

GOING STRAIGHT AHEAD

The American poet, Annie Johnson Flint (1866 – 1932) composed a poem entitled *At the Place of the Sea*, which begins like this:

Have you come to the Red Sea place in your life,
Where in spite of all you can do,
There is no way out, there is no way back,
There is no other way but through?

Then wait on the Lord with a trust secure
Till the night of your fear is gone;
God will send the wind; God will keep the floods;
God will say to your soul, “Go on.”

Have *you* come to a Red Sea place in your life where, despite your best efforts, there is no going back, no going around, only going straight ahead? On this contemplative path, and in the spiritual life generally, there is only one direction: straight ahead. The Red Sea question is one with which every one of us on this path struggles at some time, if not regularly. How can we embody a straightforward, crystal-clear, dedicated mind of practice amidst the twists and turns, challenges and traverses of our lives? In a very real sense, this practice is about embracing those twists and turns, challenges and struggles and going straight ahead nonetheless.

Going straight ahead is frightening, however. It requires faith and commitment and perseverance. There is no room for pulling back. We must search ourselves and ask ourselves: what is it which enables me to hold the course? Where in myself can I find the straightforwardness, the whole-heartedness, the honesty and simplicity of holding steady amidst all the complications, both outer and inner, of life?

Thomas Merton (1915 – 1968) wrote: “Prayer and love are really learned in the hour when prayer becomes impossible and the heart has turned to stone.” In other words, we need the twists and turns, the challenges and distractions, of our lives. If we never have any distractions or resistances, we may not yet know how to pray. The ultimate motive, the guiding vision, for prayer is a hunger for God which lies at a level far deeper than that of language or affection, so not infrequently a person whose mind is restless or cluttered with vain, critical or persecutory thoughts – but who has a deep hunger for God – may go straight ahead and be able to sit more strongly and deeply in contemplation than someone whose mind is filled with clear concepts, brilliant purposes and easy acts of love.

It is useless to become upset or to berate yourself when you cannot shake distractions. On this contemplative path a flood of resistant and distracting thoughts and feelings is standard fare. They cannot be resolved by reading a book and clutching at its sentences, for if you allow your prayer life to degenerate into periods of simple spiritual reading, you will not harvest the fruits of straightforward practice.

We all have this struggle with distractions within us. Sometimes it is a struggle with ourself; often it is a struggle against the way things are. On this path we need to acknowledge the struggle, accept it as it is and understand what constitutes the resistance to practice, to going straight ahead. Without understanding and centered practice, it is easy to be frightened by life's impermanence, its inevitable losses and disappointments, its twists and turns, and by the insecurity of aging and, ultimately, of death.

Ours is a society of denial. Our culture conditions us to deny or suppress our awareness of reality and to protect ourselves from difficulty and discomfort. We expend enormous amounts of energy and money in this effort to keep ourselves comfortable and to avoid pain, loss, insecurity and death. We are bombarded with ads for products which will make us look younger, thinner, sexier or make life easier. We are pulled hither and yon by enticements. These too are the twists and turns of the path.

Genuine practice on this path requires that we learn to see these for what they are, to see the inner struggle as it is, to see the resistance to practice for what it is, to accept that reality as our own and to go straight ahead with it. Continual practice in this way eventually brings inner peace, not only to the individual but also to the whole interconnected web of life – both inner and outer. This is not easy.

Even a person as accomplished and disciplined as Gandhi (1869 – 1948) once said:

Most people think that my principal enemy is the British Empire, but this is not correct. Actually, I have three enemies: my favorite, and the one most easily influenced, is the British Empire. The second is the Indian people, and that is far more difficult; but my most formidable enemy is a man named Gandhi – with him I seem to have very little influence.

Like Gandhi, we cannot easily change ourselves for the better simply through an act of the will. This is like asking the mind to get rid of itself. When we struggle to change ourselves, we in fact only continue the well-established patterns of self-judgment, criticism and persecution. By staying engaged with those old patterns, we keep the inner combat alive, so our efforts are doomed to fail.

What is required, first, is acceptance. One young man, whom I shall call Jim, came to contemplative practice with a deep distrust of authority. He had rebelled in his family and quite understandably, too, for his childhood had been abusive. He had rebelled in school and dropped out to join the counterculture. He fought with a beloved girlfriend and lost her. At last he took up a prayer practice and began to attend retreats. He wanted to find God and to make himself clear and pure and peaceful. It was not long, however, before he found himself in conflict and struggling again. He did not like the daily work assignment on retreat; passing cars were an annoyance; the teacher was not providing enough guidance; and on and on went the cascade of complaints and resistances. Finally at the end of one retreat, the teacher said to Jim, "You are struggling with everything: the food bothers you; the chores bother you; the sounds bother you; even your mind bothers

you. Does this not seem strange? Tell me, when you hear a car drive past, does it really come in and bother you or are you going out to bother it? Who is bothering whom?" Even Jim had to laugh at this, and that moment of acceptance was the beginning of his ending the struggle.

Another example: one of the saints honored by the Church on this date is a man whose name was Chrodegang. He was born in what is now southern Belgium in 712, and through his talents and a good education he rose to become the chief minister of Charles Martel and Chancellor of the fledgling country of France. He conducted himself with such humility, patience and generosity that, even though a layman, he was elected Bishop of Metz and spent the remainder of his life fulfilling the tasks and meeting the challenges of both offices. Throughout, he was devoted to his prayer life and contemplative practice and often said that it was the latter which kept him peaceful, centered and close to God amidst the tumult and turmoil of those years and which enabled him to bring his work to completion.

