

The Spirit of Sanctuary

Between living and dreaming there is a third thing. Guess it.

Antonio Machado

A voice weakened by days of high fever called out to me. I hastened to my mother's bedroom. In the dim light I could barely make out Mom's pale face peering out from beneath the covers, her thick black hair haphazardly strewn on the pillow. I felt guilty for her illness — measles contracted from me a week earlier. The air was thicker than I could imagine, almost as if it were suffocating my mother's life. My ten-year-old heart pattered hard as she called me to the bed. Something was wrong. The beauty of her thirty years was gone, her hand felt cold as it grasped my own.

Mom struggled for words, but in her weak voice she told me that she was dying, that Jesus was taking her away that night, that I was to be the strong one in the family, that she loved me dearly. I was absolutely numb, my heart caught between unimaginable pain and silent pleading. Mostly I was confused. Out in the living room, my two sisters casually played in front of the television while my father dozed in his recliner, preserved yet another evening within the stupor of alcohol. My mind rushed with thoughts, as if bullies were pelting me with rocks. Why couldn't it be Dad dying, relieving our family from his incessant verbal or physical violence? And what did Mom mean, that I was now to be the head of the household, and that I was to take care of my sisters?

Against my will, Mom excused me from the room. I rushed into my own bedroom across the hall, closed the door, and found my bed in the pitch dark of the night. Suddenly I began to pray. It was not the bedtime prayer I was so used to saying each night with Mom by my side: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, and if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take . . ." At my tender age I could not understand the simple power of this prayer. Instead, I began a babbling plea to a God I'd never seen. With broken heart and flooded eyes I prayed and prayed until I fell asleep at the foot of my bed.

I awoke the next morning with anxiety, but was it true that I smelled fresh coffee wafting through the crisp air? Only Mom could brew such a familiar memory. I gingerly opened my door and peered down the hall toward the kitchen. My mother stood there in her robe, and as she had every morning that I remember, she was making lunches for her family. But when I stepped into the kitchen I knew something was very different. Mom was absolutely beautiful! Her countenance showed not a trace of the week's illness, her face full of color, her hair full and soft. She turned to me and I could see that something even deeper was different about her, but I just could not define it. We embraced, my heart melting and relieved. Her voice was filled with such peace as she said to me, "I love you, son." And then she quietly took the coffee down the hall to my waiting father, both to reenact their morning ritual of sipping coffee while sitting on the side of the bed and making small talk.

When I returned home from school, Mom shared her epiphany: she had invited Jesus Christ into her life. She tenderly explained her fervent prayer to him to spare her life for the sake of her family, and he had answered by immediately healing her. I felt incredible relief and silently thought that perhaps this same Jesus had heard my prayers as well. From that day on, the icons of spirituality overtly adorned our house. I know they gave Mom an immediate refuge from the pain and suffering of abuse, and I know they also affected my father, eventually allowing him, albeit years later, to find sobriety in her and God's unconditional love.

It certainly is risky to begin a chapter with a confession. In spite of my mother's example, I lost touch with God in the world, addicted to my ego and selfish desires. Being a respected scholar and professor, a concert performer and best-selling author, a motivational speaker, a sensitive and skilled

lover — each catapulted me continuously further from Spirit, destroying marriages and friendships and careers. I had no sanctuary in the world, no place to hide from my worst enemy — myself.

Fortunately, I now understand that our personal relationship to God or Spirit may be the most perfect form of sanctuary. Most of us already know this, but we also might admit to difficulty in daily visiting this most beautiful of all islands of grace. We simply forget, caught up in numerous duties, desires, and depressions that wear us down from the inside out. The worldly “deities” that beg for our attention — pop heroes, politicians, movie stars, technology — erase our connection to a skinless Spirit.

We easily forget to see God in the face of a flower, a child playing, our partner slaving over a hot stove, an ant crawling across the counter, even the breeze drifting through the screen door. We forget to pause in all our activities, exhaling the world and inhaling a much greater Spirit. Such moments of awareness give us immediate asylum, beautiful grace. But, we forget too often and as a result spend years furrowing the world for just a modicum of the peace and security our heart desires.

After her near-death illness, Mom invited a heretofore-unknown spirit into our house that made it a sanctuary. She offered a place for God to rest along the way. She made room for the energy of forgiveness, devotion, and faith, hope, even humor. This energy found form in icons, altars, certain furnishings and arrangements. But more so, Mom *was* this energy — the Keeper of “Meadow Road Sanctuary.” She was a wise and humble wing to dodge under at the end of a long day at school or work. She held, invited, and sustained the Spirit of Sanctuary in our home. She has inspired me to go further into myself to pull up that Spirit of peace, simple contentment, kindness, humor, and generosity. I hope I have not failed her example. I hope I have modeled this Spirit of Sanctuary.

Poetic as the name sounds, Discovery Bay is a real place: a beautiful, protected jewel of a harbor in the circuitous necklace of waterways that make up the vast Puget Sound, in Washington State. It is a wild spot, or was 25 years ago, lushly planted, lined with ferns and forests, and sacred to the Native Americans that populated its shores in times past. I once had the privilege of living on the pristine shores of that bay. It was sacred for me as well. I didn’t fish her waters, or hunt, or cut saplings from the woods. For me, the realness existed somewhere deep within me, because the Spirit of the Place penetrated at last the thick walls I had erected around myself. Discovery Bay became the living metaphor for all that was safe and right and holy in a world I no longer trusted. Here I could discover a deeper pristine part of myself as clear as the turquoise waters lapping at my feet.

I inherited the rustic cedar cabin, where I lived, from my gardener friend Gabriel, who entrusted his beloved sanctuary to me when he set off on a long trip to Central America. I moved in, almost reluctantly, in January, when the weather was still cold and damp. The icy winds that swept across the bay had already laid waste to the glorious garden that had existed there the summer before. I moved there in the aftermath of yet another failed relationship, knowing that there was nowhere else in the world for me to go. I lived alone, without the comfort of electricity or running water, without music, TV, neighbors, or pets, without even a refrigerator. But it became a home such as I had never experienced, quietly reconnecting me to the forgotten Spirit within. Often, I wandered the beach at low tide, picking up all manner of treasures in the form of shells, driftwood, and special rocks. At high tide, the water lapped reassuringly at the shoreline just beneath the front picture window of the cabin. I grew accustomed to the water, the tides, the salt sea smell, the sea birds calling, and even to the wind. And although it was sometimes a cold wind, to me it was ever so gentle and ever so soothing to my world-weary soul.

Day by day, I hiked in and out, transporting my relatively few worldly needs — mostly food and firewood — in an old wheel barrel that navigated the winding dirt path like an old forlorn rowboat traversing a narrow stream. In winter, the plump rose hips that clung to the wild rose bushes along the path were but a memory of the fragrant and delicate pink blossoms that had won my heart the previous

summer, when I first began visiting this remote haven. Back then I had found the rose scent so intoxicating that it literally awakened me, stirring something in me on the deepest soul level. Some twenty-seven years later, the scent lives in me still and has never been lost — a primal reminder of my return to Spirit.

