

THE INNER JOURNEY

My lifelong focus has been on “the inner life.” This was not something directly encouraged by the spiritual mentors surrounding me as I grew. And in fact, as author Nor Hall writes, “Forced introversion does not work. You cannot suddenly decide to withdraw from the surface of reality *unless you have been pulled by an interior string.*”

I felt that “interior string” long ago, recognizing that for me reality was so much more than surface. I plunged into the depths readily, captivated by the never-ending trip. And it always came out, in part, in writing—not unusual for the person embarking on this inner journey. Sometimes it has expressed itself in personal letters to friends; eventually it came out in published works. I have also had a continuing outlet through meeting with persons who also feel drawn to their own inner landscape and want to share this with someone who is a kindred spirit.

Sharing the Spiritual Journey with Others

Here at Life/Work Direction, during the course of our process with people, we pause at one point in the middle to talk about their spiritual journey. We do not necessarily anticipate that every person even has such a concept of themselves, but for the most part people who are referred to us have an interest in exploring this with two nonjudgmental persons. Since we have had time to establish rapport, this session goes productively for the most part.

A lot of the persons we see—since we are in Boston—are lapsed Catholics, and there are always a few Protestants who could apply that label to themselves as well. There are often persons who have grown up without a religious tradition, and find themselves flailing about in Eastern mysticism, as an attempt to order their lives through mindful meditation, Zen or Yoga. We have our share of dyed-in-the-wool “cradle Christians” too—terms Episcopalians are fond of, and which could well be assumed by those raised in homes with strong Christian convictions and teaching.

To get around the awkwardness of clichés and artificial theological language, we ask them to do three things: looking into the past, to trace the milestones in their life journey which they would name as contributing to whatever they call “spiritual” growth. Most people have a series of little “Ebenezers” (a Biblical term referring to stones Israelites set up to remind them of God's intervention in their lives as a people at various locations on the way to the Promised Land—a phrase incorporated into an old gospel hymn, “Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by thy help I've come.”

Secondly, we ask them to describe their present sense of their relationship to God (for some, even that word has to be translated into “the Divine” or “the sacred”) by

drawing it for us. We get all kinds of crude depictions in answer to this assignment, and Don especially enjoys taking great liberties in interpreting what they have put on the page. The color matters, the choice of paper, the heaviness of line, the symbols employed, the placement on the page. And he is always careful to point out that since the entire concept came from them, whatever is splashed all over the page is within them. Putting some ominous dark cloud figure in one corner to represent a God who is maintaining a stony silence in their lives does not release them from acknowledging that they put God on the page, and thus this is their concept of God, not some arbitrary and literal reality.

My question always has to do with what their concept of growth or development is, so I ask, "How would you show movement, or growth, using what you have drawn? Would you have to add something, erase something, change the position of some part, or make new connections somewhere? Etc." They always seem to have an extraordinarily wise response here, knowing what has to change. Often it involves some integration of the figures they have drawn. Usually whatever is indicated is a step they seem to already be engaged in. In any case, we can support them in whatever that change is.

Finally, to look into the future, we pose a question: Suppose you have six months to live, and were guaranteed success in whatever you undertook, what one thing would you choose to do? Here Don favors grand schemes to bring peace in the world (such as implanting a special electronic gadget in everyone's forehead to make them peaceful). But most folks are quite imaginative and invariably come up with something visionary, but deeply connected to who they are. We have a good grasp of their life history from previous sessions, and have analyzed their "core traits" and gifts. What they propose doing in the six month period emerges as a metaphor for their calling, their true vocation. We find that exciting—for we know, in our work—that the person before us knows the answers to his/her own questions. It is up to us to elicit these answers by the kind of questions we pose.

The God Out There and the God Within

In all of this process with people, and also in the individual work I undertake with selected persons later, in a process we call Spiritual Companionship, I can detect a pattern of movement which seems to be universal and normative: it is the movement from the God Out There to the God Within.

I recognize this, because this has been my own movement, and it is this that I want to try to describe in words here. The God Out There is the God we learn about from our mother's knee, the stories of the Scriptures. We also take in the sense of that God by our parent gods—for that is what they are to us in childhood. We are taught to obey, not to lie, to be kind, and we are punished when we fail in these matters. Ergo, God must be like that.

Church, mosque, and synagogue amplify this God, and personify God in the teachings that emanate from these structures. We are part of a larger body of people who reinforce our concept of the God Out There.

