, is this not what we say? Through our own being, and to all of humanity, “Lift up your heads...and be lift up, ye everlasting doors.” These are *my* capacities; this is *my* body standing in that place. We bring this message into our world and the people around us through our own capacities. It is what we say to ourselves. There is something ultimately satisfying about that. A person could struggle with their capacities for a long time—

many people do. They're hard to control from any other place than the top of the mountain. We can do our best to break our bad habits, try to be good, try to do the right thing and express the right thing. It tends to be a push-pull battle, doesn't it? It is, from any other place than the apex point of who we are. Because if we keep ourselves out of *that* place, we have chosen not to be in the place of dominion, in the place of authority in our own experience, and in our world.

So it is good to share this meditation together in this hour, to climb the hill together and to stand in the apex point of being as one. It's not really "together." I guess there's some togetherness about it, but ultimately it is *as one* or not at all.

So good to share that experience together, and good to bring it into the world. To share the experience we have to give up our judgments. From the top of the hill you see. Seeing is different from judging. There are times I don't like seeing all that I see. And if you do want to see, climb the hill, because from the top of the hill you do see. But you give up the right to judge. How could you judge? It's your hill, after all, your world and your people. How could you judge? You may see, but if you are judging, you can't be at the top of the hill, because that's part of what keeps people from getting there.

The word in the Psalm for the one who dwells at the apex point is seemingly a religious name—the King of Glory. The name may be objectionable to many. I'm not stuck on that name, but I am very interested in the reality of the experience that the name points to. And if we're going to talk about something, maybe we need a name for it. It isn't about the name. It's about the reality of an experience that the name points to. If the name provides a door to that, great! If it doesn't, maybe something else will do. You can object to the names, but there's something bigger at stake than the name itself. There is the reality of an experience and what's actually happening for a person spiritually. That's actually the issue for you or for me.

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