I remember, too, a lovely stream beyond the cabin: not much to speak of in the summer, when it slowed to a delicate, feathery trickle, but broad and fast in the winter, as the rain poured down the steep mountainside. It was a beautiful spot, surrounded with ferns and alders, and beyond those, madrone and Sitka spruce. It was the kind of place that had such a presence that one naturally lowered their voice and walked more carefully when the melodic sound of water became audible. All my drinking water came from this stream, with a taste clear and sweet, and there were many healing herbs that grew along the bank. I didn't know most of their names, but Gabriel had used many of them.

Once a dear friend came to visit me at the cabin, bringing me roses. He had hitchhiked from the coast and then walked the ten miles from town. He was also carrying a pack and his guitar. He played that guitar for hours, and we sang every song we knew. Then we went swimming in the icy stream - in January - with no towels allowed. Neil's rule was that you had to dry off by rubbing your hands briskly all over your body, until the heat generated by the rubbing caused the water to evaporate. I was cold, yet exhilarated. After that wonderful visit, I never saw my dear friend again, and I had no more visitors. Once more, I was left alone in my sanctuary.

In those days, I worked in town, ten miles from the cabin. I saw only one person the entire day, my co-worker Virginia. Then, each evening, I came home and engaged in a very simple ritual. I lit my oil lamp, started a fire in the wood stove (my only source of heat), prepared a one dish meal on top of it, and sat the rest of the evening in an old, overstuffed rocker beneath a framed photograph of a saint. I didn't know who this mysterious being was, but his luminous eyes and sublimely peaceful face exuded great love. For the first time in my life, I had no desire to do anything but drink in his peace and bask in the glow of contentment in this newfound sense of inner and outer stillness.

It was a sweet interlude in my life, the memories of which I treasure. And sadly, it came suddenly to an end just as spring was returning and I was beginning to enthusiastically plant the garden, beautifying it, I thought, as only a woman can do. Gabriel returned home early from his travels because of a serious illness. He was weary and out of sorts. I was given two days to move. Two months later the cabin mysteriously burned to the ground. I never saw Gabriel again either. I think perhaps he was an angel. I have always believed that his cabin really existed for me, as my personal sanctuary, that I might be realigned with my spiritual path and my purpose in this life. Sanctuaries do that, you know, whether you spend only a few moments, a few months, or an entire lifetime there.

SACRED BOUNDARIES FOR THE SOUL

Alfred Lord Tennyson once quipped: *"In this boundless universe/let us this thought rehearse:/we can be boundless for better/or boundless for worse."* As humans, we have a tremendous freedom of will, and we also have the capacity for self-reflection. For the most part, this differentiates us from other forms of sentient life. The soul is a wanderlust, an addicted window shopper of the world. It will buy Creation on a moment's notice because it has a boundless desire to take in life, for better or worse, like a spendthrift at a silent auction.

But when we need a sense of safety, security, replenishment, and solace, we are naturally drawn to boundaries. These "islands" of consciousness are true "safe zones" for the soul, an "interior castle" as Christian mystic Teresa of Avila put it. They exist as emotional places and states of mind within us, and manifest as physically desirable places at arms length in our life. Whether on the interior or exterior plane, each calls up some energy force greater than us. Most people would comfortably characterize this energy as "spirit." My mother called up this greater Spirit — her relationship to God — to find asylum for her troubled soul. Then she provided in her home a place for this Spirit to dwell. Tricia came upon a

similar Spirit at Discovery Bay — the overall ambiance and feeling of enfoldment and security in Nature and an intimate cabin. Here she discovered her spiritual path, internalized that spiritual force, and re-engaged with the world with a clearer intent of service that has continued to this day.

Sanctuary does not ask us to be religious in order for its magic to work in our lives. But it does evoke something intangibly soothing, both within and without. And most people find themselves affected and softened by this energy, so much so that the only word that works well enough to describe this skinless force is Spirit. Those who *are* comfortable with their spiritual cloak may associate this Spirit with God.

Before we can access the *wonder, healing, and celebration* of our relationship to the Spirit of a place or to our own inner state of consciousness, we must feel we have one of the most basic needs sanctuary affords us: a sense of safety. This is a profound yet illusive quest in most people's lives. For a sense of safety must contain or support that greater need for peace — peace of mind, soulful peace, bodily and emotional peace.

Safety and peace need enclosure. When I listen to a troubled person or meet someone clearly angst-ridden, I wonder what is the state of *temenos* in their life. This ancient Greek word recognizes the need to have sacred boundaries for the soul, both within and without. Thomas Moore offers a practical characterization:

“When we choose a seat or standing area on a bus or train, when we arrange space in an office or workplace, when we decide where to put a garden, or chairs on a porch, where to sit on the riverbank to have lunch, where to play with the children — all of these decisions have to do with *temenos*, marking out a space appropriate for a certain spirit that breathes life into our activity.”

Originally *temenos* was the precinct of a god or goddess, or some other spirit that could positively affect human life. The natural qualities of a site aside, *temenos* recognizes the physical or nonphysical sense of walled separation of a space from the profane world around it. In such physical or psychological spaces we can find asylum for the soul. Our interior system of *temenos*, like rooms and gardens of the soul, is enriched and enchanted by the furnishings of our thoughts. But we often come to a place in our day in which we feel a need to let go of worldly thoughts and enter into a more sparse, relaxed, and peaceful inner space. At such times this interior *temenos* becomes interior sanctuary, as in a daydream, the recitation of a mantra, the silent outpouring of prayer, or quiet reflection. We feel, in short, momentarily walled-off from the world.

For the ancient Greeks, it was important not to pollute the *temenos*. Why? The reason comes back to this sense of Spirit that pervades our need for sacred space and time. Boundaries not only serve to contain energy, they also insure that we have access to this Spirit.

Tricia and I starkly experienced this at Cortesia one day when a group of ten Japanese tai chi students visited with their master. All of these middle-aged women had been studying with this master for years, so they brought with them a certain level of attunement. Communication was necessarily done through an accompanying interpreter. We had them stand just outside the formal entrance to our gardens, in front of the naturally vine-woven gates, above which reads our sign “Spirit and Nature Dancing Together.” Then each woman was escorted through the gates to a nearby bench, at which time Tricia carefully washed their hands in a special bowl of water and dried them. She then led the visitor to a chair on the nearby deck, next to a small waterfall, and accompanied another one in. Increasingly, the wide-eyed women began motioning with their arms and chattering in agreement. The interpreter said that they were marveling at the tremendous difference in the energy outside the gate and within. They were experiencing a strong spirited energy, much like the chi energy they were so familiar with, which was apparent just as they passed through the psychic veil and physical space of the gates. Yes, the Spirit of Cortesia had touched them.

