

## THE TRUE SELF

### Home Sweet Home



Mom and Dad just called from the hospital. They're bringing the new baby home in about two hours. They told me to call you and invite you over to see him."

I could hear the excitement in eight-year-old Jason's voice. He seemed thrilled to have a baby brother.

I finished what I was doing and then headed over to the Carpenters' home. Within twenty minutes of my arrival, Jason and I heard the car pull into the driveway. He ran to the front door to open it. I stood a few steps behind him.

After a few minutes, Luke and Katie got out of the car. Luke was carrying a bundle in his arms. Jason and I were both aware that it was the newborn baby.

Once inside the door, Luke asked Jason, "Do you want to see your baby brother, Aiden Alexander?" Jason's face betrayed his joy and curiosity.

I watched as Luke carefully unwrapped layer upon layer of blankets. Jason got his first look at his new brother.

“Father, please!” Luke said, motioning for me to hold the newborn. I carefully laid little Aiden in a cradle made of my right arm and looked into his tiny, pink face. He was sound asleep, his eyelids just slightly ajar. A heavy silence descended on me as I stared in awe-filled wonder and recalled how my grandmother used to say that newborns “dream about the angels.” There was something truly celestial about this three-day-old infant. I felt myself holding back tears of disbelief. *It truly is a miracle*, I said to myself. Another human life had come into the world. Time stood still as my stare became a contemplative gaze on a totally content, dependent newborn who, at that very moment, radiated the presence of God.

Luke bent over my shoulder and whispered to little Aiden, “Welcome home!” That greeting instantly reminded me that I too had returned to where I belong.

## WELCOME HOME!

There are times in life when the present moment opens up like doors to a magnificent homecoming party. Everything converges on a single, simple point—a newborn infant, a waterfall, the pronouncement of wedding vows, an experience of deep silence in the present moment, a selfless kiss.

This moment catches the rays of the sun through a magnifying glass and burns a hole in our memory. We remember everything about it: the weather, the music playing in the background, the people around us.

We are wide awake and truly *live* this moment with attentive awareness. We transcend “me” as our attention is riveted on “thee” (others)—whatever that might be. In such moments, Luke’s words ring loudly and clearly: “Welcome home!”

Down through the centuries, Christians have considered such

selfless moments spiritual. They can be quite dramatic; they can be quite ordinary. While meditating on the passion of Christ, Francis of Assisi had an experience of the crucified Christ that left physical wounds in his flesh. Julian of Norwich, a great woman mystic of fourteenth-century England, saw the unity of the universe in a small hazelnut held in the palm of her hand. Sixteenth-century mystic John of the Cross used paradoxical language and spoke of an interior darkness that dazzled with a spiritual light. In 1600, Jakob Boehme, while working in his cobbler's shop, saw the light of the sun reflected in a tin vessel and instantly realized that true knowledge of God brings a person into the light. Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, a seventeenth-century cook of the Carmelite Order, experienced God while making an omelet. On a Wednesday evening in May 1738, John Wesley, while listening to someone reflect on Luther's "Preface to the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans," felt his heart "strangely warmed" and justified in the sight of God. With loving attentiveness, Mother Teresa of Calcutta ministered to the dying and, in them, discovered the presence of the crucified, thirsty Jesus. Different times, different people, different experiences—but the same discovery of the divine Presence in the present moment.

A spiritual experience within the Judeo-Christian tradition is focused on "Thee," the divine Presence, often mediated through "thee," another person or object. Rather than broadening self-awareness, it broadens God-awareness and is initiated by God. Indeed, it is a grace, a gift. At times, God mysteriously inches into our lives like the morning tide or a tiny whisper. One thinks of Elijah outside the cave (see 1 Kings 19:9-13). At other times, the Presence comes out of nowhere, commanding attention, wonder and awe as God did with Moses in the burning bush (see Exodus 3:1-6) or Jesus

with his three disciples on Mount Tabor (see Matthew 17:1-8).