Our reference to that God can continue for a lifetime—as it does for some. Such persons may be very strong believers, even strict and fundamentalist (Christians, Jews, Muslims), or they may be very strong resisters to faith, to the point of atheism for some. But the central concept for both believer and infidel is that of a God Out There, described in both harsh and kindly ways.

I was taught that this subjective God Out There (subjective because any description of this God is limited by our mental capacity to imagine God) wants to be in personal relationship to humans, which sets up a dilemma, since the God Out There has been mediated to me through parents, church, and community, with varying degrees of success in convincing me that I could trust this God with my rather strong-willed, and at the same time self-reproaching, fragile little ego.

My Own Therapeutic Process

The movement toward the God Within was tortuous and long. The story of my therapy at age thirty-seven unfolds this story. I needed help in exorcising the demonic in my ideas of God, polluted by my skewed sense of what it took to "win" that unconditional love. I do not now blame my parents (especially my mother, who had a strong introjected picture of God from her own aborted relationship with an adored but strict father), but I do see how it is necessary for everyone to "go beyond" their parents in order to locate God within.

Moving from the God Out There to the God Within had many ramifications. It meant no longer knowing truth with such certainty. As the author and monk Thomas Merton writes of the impossibility of certainty in knowing God:

I know nothing of You and, by myself, I cannot even imagine how to go about knowing You. If I imagine You, I am mistaken. If I understand You, I am deluded. If I am conscious and certain that I know You, I am crazy.

I could not go to the tablets of the law carved in stone—whether from the Old Testament—or St. Paul, or the church canon, or the unspoken rules of Christian conduct etched on my consciousness since childhood. I must stand alone before God, and discern the inner voice arising from within me.

Whole structures of meaning had to be discarded, or rebuilt. What about sex before marriage? What about praying for change in others and myself? What about choosing my vocation? At the time of my therapy, when I began totally rethinking the meaning

of my life, I briefly considered becoming a waitress, since eating seemed to be a basic need for human beings, but this was an idea I quickly discarded, since I am singularly inept in balancing trays. How do I view the Scriptures—the account of miracles, the Virgin birth of Jesus? Is there a "just war" or should I be a pacifist? (This was happening in 1968 when Vietnam was on everyone's mind.) What about church—its relevance?

Suddenly I was faced with a new freedom—to choose, to act, to love. It was not primarily a movement toward rebellion against my past. I could incorporate it, but move to include a larger palette of colors. And the ground on which I stood was God as I was experiencing God from within, not as God had been taught to me from outside. A subtle difference, but it changed everything for me. I no longer saw others as "in" or "out" but persons who were moving along a path in some direction. I could come alongside and see what that direction felt like, and learn from them. I did not need to change them. I got interested in the questions people ask, what they are curious about, where their ground seems to be.

This is why I moved so easily into walking with Don, a Jewish man on his own search, though I was totally oblivious to the fact that in his moving toward me, he was making some important choices of his own. When he told me one day he wanted to be baptized, I was astonished, and glad. Actually, we were both baptized the evening before our wedding. In retrospect, I am a little sorry now I went through this, for Don's baptism had a different meaning from mine, which was a re-affirmation. I see now I did not need to make that a marker for myself, but I felt so changed, I wanted to do it.

I embarked on a journey that continues to this day, a process I could describe as moving from knowing with certainty to not knowing, i.e. to faith. Along the way, I have been helped by reading books by other persons who have had to tread that same path. Recently I picked up again one by Patrick Henry. Its title is *The Ironic Christian's Companion*. I find it refreshing that so many other persons have walked this way—especially those who have not felt they had to jettison a vital living faith in the process, but have been able to redefine, really rediscover it.

My Move Toward The Contemplative Way

The first ten years after these changes begun in therapy, Don and I engaged in the social activist concerns of our society by founding the Urban Life Center. Even there, however, I found myself balancing the external focus with the more internally oriented activities of the psychological realm. I experienced the body-oriented bioenergetic therapy; I took a year of professional training in leading Encounter Groups, becoming quite proficient in this. My work with students became more central for me—engaging in questions of their inner spiritual development along with their academic and vocational goals.

By the end of the decade, we had moved to Boston where new vistas of spiritual influence made their mark. We found this city to be more Catholic than we had known before, but somehow I managed to sidestep the land mines of Roman Catholic hierarchy and discovered quiet corners of liberated Catholic monks and nuns who began introducing me to the contemplative way—a more mystical path. I hasten to say that I was not the best disciple for this mode, but I did find it refreshing and creative. It meant learning to listen to that inner voice of the God Within.