In *The Sanctuary Garden* we talk about the *entrance threshold* as a way to understand the gathering or awakening of not only the Spirit of Place but also the Spirit housed within ourselves. When places are created solely for function and practicality, *temenos* suffers. This is the value of thresholds: they allow

us to clearly move from one sphere of life to another. A strong temenos, a well-defined threshold, releases us from large parts of the world. We can see this at work in our community. A favorite restaurant, perhaps a favorite corner table, emits a temenos (most likely well-designed by the owner) that enfolds and enchants us *as if we were in sanctuary*. Similarly, a sensitively designed doctor's office holds the compassionate Spirit of Healing in furniture, lighting, and decor. Here the feeling of sanctuary from illness is much easier to access than in an office that is officious and sterile.

A favorite example of mine, which reflects temenos and entrance into a feeling of sanctuary, comes from a young woman executive in New York City who wrote thanking us for the inspiration she received from an article describing our work. She had decided to begin taking lunch at a specific bench in Central Park. She affectionately called it her "Sanctuary Bench." This daily ritual opened up tremendous healing and wonder, helping her to cope with a stressful job and a deteriorating relationship. Her bench allowed for reflection, contemplation, and, beautifully so, just simple observation — of people, animals, and nature — without judgments. Mary's sincere desire for peace and emotional safety created an entrance point into sanctuary via this bench. She imbued this "island of grace" with her spirit, and I daresay even called up the spiritual energy of that particular spot in Central Park. In her email she described her feelings in becoming the Keeper of the Bench: how she took care to clean up the area surrounding it, offer respite for others, and to beautify it with her peaceful energy.

Temenos is there wherever we are. The difference in places, or within ourselves, is the degree to which we are able to attune with or invite Spirit in, or feel invited in the first place. Each time I visited Jake and Sally's house, I felt uncomfortable at the recessed front door. It seemed officious and cold, as if I had my backside exposed to the rain and my front side facing a formidable wall. I always felt like an unwanted solicitor. One day I arrived to find a storm door installed, thereby enclosing the porch. When I stepped into the space it radiated the natural heat from the sun. A vibrant orchid sat in a well-chosen pot, a couple pairs of shoes sat in the corner, a Japanese art piece hung on a sidewall, and a small boulder inscribed with their names sat by the door. The Spirit of Welcome I had so missed before now clearly met me at the door.

I have walked in old growth, cathedral-like forests and felt a deep presence and acknowledgment of Spirit. However, I have returned to the same setting after industrial-style logging destroyed it: the stark moonscape howling with a deeply wounded Spirit. It is the same feeling one has when entering a home that has been violated by theft or vandalism. The temenos has been altered, fractured, polluted. And most assuredly, this same feeling of insult to the soul is evident in the trauma of rape, physical and emotional abuse, or murder.

The four needs for sanctuary tell us, as discussed in the previous chapters, that we need a strong sense of daily sanctuary in our life to buffer us from the world and to allow us to commune with Spirit. We need to sacralize places and moments, if but to simply draw sustenance from how such places and moments are remembered and held in our hearts. We need to hold time and places sacred, because we need to hold ourselves and all else sacred in order to be whole. We lessen the soul of all places, time, and ourselves as well, when we take without giving and come to them without reverence for life. The positive regard we express towards them nurtures them, and they in turn nurture us.

GATHERING AROUND THE SACRED HEARTH

Sanctuary is like coming to the communal well. The thirsty soul is received by the host, Spirit, and treated as a reverent friend and guest. In holding a very special place or moment in time sacred, we grant power to that place, to that wayside moment. Our act of *holding sacred* is what is of primary importance, not where or how we choose to carry out that act. The true power of a place and sacred time of our making lies in its marshaling of our inner resources and binding us to our beliefs.

For years Tricia and I have come to associate the Spirit of Sanctuary with the symbol of the Hearth. The Hearth is both the spiritual form of sanctuary and sanctuary itself with Spirit. Most people

commonly associate hearth with a fireplace, open fire, or stove. But the *feeling* that hearth evokes is its great value. It can enfold us in communion, interaction, sharing. It speaks of storytelling, the passing on of wisdom and skills, the processing of ideas and issues, the simple feeling of being salved and balmed by like-hearted and like-minded others.

In a very practical yet spiritually bonding ritual, our friends Sharon and Steve re-enact all the symbolism of the Hearth described above. Every evening, rain or shine, Steve lights a fire in a shortened burn barrel, around which they huddle for an hour or so. Here they embrace affectionate conversation, dreams for their lives and land, and gratitude for their relationship. Their days are exceedingly full and exhausting with work away from home, but this Hearth ritual, by their own admission, provides them with much needed sanctuary for the soul of their shared life.

In another example, a father wrote us and described taking his son regularly to a local living memorial: a 2000-year-old oak tree. This tree acted as a type of Hearth for the community, where multi-generations of families had played and been held in its outstretched arms. David writes: “The eyes of the visitors follow the same path over the tree, seemingly trying to see past its leaves, bark, and wood to something meaningful that surely must have been hidden there — something spiritual and eternal. The hidden ‘something’ that these visitors sensed was, I believe, the life-giving presence of God which flows through the tree’s trunk and branches.”

David’s spiritual connection to Hearth is a reminder that our heart is always trying to find a sacred sense of home, if not to find *the* home of the Divine. The journey, as is the actual sense of sanctuary, is broad and diverse. The Psalms (91:4) encourage us: “He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge.” The image here is that of an eagle or hen, of a bird that senses danger and then protectively spreads its wings over its young. The move is so deeply instinctive that an adult bird will spread its wings even when no fledglings are around. Similarly, in our human soul is the instinctive desire to seek the warmth, safety, and comfort of some form of harbor or hearth: a place, dear friend, or Spirit in which we can hang our worldly cloak and just peacefully be.

In this one word, *hearth*, we see many words that remind us of a more noble way of living and being of service on Earth. First, in fact, is the very word, *earth*, to remind us that this Earth and the earthen soil out of which everything seems to grow is a profound sanctuary itself worth honoring — one of the most privileged *sanctus sanctorum*s in the universe. If you ever feel forlorn, reach for the nearest Nature you can find and, as William Blake reminds us, find “God in the face of a flower and eternity in an hour.”

To hear the Spirit of the Earth takes a keen, soulful type of listening. So, we also see in hearth the words *ear* and *hear* to remind us of our duty as stewards — Keepers of our places of sanctuary — to be aware of not only our needs but those of others, both human and Nature alike. This type of listening is much like fine tuning the reception of a favorite radio station: we must filter out the static of the world, the random chaotic energy that vies for our attention. When we sit in our car stuck in traffic, rage will not move us. This is the time to tune in to our soul, to comfort it with prayer, inspiring music, refreshing reverie. We may even be reminded, as Luke (17:21) proclaims: “The kingdom of God is in the midst of you.” At such times our car can become a mobile Hearth, a living temenos, giving us unexpected solace and distance from the world. Here we can steward an inner kingdom of peace, sort out the values and dislikes of our life.

