

STIRRINGS IN THE HEART: CREATING A CIRCLE OF COMMUNION

2003

One room in our house is set aside for sitting together with people in their inner journeys. We call the room "the Poustinia"—a Russian word referring to a place of silence and solitude. On a table I have placed the picture of an icon someone gave me of Elizabeth—mother of John the Baptist, and Mary—mother of Jesus. They are clasped together, two tall willowy figures, one in crimson, the other in dark blue—the younger and the elder, both pregnant. I cherish it as a symbol of my work.

Recent months have been rich in soul nourishment for me—both in personal experience and in reading. Something has been drawing me to reach out to women with whom I have been in contact in some way in the recent past—simply to share thoughts. I casually mentioned this to one woman over the phone. She instantly responded, "I hope you do it."

In sharing my thoughts in this way, I recognize I am part of a tendency of women to create *circles of communion*. We are by nature non-hierarchical, preferring a more reciprocal way of connecting. Judith Duerk in *Circle of Stones*, an exploration of a woman's inner journey, asks the question: How different would it be if one could nestle into the circle of older women who would help a woman "trust her own becoming"? This is a tentative offering. You may well want to add your own reflections to a second circle of sharing. I welcome that.

A Friend's Shared Dreams

How should I begin? Burrowing through old correspondence in my files, I came upon a letter I had written to a friend more than a decade ago. She had confided in me two memorable dreams, inviting my response. I am always struck by the way our unconscious mind cleverly poses situations and symbolic figures which exactly fit our situation. Duerk writes, "Sometimes dreams alter the course of an entire life."

This friend has identified herself as an Enneagram Two—the Giver. Here are two of her dreams and my responses:

First Dream:

I am at an English pub-type restaurant.

I am at a place of nourishment and rest, my soul's true center and home.

We are seated in captain's chairs around round tables.

In this citadel of my soul, I have invited my ruling center, my captain self, that part of me which directs and commands, to become part of a whole unified self, to experience the "roundness" of my bring, its fullness and wholeness.

I am waiting for Carol to come. (her over-busy daughter's name)

I am lovingly drawing in the Carol-self that over-plans, overdoes, who is

busy and distracted by many things. I am also waiting for the birth-song to rise in my heart—my own particular carol.

There is a panhandler outside.

I am sometimes outside in the cold, begging for warmth, to be taken in.

The panhandler—a huge black man, robust, and not hungry—came in.

There is a shadowed part of myself—that is, a part I neglect and often ignore—who comes in boldly and receives what is given. This is a strong part of me, that part which can ask for nourishment, and recognizes where it is to be found.

He does not come to our table, because we had seen him outside.

Here is a puzzle. Why does he pass us by? Is there something in the fact that we have recognized him outside? Do we pass him by because he looks so robust, and not hungry—so that we do not think to invite him in? This part is not yet clear.

I think, "What is he doing out in the street?"

The ego self—that self formed through life experience which has learned to mask the true deeper self and its needs and wishes—does not understand why someone who seems so put together, so robust and full, so attractive and active and caring and busy with good deeds, should be panhandling. It forgets that we are all beggars at God's mercy seat, that we are "poor in spirit" to whom is given—not spare change—but the kingdom of God.

Second Dream:

I am having to encounter some workers. My husband has initiated contact with them.

Yes, it seems there is work to be done. Work that has come to light, in part, through my relationship with my husband. There is a spiritual initiation process going on akin to birth.

My husband apparently promised them more hours and more pay than they realized and they are angry.

Sometimes we are disgruntled at the pay-off (or lack of it) in inner work.

I am in an office setting. Fighting happens and swords appear, like fencing. I don't seem to be in danger; in fact, I succeed in grasping a long saber-type sword and folding it back into thirds, then stepping on it to stop the altercation.

What are your associations with fencing? It is a particular form of combat, rather sophisticated and artful mode, performed between two persons. Whatever your associations might be, you are good at it in the dream. Do you know the story of Arthur, "The Sword in the Stone"? There is something magical

happening in this part of the dream and may indicate some unrealized power. The meaning is not yet clear.

A young Chinese man is there who looks like Dr. Chen. He has a strong crush on me.

Much of inner work centers around the integration of opposing forces within us, and so our dreams present us with contrasts or opposites. Here we have a man (not a woman) who is young (not old) and who is Chinese or Eastern (not Western).

This points to some aspects of inner work which will involve the Masculine principle, that which is young, or new, and that which may have some of the character of Eastern ways rather than Western.

We cannot take it literally, but you may relate this to your recent attraction to Eastern health products which you have been purchasing and selling. You have been following some Eastern wisdom already with regard to your body. The East embodies the Feminine principle—the receptive mode. Tai Chi, for example, teaches us to go with the opponent instead of resisting him. Much of spiritual growth in later years is of this receptive yielding sort. we concede how little we really know of God's mysterious ways and we surrender to that mystery. Eastern religions emphasize quiet, solitude, meditation and contemplation. Action is to come from these poses, and not precede them, as occurs in our younger days when we feel there is so much to accomplish and learn.

So the Chinese figure in the dream may represent an integration of Masculine and Feminine. we contain both capacities within us. Sometimes we have overused one aspect to the neglect of the other.

The positive feminine part of you is open to exploring new ways of perceiving, will be willing to wait and be patient with process. The masculine part will contribute discernment and creativity, enabling you to make sound decisions about areas of distress to you currently.

The negative feminine will keep busy on trivial matters, be overly attentive to the needs of others to the neglect of her own soul. She will overwhelm herself with her importance as nurturer and Giver. The negative masculine will judge herself, be self-critical, will think she knows enough already through external formulations of religious teaching.

