

FROM THE EDITOR

NAMASTE

By Dan Wotherspoon

*God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
Then walks with us silently out of the night.*

These are the words we dimly hear:

*You, sent out beyond your recall,
Go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.*

*Flare up like flame
And make big shadows that I can move in.*

*Let everything happen to you: beauty and
terror.*

*Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.*

*Nearby is the country we call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.*

Give me your hand.

—RAINER MARIA RILKE¹

I HAVE BENEFITED FROM a wonderful cross-fertilization of ideas these past few months working with Phil McLemore to ready his “Yoga of Christ” article for publication (begins page 30) while at the same time preparing lessons for my Gospel Doctrine class and making my way through several books in my own reading pile. In Phil’s article and these books, I find reminders of our own innate divinity, a divinity that is obscured by life’s cares and by our attachments to things in a world which, though serious, is only a temporary home, a place for us to pass through long enough to regain the secret of who we really are. These ideas have begun to affect my vision in exciting ways.

In my Sunday School teaching, this understanding of who we truly are has helped me rediscover the power of the Gospel of John’s Gnostic-flavored storyline, in which the Light shines in the darkness with the intent of gathering the scattered pieces of Itself. Which of these sparks of divinity will see past the distractions of physical water, bread, history, and lineage, recognizing them simply as shadows of the brightness they once knew and were part of? Which of these wandering sheep will still recognize the voice of the shepherd? Which branches will abide in the vine, bearing the fruits of joy and manifesting God in the world? Which will be shadows in

which the Light can move and perform miracles? Also, Phil’s analysis of the prodigal son is the best I’ve ever encountered: a son takes his inheritance (his divine nature) into the world, is distracted by its enticements, but eventually “comes to himself,” realizes who and what he was when he lived in his father’s house, returns and is greeted as the royalty that he still is—now, even more so because of the understanding he has gained through his journey. The father offers this same reception to his other lost son, who is so distracted by duty and self-righteousness that he, like his brother before his adventure, doesn’t recognize his own divine nature, doesn’t realize that he must make a similar pilgrimage.

This growing sense of the holiness—wholeness—in myself and others has been fed further through my reading of Krista Tippett’s *Speaking of Faith*, a book of reflections about her experiences and the insights gained from the past six years as host of the wonderful NPR radio show of the same name.² Though I’ve been aware of Rilke’s poetry for some time, the poem above really only came to my attention as the epigraph to Tippett’s book. More than that, this book, in which Tippett discusses the memorable people and ideas she has been blessed to interact with in what she calls her “life of conversation,” shares many details of her life path. That path includes wandering from faith to doubt to cynicism and despair, then to faith regained, even while experiencing the trauma of divorce and battling chronic depression. Her book has reminded me of the strength that is vulnerability, the true courage that is the core of all of us and can be rediscovered only through struggle and temporary forgetfulness.

Another book I read in the past few months (and which came to my attention when the author was a guest on Tippett’s show), Rachel Naomi Remen’s *My Grandfather’s Blessings*, even more directly addresses the divinity that is all of us.³ Remen is a physician who gave up her pediatric practice to focus on the spiritual and psychological needs of those who, like her, are dealing with chronic illness. She shares with readers the legacy she received from her grandfather, an Orthodox rabbi who embraced Kabbalistic

teachings about the scattered spark of divinity in everything and chose to “bless” everything he encountered. In the book’s introduction, she reflects on the Hindu greeting, “Namaste,” and the strengthening that occurs in both parties when this spark is honored:

On meeting even a total stranger, one bows and says Namaste: I see the divine spark in you. Here we are too often fooled by someone’s appearance, their age or illness or anger or meanness or just too busy to recognize that there is in everyone a place of goodness and integrity, no matter how deeply buried. We are too hurried or distracted to stop and bear witness to it. When we recognize the spark of God in others, we blow on it with our attention and strengthen it, no matter how deeply it has been buried or for how long. When we bless someone, we touch the unborn goodness in them and wish it well. . . . A blessing is about our relationship to the spark of God in one another. (5)

I N my interactions with others these past months, I’ve begun to notice the fruits of trying to remember to see and acknowledge the holy in them. Tippett quotes Virginia Mollencott, from a conversation on the *Speaking of Faith* radio program, as saying that we should always seek to speak “from the holy in ourselves to the holy in the other” (192). This phrase has proven to be a powerful mantra for me, coming with greater regularity to the fore of my consciousness during times of frustration. It has helped me be more patient in interactions with my less-than-favorite people, and those people in turn have responded in ways that have led me to reconsider my own contributions to the strain between us.