Hearth also contains the word *art*. The business of the soul in the world is really about the art of living amongst God’s Creation. I have personally found that the art of living has much to do with our way of behaving. Years ago I internalized the noble qualities of Friend, Guest, and Host to help conduct my artful dance of life. We should always attempt to show unconditional Friendship. We should respect others and our surroundings as if we were a Guest on a sacred pilgrimage. And we should offer our service and attention in the true spirit of an accepting Host. Think about these qualities of stewardship as you consider yourself to be Keeper of your personal place and sense of sanctuary.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, within *hearth* is the very word *heart* itself. Both our spiritual strength and vulnerability are tied into the state of our heart. Most people need sanctuary because the

world has broken their spirit, unraveled their heart. But this heart is our Sacred Chalice from which we can drink the divine nectar of love and reverence for life, and from which we can talk to Spirit or God. When we embrace life with heartfelt energy we can't help but be led to our Higher Self that is hopeful, reverent, gracious, humble, honoring, respectful, forgiving, and joyful.

The question is not one of holiness or religion, but rather part of the human quest to find peace on Earth. That question is this: Where is that place and time in your day in which you feel more yourself than in any other place or time? Does such sanctuary deepen you, allowing you to touch the fabric of your soul, and the soul of others, with tenderness and love? Does such an island of grace hold a vital Spirit that opens you to wonder, healing, and celebration for life; and, does such a Hearth, like a sacred *mandir*, or holy temple, reconnect you to something greater than your own self?

It is possible to easily answer this question if we make room in our daily activities to practice the presence of sanctuary.

PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF SANCTUARY

Have you ever held a wounded bird in the palm of your hand, marveling at its tiny, quivering body, as you prayed that its life would be spared? Perhaps it flew against one of your windows, or you rescued it from the clutches of a cat. In that simple yet profound gesture of hope and healing, did you not experience the living presence of sanctuary, both giving and receiving? And if the bird, perchance, recovered and flew away, no doubt you felt a joyous sense of celebration. In a way, you had created a temenos for this creature within the safety of your hand, which no doubt helped to breathe new life into it, or at the very least to offer it temporary asylum from a terrifying experience.

Practicing the presence of sanctuary is about creating a portable temenos for you, as Forrest so eloquently addressed earlier. In other words, it is about fostering and fine-tuning awareness, wherever you go, of all the subtle ways in which wonder, healing and celebration occur in daily life, from the simple to the sublime, whether giving or receiving. It is a sort of wordless love affair with being fully awake and attentive to all that is good and noble and regenerating. We suggest the honing of such a heightened awareness, not with the expectation of creating saints (although one never knows), but with a very practical purpose in mind. For if you do not cultivate understanding and appreciation of the innumerable small blessings that life offers you, you may easily succumb to the discouragement and disenchantment that is so common in the world today. And perhaps, if you lack such awareness, you might unknowingly short circuit or sabotage some of the serendipitous opportunities that seem to come out of nowhere when you're least expecting them.

There are many short-lived opportunities that are only noticed when you are really paying attention, when you are receptive. French photographer Cartier Bresson calls such an opportunity "the decisive moment", when the attentive eye of the observer bears witness to something so perfect, so poignant, and often so fleeting that there is perhaps but a single moment to click the shutter, or, in laymen's terms, to receive the gift or capture the memory. But how does one cultivate and foster this kind of insightful receptivity? There are several key points to consider:

- Create a daily spiritual practice
- Take advantage of numerous spontaneous opportunities to perceive sanctuary as it exists in the everyday world around you
- Cultivate gratitude for the beauty of life and everything that comes to you, and
- Slow down

The Importance of a Daily Practice

“The repeated, conscious use of spiritual tools allows the seeds of these qualities to bear fruit.”

Sherry Anderson, *Feminine Face of God: the Unfolding of the Sacred in Women*

We believe that one’s receptivity to the good in life and to the Divine is significantly increased by the cultivation of a daily spiritual practice. The particular form that such a practice might take varies greatly from person to person, and changes to reflect one’s personal evolution. Some forms of daily spiritual practice might include:

- The creation of a personal altar
- Daily periods of prayer and/or meditation
- Singing or chanting
- Journaling
- Mindful walking
- Attending a church, synagogue, or other specific service
- Periods of silence
- Sacred reading (Lectio Devina)
- Simply talking to God in the language of your own heart

I remember, for example, my Father taking the train to Chicago every morning and then walking to church on his way to his office, a ritual he *never* missed. I also recall vividly a picture of Jesus in a gilded frame with little doors that opened and closed. This picture sat on my Father’s desk in his study for years and became the symbol for me of my Father’s intense yet unspoken devotion. He wouldn’t have called this an altar, but that’s really what it was. When he died this picture was the only possession of his that I wanted, and by now having placed it on an altar of my own, I carry on his devotional legacy.

The need for a spiritual practice arises when the mundane activities of the day no longer fully satisfy one’s quest for meaning in life. The soul is restless and asks for something beyond the ordinary schedule of working, eating, sleeping, and recreating, day in and day out. In fact, the soul asks that time be set aside *every day* for its nurturance, over and beyond these other activities, no matter how busy or over-scheduled we might be. While we are each fed, to a certain degree, by inspiration that is gleaned from our experiences in daily life, often it is during sacred time or reflective time that we are best able to digest and integrate what life is teaching us.

Setting regular time aside for a spiritual practice is so important to Forrest and me that we have gladly structured our lives around this need. Our morning practice is probably the most important part of our day. The ritual is well in place; its daily, mindful repetition providing the perfect canvas or backdrop for practicing the presence of sanctuary, of peace, and of calmness, and thus embracing Spirit. When a particular practice evolves to the point that it becomes deeply fulfilling, it begins to feel foreign to go a day or two without engaging in it. One feels strangely out of balance, perhaps even a bit more vulnerable, like forgetting your raincoat or umbrella on a very wet day. There is nothing wrong with developing somewhat of an addiction to a spiritual practice. Such good habits may well have to be jealously guarded, for the world is all too eager to claim our attention, crowding in with all manner of demands and obligations.

The foundation of our practice, for these past twenty years or more, is morning and evening meditation, but Forrest and I differ somewhat in the framework we have created to support this. Before my morning meditation, I like to walk briskly outside for half an hour or so, rain or shine. This wakes up my body and mind. Following my walk, I go out to my personal sanctuary — a round, wooden yurt in the forest behind the house — and I prepare for meditation. I light candles and incense, do fifteen minutes of yogic energization exercises, and affirm aloud, in different words each day, all of my goals in

life. While exercising, I affirm the character qualities I aspire to: conscious will, vitality, health, patience, unconditional love, and so on. I want my body to hold these aspirations as well as my mind.