Imagine it being Catholics—with all their paraphernalia unfamiliar to me; their odd little customs and icons and ointments that seemed excessive to me as a Protestant. I had always looked at their ways of forgiving all sorts of lapses by confession with some envy because it seemed to relieve them of guilt more readily than my own patterns. But it was the revered writers within the Catholic community who gave me such a positive introduction to God the Beloved who seeks nothing less than union with us humans.

I began reading the Carmelites, a Roman Catholic order established in the sixteenth century by two remarkable persons—St. Theresa, a feisty Spanish lady whose instructions on the spiritual life read like a very harried person's diary jottings, and St. John of the Cross, the Spanish mystic who wrote almost erotic poetry of his yearning for God, as well as the better known opus on the "Dark Night of the Soul," which is a much needed accompaniment for anyone embarking on a spiritual journey.

Something about John's passionate poetry, an extrapolation of love poetry of The Song of Songs of Solomon spoke to me during some of the "dark nights" I experienced a couple of decades ago:

*Why, since You wounded
This heart, don't You heal it?
And why, since You stole it from me,
Do You leave it so,
And fail to carry off what You have stolen?*

*Extinguish these miseries,
Since no one else can stamp them out;
And may my eyes behold You,
Because You are their light,
And I would open them to You alone.*

*O spring like crystal!
If only, on Your silvered -over face,
You would suddenly form
The eyes I have desired,
Which I bear sketched deep within my heart.*

Working with a Carmelite Jungian analyst supplemented these forays into mystical literature. Jung took religious symbolism seriously, and when I began listening to my dreams, a door opened up to a rich interior world I had never dreamed (pun intended) existed. Night after night, in Technicolor, with scenes and interpolations of assorted persons from my past and present, and intriguing and mystifying symbols, I found that sleeping one-third of one's life away is emphatically not a waste of one's time on earth.

Companioning Others on the Inner Journey

At the same time that I was exploring these rich resources of the inner life, we had become involved in our new work at Life/Work Direction. Very soon, participants seeking our help in discerning their vocation—and sensing my attunement to psychological and spiritual issues—began turning to me for on ongoing individual counseling to further explore issues which had been raised. I knew I had to seek additional training and supervision from someone more experienced in the inner life.

My interest in dream work had been sparked by a workshop I had attended while on retreat at a Jesuit center, so I wondered if there might be someone with expertise h—that matched my own interest in the place of dreams in the inner life.

Serendipitously, I was led to a Carmelite monk/priest who also served as a trainer of analysts at the Boston Jung Institute. Jungians are especially open to the use of "lay analysts" in the kind of work I would be doing, so I was warmly received and encouraged. Could that be a way of getting supervision for the work to which others seemed to be calling me.

Not surprisingly, these supervision sessions soon morphed into my own analysis. I began to feel the magnetic pull of the inner journey, especially as conceptualized by Carl Jung. His view that "the natural gradient of the soul is toward wholeness," coincided with my upbeat attitude toward life.

Of course, I misperceived inner work as something I could do—as a task, and I attacked it with characteristic zeal. Although my analyst called my ego state "inflated narcissism," he knew that my task-orientation and ego-involvement were major factors to be dealt with in supervising me in my work with women.

I was not prepared for the necessary part of the analytical process that precipitated a dark descent into the depths of my psyche. My dreams would be my guides in this dark night of the soul. My shadow would be carried by dream characters with whom I closely identified. Primary among them was a powerful figure from my past, whom I saw as manifesting the gifts and hazards I myself possessed. I had lost touch with her since moving east; I was now in touch with her qualities within myself—very much alive

and well in my inner attitude. The woman in my dreams cannot be construed as a true representation of the person I knew. Even the physical likeness was not there in her image. Rather, she became, in Jungian terms, an internalized archetype of my compulsions toward creating an image of success.

As a result of my previous experience with bioenergetic therapy, and later in Jungian analysis, I came to firmly believe that two incontrovertible and utterly reliable sources of wisdom available to everyone are the body, and dreams. Neither can lie. Neither can be controlled by mind games. Dreams simply arrive, and so do bodily responses in life—a tightening of the jaw, an ache in the shoulders, a wrench in the gut, shortness of breath, a headache, a twinge in the heart, all potential metaphors for aspects of our life experience, as well as indications of genetic weaknesses and the ecology of our increasingly polluted planet. Could these also be ways that God speaks within the human psyche as powerfully as in ways more conventionally advised within the Christian community as I had known it in earlier life?