The Massage is the Message

It was my last day of a vacation trip to Los Angeles visiting Don's family. My sister-in-law Penny suggested we go together to get a special "Thai massage." Her daughter Lauren had told her about it. "They use their hands and fists, their elbows and knees, all parts of their body, in giving the massage. They even walk

on your back!"

That didn't sound appealing to me. "I don't think so," I said. But in the end, Penny cajoled me into going with her. We drove through Hollywood until we came to a cluster of little shops and business establishments grouped around a hollow square parking spot. Inside, we were greeted by a line of waiting Thai women who, one by one, were peeled off to conduct each of us to dimly lit square spaces enclosed by curtains. I lay down on a mat on the floor and soon my massager began.

Something about the gentle touch, the caring for the body, just the simple experience of being paid attention to which comes with a massage, always moves me to tears. My feelings of independence and competency dissolve and I melt. My massager was concerned, "Am I hurting you?" "Oh no," I replied. "I always cry when I get a massage."

As she began to work on me, and I felt her strong arm and elbow, I decided I should probably warn her to go gently. "Do you know how old I am?" I asked. "I am 75." She quickly reassured me, "I be careful."

From that point on, I sank down into a kind of oblivion as she moved around my body, first on one side, then the other, using different parts of her own body to massage mine. It felt soothing, intimate, personal, protected, secure. And it lasted an entire hour.

Afterwards, with her help I got my clothes on—I was tottering a little from total relaxation—and went and sat in the outer reception area. She brought me a glass of water, and sat down beside me. "Don't cry," she said again. "I cry when I'm happy," I explained.

After a moment of silence, she spoke. "My mother is 76," she said softly. *I thought, "Oh, like me."* After a pause, she continued. "She is still in Thailand." I could feel the sorrow in her voice. Then she made a gentle forward movement, just for an instant burrowing her head against my shoulder. "I felt like a baby," she said.

By then I was crying, remembering the quality of the massage and the hidden message it carried for us both. We had been mother and daughter—the first time for me.

"Eastern" Easter

When our Life/Work Direction colleague, Richard Faxon, died last summer, his wife invited us to look through his library and take what we wanted. One book I picked was *Meanings*, a series of essays by Krister Stendahl, Lutheran theologian and former Dean of Harvard Divinity School. I knew Stendahl to be someone the Jewish theological community respected because he approached Judaism in its own terms. Also he is careful to interpret the Scriptures in terms of their meaning to the early Jewish Christian community in which they were written.

One essay on "Immortality" caught my attention. I have always argued for the immortality of my soul—not on the basis of Scripture—but simply on my innate instinct that this core of being, my soul, once created in my mother's womb, could never cease to exist.

Stendahl pointed out that the Scriptures give the concept of immortality short shrift by mentioning the word only twice. The Old Testament views humans as created of dust. "The dust returns to earth, whence it came, and the spirit returns to God who gave it," writes the author of Ecclesiastes. And the spirit referred to is "not the individual's little identity spirit, but the life-giving power of God, the *ruach*, the wind which is withdrawn causing man [*sic*] to disintegrate into dust." My ears perked up at the phrase "*individual's little identity spirit.*" Could the focus on my soul's immortality contain a bit of hubris? Am I preoccupied with my own identity and its continuation into eternity? I was surprised when Stendahl goes further, identifying the concern for immortality of the soul as an essentially Platonic idea—the polarity of soul and body, a dualism which separates us from the Spirit which gives us life, whereas I am more inclined to see the unity of soul and body.

I tread carefully here, for I am confronting my own absorption with soul life over many years, which I could argue has brought me into a deeper understanding of myself and others, and of the nature of God. Now I have to ask if this has cut me off from a fuller understanding of life and death, in short, the meaning of Easter and the resurrection of Jesus. Easter appeared to shore up my sense of immortality by presenting me with a resurrected Jesus, a foretaste of my own future resurrection.

Stendahl's arguments lead me in a new direction. He suggests that the resurrection of Jesus does not so much answer the question about what happens to me when I die, but rather addresses the question of justice. In his words, "The question is not: What is going to happen to little me? Am I to survive with my identity or not? The question is rather whether God's justice will win out. Is this a moral universe or will evil win? Will the kingdom come somehow so that righteousness flows forth and justice is in the midst of us all? . . . Will God and justice have the last word?"

These questions made me pause. I began to make a connection to the times in which we are currently living, where issues of justice are stark and raw. I have not known how to pray at a time when, on the one hand, our nation is killing and torturing and causing suffering, and on the other, neglecting and ignoring the suffering in some regions of the world.

It helped me some during Lent, when a change was introduced in the opening prayer of confession in our services at the monastery. Added to "Forgive us for the evil we have done," was the line, "*And for the evil done on our behalf.*" This gave me a way to express my sorrow and need for forgiveness for actions done, not by me directly, but in my name as a U. S. citizen.

So this Easter I will not preoccupy myself with my soul's immortality. Rather, I

will let Easter speak of the coming of God's kingdom, of victory, a victory manifest by apparent weakness: turning the other cheek, loving one's enemies—a strange kingdom for which we are still far from ready. "We live in a nation that has no respect whatsoever for the power of weakness," wrote Stendahl in 1972, but he could have written it in 2005.

There is wisdom in this "a lower posture," which Jesus taught, and which is sometimes more evident in Eastern religious practices than in my own Christian community. I am currently part of a small group formed around contemplative spirituality, where I am grounded in silence and listening.

Perhaps, as Stendahl writes, "this whole search for identity perpetuation, or immortality, . . . should be lifted out of ego and placed in God." Rather than worrying about my identity in the hereafter, I can celebrate the coming of the kingdom of God and the beginning of eternal life within me now. . . humbly, joyfully.

I am clearly just a work-in-progress, sitting in the Poustinia, offering these tentative stirrings in my heart.