My meditation space is full of sacred symbols that also serve to remind me throughout the day of what it is I want to be creating through my thoughts and actions, and through my writing. I believe that we all need such reminders to be very visible as we perform the duties of the day, lest we forget our deeper intentions and get bogged down in trivial or petty concerns.

I meditate sitting in front of an altar that looks out across the ridge top to the hills and valleys beyond. The altar is covered with a beautiful silk cloth, whose colors flow seamlessly from pale green to blue to purple. On top of it sit a few well-chosen objects: a plant in an elegant ceramic pot, a carved wooden bowl holding three shells, a small embroidery with the words “Only Love”, a carved hand holding a polished stone, and a few framed photographs of great saints. This configuration of sacred items changes regularly to reflect the many facets of my devotion. But once I sit down — in the same mediation chair I have used for years — wrapped in a soft woolen shawl, eyes closed, all movement stilled, time and the outside world disappear, and all my burdens are gently lifted from my shoulders. When finished, again if time permits, I sit and gaze out the window or do some spiritual reading. This invariably inspires me and launches me calmly into whatever activities the day may hold.

If time is very limited on a given day, I may delete the walk and shorten the meditation, but whether I have half an hour or three hours, the basic practice is essentially the same. I have learned, however, that early rising (we get up at 6:15am) is one of the keys to finding enough time for meditation or any other practice. Once the day is well underway or if one is too tired by nighttime, the willpower seems to erode a bit and it becomes easier to rationalize skipping the practice altogether. It is only by regular repetition over a long period of time that most people seem to reap optimal benefits from their practice. Loyalty and devotion become important attributes in maintaining this regularity.

Elizabeth Lesser, in *The Seekers Guide*, refers to this concept of necessary repetition, likening meditation to piano scales, basketball drills, or ballroom dancing. “Practice requires discipline; it can be tedious; it is necessary. After you have practiced enough, you become more skilled at the art form itself. You do not practice to become a great scale player or drill champion. You practice to become a musician or athlete. Likewise, one does not practice meditation to become a great meditator. We meditate to wake up and live, to become skilled at the art of living. And like any art form, the need to practice continues at every level of achievement.”

Reverend Ruthann Carosio, in a fascinating study entitled “*In Spirit’s Embrace*”, writes about the common ground she has seen among women of very different faiths that includes “a willingness to open in their journeys to a spiritual and religious orientation that is unfamiliar. This willingness to explore allows them to find a spirituality that they can embrace fully...even if they end up far from where they began their journey in their family of origin.” This natural inclination on the part of many seekers to experiment and thus personalize their practice, Reverend Carosio goes on to point out, is part of their spiritual maturing and often increases the level of satisfaction and meaning they find in their practice.

Even among individuals of the same faith, such as Forrest and I, there may well be the tendency to personalize the practice by using the same elements with a different emphasis. For example, whereas meditation is the strong focus of my spiritual tradition, devotional prayer is Forrest’s primary focus. He prefers to meditate first, and then engages in a period of intense prayer. Theologians Ann and Barry Ulanov describe prayer as “the most fundamental, primordial, and important ‘language’ humans speak.” For Forrest, this prayerful pouring out of his heart’s devotion happens throughout the day and is so deeply comforting to him that he may drift off into a sublime sleep. When he awakens, he feels wonderfully refreshed and inspired. After our evening meditation, which happens just before bedtime, we often pray ourselves to sleep, allowing us to end each day as we began, on a spiritual note.

Similarly, Joanna, a Quaker woman, speaks of beginning each day in a sacred way by practicing silence. She does so in an effort “to create some empty space before filling her day with activity.” She

also describes “holding other people in her prayers”, but she does so as she walks to work each day, reflecting on those in need of healing and “holding them in the light.”

Stephan’s practice, as he defines it, takes place each morning in his living room, near windows through which the sun streams in. He settles himself into a cozy chair for a period of reading and a cup of tea. Then he journals as “a way to access an inner world that otherwise gets bulldozed by all the external things to do.” Stephan began this practice about nine months ago while experiencing the turbulent ending of a long-term relationship. He finds it to be a quiet, yet informative time that “keeps me on my toes and in touch with my feelings, and all my ups and downs.” He has learned a lot about himself, and no longer avoids issues and emotions that surface. He also pays close attention to his dreams, often journaling about the insights that arise.

Morgan’s practice includes four components: daily walking, the ongoing maintenance of a centrally located altar, a time set aside to send Reiki healing and prayers to those in need, and the writing of “morning pages” (in the tradition of the *Artist’s Way*). Since she lives in the desert and is sensitive to the heat, she begins her day with a 6:30 am walk with a friend. They generally walk in silence, being very aware of their breath and everything around them. They typically see a variety of desert plants, rabbits, quail, coyotes, many species of birds, and two puppies that look forward to Morgan’s affectionate petting. She describes this walk as “paying homage to Nature”, stressing that exercise is definitely a secondary motivation. She “walks to be present in every step — with God, self, and Nature.”

Morgan’s altar is located on one end of the kitchen counter and actually faces into the living room. It is beautifully and eclectically furnished, with a carved statue of Quan Yin, the Chinese goddess of love and compassion, an Our Lady of Guadalupe candle that is always burning, and various sacred objects that relate to the realm of the Divine. In particular, this altar is symbolic of gratitude and serves as a constant reminder throughout the day to consciously give thanks for abundant blessings great and small. It is also a way of creating sacred space in the center of the house rather than hiding it away in some private location. Morgan says that just walking by her altar, which she does many times a day, reminds her to see the beauty in life. Sometimes she puts an object on her altar that is associated with a particular family member or relates to a special need or request, such as the photograph of a friend who is in need of healing. Thus, the altar is never static. It is a living, ever-changing spiritual expression on the most intimate level.

Additionally, Morgan writes her morning pages, usually after her daily walk. For her, this is much like a meditation and serves to release tension and clear the space so that she can then open to feel and listen to a higher presence. Finally, a time is set aside each morning and evening to send Reiki healing and prayers to negative situations and those in need. This is also her activity of choice when she is unable to sleep. It gives her the sense of a deep connection to the world rather than the helplessness that so many express. The empowerment of this prayerful form of response to crisis is pivotal to practicing the presence of sanctuary. As Morgan eloquently puts it, “I live with a prayer always in my heart.”

If you take a more traditional approach to a spiritual practice, such as regular attendance at church or study of the Bible or other sacred books, be sure to give yourself permission to personalize your spiritual routine in whatever ways are necessary so that it truly reflects your own uniqueness. In this way, you will be better able to weather the inevitable dry spells when a practice seems to temporarily lose its meaning or potency. Keep very current with your constantly evolving, whimsical soul so that your outer actions reflect your inner needs. Dogma alone may not be enough to awaken your heart’s devotion and kindle your deep passion for seeking God, which are, after all, at the heart of every spiritual practice, no matter what the tradition.