Dealing with this possibility opened a door to a rich interior life whose door could be opened by conscious awareness of my bodily responses, as well as by unconscious imagery flashed upon the wall of my night-time dreams. My subsequent journal writing details the decades of learning how to listen to these two sources—and listening to them as God's way of being my intimate companion through the terrain of my life. They did not replace other core resources; they amplified them and brought them into the immediate present dailyness of my life.

The Core Resources Available For the Inner Journey

Recently someone asked me what my overarching goal in life was. The answer came easily. "To love God with all my heart, soul, and strength, and to love my neighbor as myself." Since knowing is part of loving, this means knowing God, knowing my neighbor, and knowing myself. How do I come to *know*. . .and then to *love* God?

1. I begin with **Jesus** coming into the equation. All the monotheistic religions posit the One God. So how do we make contact with this God Out There? Christianity's contribution to the world's understanding of God is that God made human contact at a point in time and space—through Jesus. The other religious traditions have to deal with this problem—God-to-person contact—in other ways. To the Christian, Jesus is a superb answer. The whole story—the actuality of it, and the mystical meaning of it—completes the story of how it is that a God Out There does indeed love us personally. So for everyone—Christians, Jews, Muslims, and others—to my way of thinking, the principle applies that we need a mediating force between God and us.

Face it, we all anthropomorphize God anyway, making God in our image, only a little nicer or more just and holy. I prefer Jesus, and am willing to let God alone and be God. Job came to that conclusion after much suffering

2. I must deal with **the Bible**, then, for that is one major source of my information about the who Jesus was. I have given up on making decisions about the authority of the text. I am intrigued by modern textual criticism, and always find it opens up a new gateway of meaning. But the Bible is not primarily a rationally scientific account. It is poetry; it is drama and narrative; it is parable and metaphor; it has outlandish stories of miraculous interventions. And it is mystical truth.

There are inexhaustible possibilities of interpretation, which is where I appreciate the Talmud in Jewish tradition which takes a text and scholars expound on it century after century, drawing out various shades of meaning, various scenarios—some of which depart a long way from the ordinary sense of the words—but which elongate the delights and treasures to be found. Some of them are quite humorous, and often reveal interesting sidelights and foibles of the actors in the drama. We need a Jewish sense of humor in our deliberations.

What matters are a few simple events: Gethsemane, Calvary, and the empty garden tomb. We all understand the dilemma of surrender at Gethsemane, the constant love emanating from the cross. And none of us understand the empty tomb, which is precisely the point, for it is the ground of the entire Christian tradition. That God allowed Jesus to die, and that Jesus did not stay dead. All our hope rests here.

I cannot explain it; I also cannot explain it away. I rest on faith. Everything else is up for grabs.

3. Then I must also reckon with **Church**—a word that does not always have a positive sense for me. I grew up assuming its presence in my life, and I looked to the church as a place to serve, primarily, until things changed. After therapy in 1967, what had seemed seamless and sound now looked porous and pock-marked. My history of church in the early years of my marriage left me perennially suspicious.

I have come to rest in a more solitary spirituality. But I need to worship, so the monastery where we now worship is an ideal setting for both me and Don. You could argue that “everything is done for us by the monks.” Yet we enter into their rituals easily. We don't primarily look for fellowship, or to serve on committees, or to teach others, or to make decisions about money. It could be called a selfish choice, and yet it is one I recommend to any persons who find themselves in need of genuine worship.

For worship is what occurs there every week. Dependably. Beautifully. Meaningfully. Simply. Quietly. With decorum, good music, thoughtful brief sermons.

4. Yet my inner spiritual life is “so daily”! And it is in the daily round of life that I find two incontrovertible and utterly reliable sources of wisdom available to everyone on earth: the **body** and its instinctive responses, and **dreams** that arrive without our

conscious control. Neither can lie. Neither can be controlled by mind games. Dreams simply arrive, and so do bodily responses in life—a tightening of the jaw, an ache in the shoulders, a wrench in the gut, shortness of breath, a headache, a twinge in the heart, all potential metaphors for aspects of our life experience, as well as indications of genetic weaknesses and the ecology of our increasingly polluted planet.

These resources unite all of the strong streams in my life to help me to know God and know myself, and thereby to love my neighbor.

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