Remen writes of the magic that flows when we bless rather than curse another:

A blessing is a moment of meeting, a certain kind of relationship in which both people involved remember and acknowledge their true nature and worth, and strengthen what is whole in one another. By making a place for wholeness within our relationships, we offer others the opportunity to be whole without shame and become a place of refuge from everything in them and around them that is not genuine. We enable people to remember who they are. (6)

While the effects of these blessing moments are empowering to the other, I've appreciated even more the blessing that has come to me as well in the form of greater patience with and acceptance of myself. Recently I've been meditating on why particular people and attitudes bother me more than others do. I can see that the people I feel edgy around have many friends, and they seem as generally lovable as any of us—so what is it about them that makes me a bit crazy at times? I have ultimately come to realize that in most cases, these persons drive me bananas because they are actually quite a bit like me. We are stubborn in many of the same ways, too often timid in moments where boldness would be a big help, more effective at talking and analyzing than actually putting our theories into practice. This realization smacked me especially hard as I analyzed my reactions to certain dogmatic types in my present and past wards. "Dan—he/she

by winning and losing matches. Mike was just born strong. Strong and wild. Dad loved his spunky son, the son who fought back—who, even as a toddler, threatened to "beat your brains to the moon."

Mike still says and does what he wants while I remain censured by the fear of disappointing our parents. And though I've adopted my father's two great loves—wrestling and writing—I've never caught his eye with either. But Dad swells with wet-eyed pride over his younger, feistier son who's out driving Hummers in Iraq while I sit here guzzling soda at the keyboard.⁴

This realization that those who frustrate me the most are often those in whom I see myself has allowed me to let go of the huge burden of expectation and judgment. Just like me, I have come to realize that they are

Her eyelids flickered for a second, she gave a long, tired breath, and she said very quietly, "History records, dear, that you will do quite well."

Chittister expounds on Sister Theophane's insight:

The fact is that history records that we all really do quite well, however we do. Transitions complete us. We ripen. We learn. We hurt. We survive one thing after another. And we go on, whatever the odds against us. Then in the end, we gain what we came to get—a kind of well-worn, hard-won wisdom. One way or another life batters us until we get the unavoidable. Sometimes we get it with glory; sometimes we get it in disgrace. Whatever the circumstances, the problem is that we all too seldom bother to stop and notice how much we have become in the process.⁵

THE EVENTS AND LESSONS THAT BRING us to the point where we "come to ourselves" and realize our divinity will differ, but life is designed to work its magic and turn us toward our true home.

is you! You were once that certain about things! You were once the one who had it all figured out and were more than ready to share your wisdom at every possible chance!"

In his SUNSTONE article about Jacob's wrestle with the angel and the many side dramas in the stories of Jacob, Esau, Isaac, and Rebekah, Rick Jepson shares an intensely personal connection with the story that he has given me permission to tell again here. In a footnote prompted by the comment that "we don't always like seeing our reflections," Rick writes that he only recently realized that his obsession with the story arises largely from an (up til then) unconscious recognition of his own kinship with Jacob—the son who, though much more like Isaac than his brother Esau was, "couldn't buy or steal [his father's esteem], despite his efforts."

My own mild father . . . seemed always frustrated with me, with my boyhood shyness and sensitivity. But not with my brother Michael, who came three years later. I've become a strong man. But, like my father, I had to develop that strength

on a journey. Our stories may be different in specifics but not in their arc. As Phil McLemore's article suggests, we are all prodigals and elder brothers—each of us is clothed in ego, the story and shield we unconsciously create and work hard to maintain as a buffer to our sense of vulnerability that comes with being human and living in a chaotic, ever-changing world. The events and lessons that bring us to the point where we "come to ourselves" and realize our divinity will differ, but life is designed to work its magic and turn us toward our true home.

In her book, *Called to Question*, Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun whose thought and writing I also first encountered through Tippet's radio show, tells the story of how she first came to consider that this fact might be true.

Sister Theophane, one of Chittister's primary mentors, fell deathly ill. Following her collapse, Sister Theophane tells a desperate Chittister, "I'm going now, Joan."

"But Sister," Chittister pleads, "you can't go. . . . What about me!"

Chittister continues:

FOR me to imagine the people who frustrate me as forever stuck in the same place they are now requires that I imagine the same of myself—something I can't do. Life continually shows me otherwise. The question then becomes whether I will move past simply letting go of my judgment and irritation and seek also to bless them and receive their blessing in return? Remen writes:

Our blessings become even more powerful as we grow older. They have survived the buffeting of our experience. We may have traveled a long, hard road to the place where we can remember once again who we are. That we have traveled and remembered gives hope to those we bless. Perhaps in time they too can remember this place beyond competition and struggle, this place where we belong to one another. (6)

And speaking in the context of her own chronic illness and life's work as a wounded healer, Remen writes of the blessings she receives from an acceptance of her own vulnerability that has been enabled by her encounters with others:

I realized that many of the ways I had changed myself had made me smaller and in some ways weaker. Parts of myself that I had judged and hidden for years were welcomed and even needed by those who were dying. I felt the life in me

blessed by such people; felt it expand to become its real size and shape and power, unashamed. . . .