And remember this. It’s far less about the length of time spent in a spiritual practice and more about the sincerity of one’s commitment. Whether you select for your sacred time the early morning, evening, or any other time of the day, such as your lunch hour, it will nourish you deeply, even if you have to wake up earlier or stay up later, nurturing your soul while your family is sleeping. You may feel sleep-

deprived at first, but if you stay with it, the rewards will be forthcoming. And eventually you may require less sleep.

For Forrest and I, it doesn't matter what else does or does not get accomplished as long as we are true to the needs of our soul. This may sound impractical, but it's not as distracting as it might seem. *Because* of having this sanctuary time, we are able to lead highly productive lives. I need very little sleep, for example, perhaps three to five hours a night. Deep meditation is often even more regenerating than sleep. Journaling can be the cheapest form of therapy! Mindful walking is like the proverbial apple a day that keeps the doctor away. And, as a great saint once said, "Solitude is the price of greatness."

Also, the improvement in your disposition and overall outlook will be worth whatever sacrifices you have to make. Whatever form your daily practice takes, it will support you in the work you do in the world, and you will approach this work and the rest of life with a tremendous amount of vitality and enthusiasm if your inner needs are already taken care of.

Cultivate gratitude for the beauty of life and everything that comes to you

"I want to receive the beauty that reminds me that there is no separation — that each act I live while I am fully awake cannot help but be both prayer and lovemaking."

Oriah Mountain Dreamer, *The Invitation*

Forrest and I speak so often about gratitude in this book that it almost seems to go without saying that it is a key element in practicing the presence of sanctuary. Sometimes when things are going well and life is good, it seems easy to be grateful. At other times, when we are struggling deeply with our core issues or life has dealt us a tough card, gratitude may be the last emotion we would expect to call forth, and beauty may seem painfully absent from the stark landscape that we inhabit.

Our neighbors, Lynn and Dave and their four children, are the first example of gratitude that comes to mind. It seems that they are almost always either in a state of crisis themselves or helping someone else who is in crisis. They've been robbed repeatedly, their old truck has caught on fire and broken down on numerous occasions, their well ran dry years ago forcing them to haul their water from town, the kids have sustained countless injuries, they have frequent financial challenges, the deer ravage their garden, on and on, yet they are always counting their blessings, always. No matter how bad it gets, they find a reason to be grateful.

"Life is certainly an adventure," Lynn has often said to me when things are particularly difficult. It never seems to occur to her to blame anyone for the challenges they must endure or to feel unfairly treated. Their faith in Jesus Christ carries them through every test because they know they will find the help or resources they need in a given situation. Once a large tree on our property fell across the road in the middle of the night during a big storm. Someone driving home about 2:00am came upon the roadblock and went to our neighbors for help. Without bothering us, Dave simply fired up his chain saw and cut the entire tree up into firewood. The next day he called to offer us the wood. Far from feeling inconvenienced, he was grateful for the opportunity to be a good friend!

When one gets into the *habit of being grateful*, in every situation, there ceases to be any question of why things happen the way they do. Instead, one looks immediately for the hidden blessing, the lesson to be learned, and the underlying truth. With such an attitude, the solution or right behavior is ever close at hand. Practicing the presence of sanctuary is indeed synonymous with gratitude. The two fit together like hand in glove.

Sometimes when I'm feeling especially discouraged or worn out, I am amazed at how the poignancy of some aspect of Nature's beauty will reveal itself to uplift me: the call of an owl in the dark forested night, the sight of a flower blooming in tough conditions, seemingly against all odds, the fresh air flowing into my lungs and reviving my spirit. I think I can now pray or walk my way through any test,

with the beauty of Nature and Spirit as my primary inspirations. “Spirit and Nature Dancing Together” are the words that are carved on the wooden sign above the arched entrance to our garden.

Oriah Mountain Dreamer, in her deeply honest and moving book *The Invitation*, poses this challenge: “I want to know if you can see beauty, even when it’s not pretty, every day, and if you can source your own life from its presence.” She writes about her experience of teaching a painting workshop and urging a woman to paint what she felt about her mother’s recent death. The resulting painting was both hauntingly painful and beautifully honest: “It simply was the truth.” This is the kind of beauty we must learn to love.

I have come to love old faces, full of wrinkles — laughter lines, worry lines, even frown lines, it doesn’t matter. It’s just a love for what is perfectly reflected in a human being’s face after a lifetime of thinking and feeling. Once I was working in a nursing home in Washington State, directing a grant program I called *Heart to Heart*. The program was designed to meet the non-medical needs of the elderly residents in simple ways that would improve their quality of life and their feeling of being nurtured on the soul level. I sometimes visited a rather crabby woman named Nettie Strawbridge. Everyone else avoided her. She was in her nineties and was very cantankerous. But I was drawn to her for some reason, trying to coax a smile out of her. I came to see a kind of beauty in Nettie and her candor. Later I realized that she was not only one of the oldest residents in the nursing home but also one of the healthiest. This was when I developed my theory that feisty individuals often live longer. She simply refused to play games or pretend to “go to sleep.” She said what she felt and did what she pleased. There is beauty to be seen and appreciated in this level of honesty and realness. When I learned to meet her in that place, she gifted me with her smile.

The Invitation talks about expanding our definition of beauty and “broadening our ability to recognize the interconnectedness of all manifestations of life.” Doing so directly fuels our sense of gratitude for the wealth of insight that is constantly streaming into us from every experience.

Artist and distinguished writer Clare Leighton, in *Where Land Meets the Sea*, wrote decades ago about her exploration of the mud flats of the Bay of Cape Cod that were only exposed at very low tides near the full moon. While others shunned these temporary mud flats, waiting only for the water to return, Clare became fascinated by their “subtle rather than obvious beauty.” Grateful to be their lone explorer, often knee deep in mud, she discovered a rich and varied terrain teeming with life. One day she came upon a large bed of conch laying their eggs. “The scene before me,” she writes, “here in the cold, dark mud, holds all the ambivalent ugliness and beauty of procreation. Out of those clammy-looking folds of flesh emerge the beautiful, lengthy chains of egg discs that will float here, on the incoming tide, secured into the mud, until the eggs have matured.”

“If you look closely (at such a world),” Clare concludes, “if you stand still and listen, it will disclose immeasurable magic.” I dare say this philosophy could be applied to all of existence, and that the mud flats become the perfect metaphor for the more mundane aspects of our daily lives. So much is hidden just beneath the surface, bubbling forth at the slightest pressure or prodding, eager to reveal its secrets. But we must be willing to accept what is revealed to us and to be gratefully guided by its truth, whether it is a “terrible truth” or one that resounds with comforting beauty. In the presence of sanctuary, the distinctions between all these truths begin to fade and we learn to simply perceive the beauty of what is without judgment.