In such moments and experiences, our attention is riveted on the present moment as an interior door is thrown open in welcome. We find ourselves invited into a mysterious darkness pregnant with the loving divine Presence. We are taken by the hand and led to a place that feels all too familiar and yet is strangely new. At such times, we are welcomed home.

### BECOME LIKE A CHILD

Without realizing it, Luke had spoken a deep spiritual truth to little Aiden when he said, "Welcome home!" Aiden truly was home, but in a sense deeper than a sociologist's understanding of a family unit. Like any other infant, he could live only in the present, for he had yet to learn of something called "the past" and "the future." When awake, Aiden would gradually learn to focus on everything that surrounded him. He would be totally dependent on Luke and Katie for all his needs. And if my grandmother was correct, he would dream of the angels, indicative of the presence of God that surrounded him and radiated through his very presence. Indeed, Aiden was home. He was right where he belonged and where God intended and created him to be. He was living in the here and now.

This focused and dependent disposition, so evident in newborn infants, is analogous to what some spiritual writers refer to as the true self. The true self experiences, lives in and responds to the present moment. It is attentive to the divine Presence right here, right now, as it comes to us under the guise of a living person, some inanimate form of creation or an event. With childlike simplicity and spontaneity, the true self is dependent and has a relationship with thee (others) in the here and now as the sacred place of encounter with Thee (God).

Perhaps that is why Jesus makes the bold proclamation, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). We need to return to being who God created us to be and stop being who we are not. We need to come back home to the true self.

A little reality check speaks volumes about how far we have wandered away. Newborns, because they are focused on the present, do not experience the learned behaviors of guilt and sentimentality that are characteristics of the adult obsession with the past. Because they are focused on the present, newborns do not experience the learned behaviors of worry and anxiety that are characteristics of the adult obsession with the future. Guilt, sentimentality, worry and anxiety arise in our lives as we grow into adulthood.

A parent tosses his young daughter high into the air, and the child giggles with glee because she is certain that loving arms will be waiting to catch her on her descent. Her trust is natural and spontaneous. However, as that child becomes an adult, she will be conditioned toward independence and will soon learn how to be self-reliant and distrustful of others. With that, the natural God-given trust in others fades into memory.

The great tragedy for many of us is that in growing up, we become self-made, independent successes who are weighed down with thoughts of the past and worries about the future. We lose touch with our true self, the person God created us to be. We live off-center and alienated from who we really are.

#### THE GREAT INSIGHT

Our alienation is no more evident than in our experience of God. If little infants like Aiden do dream about the angels, then the di-

vine Presence is naturally close to us. The history of Christian spirituality certainly attests to that. Indeed, the tradition speaks of a divine indwelling with expressions such as “interior fire,” “the ground of my being,” “the spark of the soul.” Meister Eckhart preached, “God is at home,” and home for him was within. Paul wrote to the Galatians, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). At the very core of our being, whether we are conscious of it or not, there is a communion—a “common union”—with God. In the words of Catherine of Genoa, “My me is God!”

And this divine Presence is not simply some objective “thing” inside us. The divine Presence also surrounds us like the air we breathe. Apparently quoting a Greek poet, Paul preached at the Areopagus, “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). The first letter of John makes clear that the divine Presence is the fishbowl in which lovers swim: “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 John 4:16).

Human language always stammers, limps and collapses when trying to express or communicate the mystery of God. Whatever is said or written about God will be off the mark and prone to misinterpretation and error. As Eckhart said, “The hand that writes the true thing about God is the hand that erases.” Only silence and erased blackboards have the capacity to speak and convey the truth about God. And so we must be content with analogy and allegory when speaking of the divine Presence.