When people are blessed they discover that their lives matter, that there is something in them worthy of blessing. And when you bless others, you may discover this same thing is true about yourself. (6–7)

No, I've decided it isn't enough simply to make peace with aggravating others because they are me. Through this realization, my burdens feel lightened, yes, but only in a cut-and-run sort of way. One piece of prevailing wisdom says that once we've moved past a particularly difficult challenge, we should put it in our rearview mirror and drive away from it with all speed. As Remen writes of this path, "Life might be easier then but far less genuine" (27). No, we must go deeper *into* those things we struggle with, not away from them. We must learn to love even those parts of ourselves that frustrate us. They are the points of vulnerability through which we are able to truly come to ourselves; they are the ground as well as counterbalance to those places and ways in which we soar.

AMONG the many spiritual experiences I've had my life, two—coming more than twenty years apart—stand out. Each came in response to deep despair over opportunities wasted, progress stalled. In both, my father met me with arms wide open, with robe, ring, and shoes. I was perfect, he told me in no uncertain terms. My journey was perfect. Where I thought I was lost, I truly was found.

I find it interesting that even after experiences such as these, I must continually relearn this most basic truth. Thankfully, I want to keep at it, to keep learning "Namaste"—how to honor the holy in others and myself. I'm quite certain it's actually the only lesson we're here to learn. ☺

NOTES

1. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, Anita Barrow and Joanna Macy, trans. (New York: Riverhead Trade, 1997).

2. Krista Tippett, *Speaking of Faith* (New York: Viking, 2007). Tippett's radio show airs weekly on most NPR stations. A downloadable podcast of each week's show is available through the show's website: <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org>.

3. Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., *My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2002).

4. Rick Jepson, "Godwrestling: Physicality, Conflict, and Redemption in Mormon Doctrine," *SUNSTONE*, November 2005, 30.

5. Joan Chittister, *Called to Question: A Spiritual Memoir* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2004), 57–58.

TOUCHSTONES: CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS



WE'VE BEEN PLEASED at reader response to the TOUCHSTONES section that we began running in December 2005. Unfortunately, we haven't yet received enough submissions for either of our next two topics to run a TOUCHSTONES in this issue. If you've been thinking about "THE WARD" or "FAMILY DINNER" but have been thinking it's too late to submit it,

please send it to us right away! We'd also very much like your suggestions for future topics!

TOUCHSTONES is inspired by "Readers Write," a very popular feature in *The SUN* magazine. TOUCHSTONES topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for personal expression and creative approaches. Writing style is not as important as is the contributor's thoughtfulness, humor, and sincerity. *SUNSTONE* reserves the right to edit pieces, but contributors will have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. To submit a reflection, please send it typed and double-spaced to *SUNSTONE*, 343 North Third West, Salt Lake City, Utah, 84103. Send electronic submissions via email to TOUCHSTONES editor Allen Hill at: ALLEN@SUNSTONEONLINE.COM. Submissions should be kept somewhere around 400 words, but we are willing to make exceptions for exceptional pieces.

SAMPLE TOUCHSTONES REFLECTIONS ON THE TOPIC: "GRACE"

When I was twelve, I was boy-crazy. Sometimes I even kissed boys in the halls at school. Enjoying the power that the promise of such kisses held. Imagining myself a winsome beauty. Relishing the whispers of girls who gossiped about such things. Knowing that I was the center of scandal.

When I was thirteen and was diagnosed with bone cancer, I started to feel guilty about my boy-craziness. When someone suggested that my cancer was God's way of punishing me for kissing boys during my lunch hour, I believed them. I knew I was supposed to wait for such things until I was sixteen or until I was engaged to a good Mormon boy. Maybe God knew that the only way for me to ever end up worthy for the temple was to make me so sick that I no longer thought about boys.

Now, with that temple marriage behind me and more than twenty years since my diagnosis, I still wonder why I got cancer. But I have given up believing that my cancer was God's doing. He and I have talked about that. And I now know that it was as hard on him as it was on me.

—JANA BOUCK REMY

My missionary companion and I had ordered some gyoza in what was a small, dark, considerably less-than-two-star cafe in Yamagata, Japan. He suggested we say grace, so we bowed our heads slightly and I said a quick but typical Mormon food thing: ". . . and bless this food to nourish and strengthen our bodies."

About a minute later, a cat slunk across the dirt floor with a rat weakly squirming in its jaws. Cats with rats are not entirely unusual in Japan, so we chuckled and turned back to our appointment book. A few minutes later, I went to use the restroom and happened to glance into the kitchen where I saw the cook filleting the rat into our gyoza.

We got the heck out of there. I wonder, if we'd stayed, whether God would have graced us with the nourishment and strengthening of our bodies.

—D. JEFF BURTON