Spontaneity

In addition to a specific daily practice of some sort and the honing of gratitude, there are countless moments in the day when you are free to practice the presence of sanctuary, in the broadest sense of the word. If you only embrace a few of these opportunities, you will set yourself on a course to discover many more pleasant or even sacred waysides that will enrich your life. And you will learn that these

experiences have a way of coming along when you least expect them. So much the better! It's delightful to be surprised.

Recently I was walking down the street with my friend Bhakti when a great gust of wind came along. We watched as it swirled in the branches of a cherry tree blooming across the street, causing many petals to fall. We were so appreciative of this magical moment that I spontaneously called out to the wind, "Blow the petals over here!" Immediately the wind seemed to change direction, and we were engulfed in a shower of pink petals that literally made a beeline for us. It was lovely, and we danced around like little kids, delighting in this sensory adventure. We then picked up handfuls of petals and tossed them at each other like snowballs. Soon the grass, sidewalk, and street were all covered with pink blossoms. I'm so glad we were there to witness this.

I remember Forrest telling the story of a beautiful encounter he once had while he gazed out the window of an upstairs bedroom. It was late fall, and he was admiring the elegant, bare branches of a large maple tree in our neighbor's yard, when suddenly the very last leaf on the tree let go and slowly drifted to the ground. What are the chances, really, that one would witness such a thing? For some, this kind of experience would perhaps mean very little, but for us, they are poignant, if brief, glimpses into the wondrous workings of the universe. Since the human mind is constantly at work, producing a steady stream of, for the most part, useless ideas and thoughts, why not divert one's attention now and then to something more worthwhile or noble?

Brother Lawrence, a humble French, Carmelite monk of the 17th Century, wrote passionately about practicing the presence of God, but the way in which he did this was not to withdraw into his cell or spend the day praying in church. He simply placed his mind on God while performing menial tasks, such as sweeping or chopping vegetables. After years of "practicing the presence", no matter how mundane the activity, his heart was overflowing with divine love.

"I am not saying to do this it is necessary to curb oneself unreasonably;" Brother Lawrence writes reassuringly in *Practice of the Presence of God*. "No, we must serve God in a holy freedom; we must do our work faithfully, without distress or anxiety, recalling our mind to God calmly and tranquilly whenever we find it distracted from Him." Holy freedom - is that not a beautiful concept? The Dalai Lama characterizes this as simply developing the seed of peace within oneself.

Whether we feel ourselves called to practice the presence of God, sanctuary, or simply of peace, the process is essentially the same. In a thousand variations on the theme, we seek to honor the overarching principle of Creation and bring ourselves into alignment with it. "Do not be discouraged by the resistance you will encounter from your human nature;" Brother Lawrence cautions, "You must go against your human inclinations. Often, in the beginning, you will think that you are wasting time, but you must go on, be determined and persevere in it, despite all difficulties."

There is a kind of lightheartedness, a sense of readily accessible joy, that we begin to experience when we take advantage of the ephemeral islands of grace that present themselves, even on a very ordinary day. This happens first on the inner plain, and then spills more and more into exterior behaviors and everyday activities. I think of my Aunt Marcia, now in her late seventies, who in spite of painful physical limitations and financial challenges, nevertheless persists in her optimism about life. She is generous and appreciative and quick to smile, delighting in the simplest things. In the many family stories she has told me, she always frames events in a positive way. For her there are no villains, no lurking bad memories that bring out anger or depression. For years, she has practiced seeing only the good in everyone and everything. The results of this are clear. Aunt Marcia is happy and at peace. That doesn't mean her life is perfect, but she accepts what comes and always does her best. Moreover, she enjoys her life rather than bemoaning her advancing age.

We are amazed at how often stories of the lives of saints or great spiritual leaders — of any tradition — point out the presence of this same sweet child-like joy and spontaneity. But we can choose to express these same qualities in ourselves by not holding onto negative thoughts or experiences. A sage once said that each day we should treat everything that comes to us as coming directly from God, and

each night we should give it all back into God's hands. My aunt is one person who has learned to do this.

I also met an elderly nun some years ago who modeled this same child-likeness. Her name was Sister Mukti Mata. She willingly left her numerous duties to spend two hours talking with me and showing me the Christmas decorations in the ashram. She took a sweet delight in everything, giggling like a schoolgirl as she recounted stories and memories of Christmases past. She had not a trace of the sternness I was raised to expect in nuns. Her heart was as transparent as a child, a very wise child though she was.

I had a dream once that I was skiing down a mountain, feeling so carefree, exuberant, and youthful, so at one with Nature. Then, in the dream, I suddenly came out of my reverie and realized that in actuality, I was very old, and living in a nursing home. But though I was quite incapable of skiing any more, in another way my youthful spirit had come to understand that true freedom is *within*, and that being young at heart is preferable to being just physically youthful. As mentioned, I know more than one elder who reflects this truth, being truly spontaneous, playful, and in touch with their vitality.

My dream helped me to realize how, in the beginning, I used to think that sanctuary was synonymous with freedom from *outer* constraints, so this is where I focused much of my efforts. Forrest and I intentionally created a lifestyle that would allow us maximum freedom from the dictates of the world, freedom to do whatever we wanted. But in spite of the outer freedom we enjoyed, I still felt constrained internally. I repeatedly let my fears, jealousy, or anger prevail, stealing my peace and obscuring the feelings of deep love and goodness in my heart. I'm not certain why I did that; I think many people do. By our own negative thinking, we make everything harder than it really needs to be. A silly argument becomes a huge conflagration; a tiny possibility of risk looms as a fearsome danger to be avoided at all costs. A minor inconvenience takes on the gothic proportions of a disaster, or similarly, a bit of rejection spirals us into weeks or months of depression. Do you see how fragile we can be? When do we finally grow tired of our own fragility?

This is why we so much need to integrate the concept of sanctuary into the very fabric of our innermost thoughts, so we can feel safe and capable, moment-by-moment, of rising above the adversity that is inherently and unavoidably part of life. My goal is to replace every spontaneous negative reaction (no matter what the cause) with an automatic positive reaction ("Only Love"). The ability to do this will be a clear indication to me that I am indeed practicing the presence of sanctuary consistently wherever I am.

Recall again, if you will, Ghandi's immediate reaction of blessing and forgiveness when an assassin shot him. He never stopped chanting his mantra — Rama, Rama, Rama — until he died. I once watched Forrest stand peacefully as a drunken man waved a knife in his face. Eventually the man was softened by kindness. And another time he prevented a tree from being cut down in a public campground, standing his ground while the camper belligerently threatened to kill him with his ax. Having easy access to a calm place of sanctuary within counters the tendency to overreact and at the same time gives one the intuition to do the right thing in the most unexpected and challenging of circumstances, as well as in the ordinary events of each day.