This practice is about perfection, perfection not only or even so much in the sense of flawless as in the sense of completeness. In the Gospel of Matthew (5:48), Yeshuah (Jesus) tells us to "be perfect, even as our heavenly Father is perfect." This is his encouragement to us for continual effort on this path. Perfect. All-encompassing. Complete. Fully integrated. The perfection of practice encompasses every possibility, every turn, every encounter, every moment of this life. The degree to which we are willing to acknowledge that this path is about completeness is the degree to which we shall be able to go straight ahead. Everything we do in this practice offers us a reminder of this. Our daily sittings, these first Saturday sittings, longer retreats, all offer the intensity and collective energy which allows us to bring straightness of mind to all the minute and continuously-appearing curves and twists and turns and challenges which daily confront us.

The twists and turns and challenges for Jim were mostly interior; those from Chrodegang were mostly exterior. Sometimes it is one kind, sometimes it is the other. Yet, for both, it was necessary to have a regular spiritual practice, to be steadfast and present and to go straight ahead. The process takes time – time to see, to internalize, to embody. Spiritual transformation is a profound process that does not happen by accident. We need a repeated discipline, a genuine training, in order to relinquish old habits of mind and heart and to find and sustain a new way of seeing, a new way of being. To mature on the spiritual path we need to commit ourselves in a systematic way – and then to go straight ahead. It starts, as always, on chair or bench or cushion. We sit down, straighten the back and breathe. There is the first twisting turn of inhalation, then the next one of exhalation. Are you staying on course? Are you going straight ahead? Is your mind wandering? Are you awake? Are you present? Wake up to just this moment. Breathe and let go. Empty out and start again. In this way your mind is clarified, your heart purified. The Desert Fathers spoke of contemplative prayer as cleansing the eyes of the soul, and they quoted Matthew's gospel: "If your eye is light, your whole being will be light." (Matt 6:22).

When you are awake and alert, filled with light and lightness, you are directly yourself and going straight ahead. What happens after that? In each moment, just do the one thing that is required of you. Just this turn. Just this curve. Just this challenge. Practice in that spirit, the spirit of mindful and prayerful attention, the irrevocable straightforward spirit of remaining on the path come what may. Just practice one thing completely. Just sit completely. Just walk completely. Just eat and work completely – with every bone, muscle and cell of your body engaged upon the task.

Does your mind drift during contemplation? Does it drift in your daily life? Your sitting practice is just that – practice for daily life. During contemplation, the mind wants to drift toward something more interesting or entertaining than the breath and the sacred word. In daily life the mind wants to drift toward fame and fortune and security. What to do? Stay the course. Stay committed to your practice. Do not try to make anything happen. Do not try to become somebody, but simply realize your true nature as a daughter or son of God. When you realize that, you know your vocation in life, and you know you are home. Then you also know that there is only one direction to take for addressing the challenges of your life.

Everything on the contemplative path supports us precisely in this complete straightforward commitment. The chains and fetters that restrict us, the barriers that block our way, do not exist except in our own minds. They exist because we have placed them there. In actuality, there are no chains, no fetters, no hindrances. The only real enemy is allowing the mind to drift away, to drift away into doubt, distraction, hesitation, to drift away from the complete dedication to this practice.

Sometimes the drifting is due to fear, other times to disappointment with the practice. We say to ourselves, “I am not getting anywhere. This practice is not helping me. I keep falling into the same unhealthy behaviors.” The list goes on. See this for what it is. There is an egoistic pride in this kind of evaluating, grading, keeping score, in thinking that one must accomplish something, achieve something, get somewhere. This is our cultural conditioning, and it is contrary to what is required of us on this path. What is required of us is to let go, empty out, and as the poet reminds us, to “wait on the Lord with a trust secure/ Till the night of your fear is gone.”

Ongoing practice on this path, the practice of daily contemplative prayer, the practice of letting go and forgetting our little self, can help us to grow and mature in the spirit and cultivate a new way of relating to life. When we let go of our inner struggles and conditioning “scripts,” our hearts open and we come to rest in what Fr. de Caussade (1675 – 1751) called “the sacrament of the present moment.” Only in this sacred present moment are we at home. Only in this sacred present moment can we find that which is timeless. Only here and now is love, peace and connection possible. Only in this sacred moment do we meet God.

If you have devotion – that is, total faith and commitment to your spiritual path – your determination will naturally build momentum. Fewer and fewer twists and turns of life, challenges and distractions will hamper you. No matter what tries to pull you off-center,

you will not be deterred. Proper devotion also requires fortitude – courage. Body, mind, heart and spirit must be concentrated on your spiritual practice. With that kind of devotion, commitment and courage, then it is possible to “...wait on the Lord with a trust secure till the night of your fear is gone” and to respond to the voice of God in your heart which says, “Go on.”

So, sit down on your chair or bench or cushion and become your own monastery. Breathe your sacred word and let go. Create for yourself the compassionate space which encompasses whatever arises in your life. Commit yourself to your practice and go straight ahead, day after day, and all of the crooked ways will be made straight.