This kind of understanding comes incrementally, and sometimes quite unexpectedly, as we take small, sincere steps and trust that we will someday reach the noble goals we have set for ourselves. The beauty of accessing spontaneous sanctuary is that it supports us when we need it, and helps to deepen our trust in our own instincts. And it may well take us by surprise, so that we have less opportunity to resist it or to erect complex justifications and rationalizations about why we cannot afford to take advantage of such an opportunity. Sanctuary simply presents itself in the moment (a traffic jam will do nicely!) and either we grab the chance or we don't. Say yes more often. Be available (waiting in line can easily foster a sanctuary moment!). Be willing to change direction, to follow a whim, to let go of guilt, to listen to the intuitive voice when it whispers, "Go for it!"

I was once riding around with friends in the back of a pick-up truck. The night air was cold, and so, after a half hour or more of driving, we were naturally attracted to a small campground just off the road, where we saw from a distance a great campfire burning. We approached the fire in disbelief: there was no one there, no vehicle, no tent, nor people. As we gratefully warmed ourselves near its flames, I was even more amazed when I looked over at the nearby picnic table. Sitting on the table was a German chocolate cake and lattice-crust blueberry pie just like my Grandma used to bake. They were untouched. We waited as patiently as we could under the circumstances. And then we devoured them. (What would you have done?) Within moments of finishing, there was a deafening roar of thunder and it began to pour down rain. We took shelter under the picnic table, and when the rain stopped, headed for home, still astonished at our good fortune. Spontaneous sanctuary.

I remember one day when Forrest woke up with an ear infection. He had a day full of obligations, beginning with an 8:30am appointment. At the last minute, the woman called to cancel, saying the clutch had gone out in her car. Forrest's first inclination was to use this unexpected time to mow our unruly lawn. When I never heard the lawn mower start up, I went to check on him, only to find that he had instead decided to play some soothing music on his guitar and then to take a long nap. Spontaneous sanctuary.

That same day, I was expecting to lead an evening garden tour, for which there was much preparation to make. Then it began to rain, and I received a phone call rescheduling the tour for the next month. Wonderful! I was about to dash off to do all the errands I had been neglecting, but I decided instead to cozy up on the couch and read a really good book and then to make a special dinner for the family that required a little extra prep time. Spontaneous sanctuary.

We are all familiar with the feeling of peace derived from watching the snow silently falling from the sky, or the cooling taste of lemonade refreshing us on a hot summer day. We remember the reassuring haven of our mother or father's arms, the beauty of a perfect sunset, the welcome and timeless retreat found in the pages of a really good book. Okay, you have the idea. Now you just have to do it! No guilt, no regrets. The soul is always on the lookout for yet another way to turn the ordinary into something special, to turn a catastrophe into a blessing, even to transform the most mundane moment or experience into an absolute miracle. Divine intervention? Why not? Pay close attention, and see what you discover. There's always more to know, understand, and receive. *So the next time a special opportunity spontaneously presents itself, asking that you set aside your everyday reality for a moment or an hour to enter willingly into some other realm, please don't turn away.* Accept any gift of sanctuary that has been given you. Use it well.

Slow down the pace of your life

Industrialized nations have long adopted a high standard for competency, involving the masterful use of time to accomplish all the various tasks that define optimal productivity. Multi-tasking has become the bottom line for everyone from homemakers, office workers, and farmers to politicians and high profile executives. We all seem to be hell-bent on non-stop efficiency, to the point of which we are virtually unable to slow down and relax even in our so-called leisure time. More often than not, we work at a feverish pace, whether or not we really need to. We are thus habitually in a hurry and stressed to the point of exhaustion. Additionally, we may well feel, even if subconsciously, that we are in competition with those around us. We literally believe that we can't slacken our pace for a moment or we'll fall hopelessly behind "those others", be they imaginary or not. My service-oriented friend Bell is afraid that if she slows down to catch her breath, she will not be doing all the good that she should be doing. I remind her that if she "saves the world but loses her own soul" she hasn't accomplished much.

Many of us don't even blink an eye anymore at the harried driver of the car in the next lane who is talking on their cell phone, drinking a latte, trying to keep the kids in order, *and* about to make a risky last minute turn across two lanes of traffic to get to the bank before it closes. Most of us have little room

to criticize others because in one way or another we are doing the very same thing: pushing it. The myth has been carefully perpetuated. It goes like this: *we have no choice*. Is it presumptuous to say that this is highly inaccurate? We *do* have a choice. Moreover, if we refuse to exercise this choice, persisting in our time-crazed rushing around at all costs, we may well lose the last remaining shreds of perspective that enable any degree of discrimination or self-preservation. This sounds alarmist I know, but we feel deep concern for our culture in this regard. Such a pace is simply not sustainable.

Sometimes I find myself driving on a beautiful country road behind a very slow driver. I may notice that I am impatiently trying to pass him *for no good reason*, but simply out of the habit of preferring a certain speed. I have to forcibly remind myself to slow down and take it easy. If I look around for a moment, I start to realize that the driver in front of me may well be enjoying the scenery, and I am free to do the same thing. But then a curious thing happens. Just as I am succeeding in relaxing, as evidenced by lowering my speed and perhaps noticing some pleasing aspect of Nature in passing, we reach the city limits, and suddenly the slow driver steps on the gas. After going a speed significantly below the speed limit, he now is going well over the posted, in-town speed limit. This happens regularly so I know it's not a chance occurrence.

I have a little theory, which I call "The Negative Ion Phenomena". Not everyone is susceptible to it, but for many, being in Nature or even driving through it exerts an automatic, calming urge to slow down and appreciate the beauty, at least for a while. But once back in "civilization", we quickly revert to our normal lightening speed approach, and our soul, perhaps briefly awakened, falls back to sleep.

When Forrest, who isn't called Doctor Leisure for nothing, drives at or below the speed limit on the freeway or any four-lane road, nearly every car passes him. Nevertheless, he staunchly refuses to be rushed, asserting his right to not be in a hurry. I admire this about him, though sometimes it drives me crazy. But he's the same way with everything. When shopping, he rarely consumes on impulse, researching the range of products available and carefully considering quality and value before making a purchase. He generally thinks about what he wants to say before responding to a question, refusing to be rushed. And he genuinely likes such mundane tasks as weeding, washing dishes, and food buying because he can take his time and pray or watch his breath during the entire duration of the activity. He is capable of multi-tasking, but he doesn't choose to do it very often. Generally he doesn't miss a thing because his relaxed approach facilitates full attention to the matter at hand. His behaviors in this regard are gradually rubbing off on me, to the point which most of my friends think of me as a calm and grounded person most of the time. But they should have seen me even five or six years ago, as tightly strung as an over tuned violin! It has taken years of meditation, hard choices, and much conscious effort to slow my life down, but now I *am* smelling the roses and they sure smell good!

Not a bad idea just about now. I think I will go ask Forrest if he wants to go smell a rose with me. It's a sure fire way to smell the sweet fragrance of God. A perfect sanctuary moment.

Excerpts from forthcoming book: **Islands of Grace: Creating Sanctuary in Daily Life**. By Dr. Christopher Forrest McDowell and Tricia Clark-McDowell

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