Thomas Merton once used the analogy of walking outside in the fresh air to speak of the experience of God. He said we usually do not concentrate on the fresh air—we simply breathe it. And we normally do not fix our attention on the sunlight—we simply enjoy and bask in it. And so, Merton said, the things that corre-

spond to the divine Presence are not things on which we can and do concentrate. Rather, we simply are *in* them as we are *in* the divine Presence.

Many of us ask, “Where is God?” But that’s like asking the location of air or the direction of sunlight. The divine Presence is not a “thing” that is “out there.” Lovers abide in God and God in them. “For then the soul is in God and God in the soul just as the fish is in the sea and the sea in the fish,” Catherine of Siena wrote.

Using John of the Cross’s analogy of a window pane and light, we can say that our physical bodies and our historical lives are stained-glass windows through which the interior presence of God—the divine light—shines to the world. As we read in the Gospel of Matthew, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (5:16). We are sacraments, tabernacles of the living God. That awareness of Thee is the key to the door of this very moment. And it is right here, right now, where God intends for us to be.

Of course, this points to the great insight: there is nothing to “get” in the spiritual life because we already have it! We simply need to become aware of the Presence who dwells within and in whom we dwell. We need to be attentive to the sacrament of the present moment.

Every time I get into an automobile, I look at those words printed on the bottom of the passenger side-view mirror: “Objects in mirror are closer than they appear.” That speaks of the divine Presence. God is closer to us than we have ever imagined or dreamt. Genesis portrays Adam and Eve experiencing the divine Presence in the evening breeze (see Genesis 3:8). Augustine of Hippo said, “God is closer to your soul than you are yourself.” Indeed, to quote Eckhart again, “God is at home.”

## THE INCARNATION

Of course, this insight is hard for us Westerners to accept. As we grow up and are trained in the dualistic thinking of our culture, we quickly learn to divide and compartmentalize our lives. God is up there and we are down here. As a Scripture scholar once commented, we live and work in one world while believing and praying in another. Surprisingly, the God of the Christian turns such thinking upside down and inside out.

Jews, Christians and Muslims all share the same one God and have a deep respect for divine transcendence. I remember watching Muslims in Cameroon, West Africa, as they pulled out their prayer mats, faced Mecca and began their prostrations and prayers to Allah. Muslims have a tremendous awareness of Allah's presence in their lives—they call it *taqwa*—and a deep respect for God's transcendence. They publicly call it to mind five times a day.

But it was while visiting a patient named Iridizo in the hospital run by the Franciscan sisters in the village of Shisong that I also realized the great difference between Christians and Muslims.

Black Muslim Iridizo had a lot of questions to ask the visiting white priest from faraway America: "Is it really true that in your country you have machines that make the air in buildings cold? Why would you ever want to do that? And why do you need so many different kinds of cars?"

After we discussed everything from air-conditioning to the American fascination with the automobile, our conversation inevitably turned to the topic of religion. I was surprised at Iridizo's directness: "When we Muslims get together to pray, we are very respectful toward Allah. We pray on special mats. We prostrate and bow. We love Allah dearly, and we show that by the way we pray.

But you Catholics are so different. I went to one of your services and was shocked to see people turning around and shaking hands. How do you show reverence and respect for the Compassionate One when everyone is shaking hands?”

Iridizo's question revealed the fundamental difference between Muslims and Christians. For Muslims, Allah lives in heaven and must be shown respect and reverence. For those who profess faith in Jesus, however, the transcendent God “up there,” in the words of the fourth Gospel, “became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). This is the wonder of Christmas: God has come down to earth in human flesh. He is Emmanuel, God with us.

Though language is inadequate to contain the truth of the divine, in the miracle of Christmas, God entered the only and most apt vessel that *can* contain the ineffable divine Presence: the tabernacle of human flesh. To borrow the imagery from Paul, there is a precious treasure found in the clay vessel of human flesh (see 2 Corinthians 4:7).

God's embrace of the body at Christmas is a dramatic event that radically affirms the goodness and sanctity of human flesh. Traditional piety has often evaded Paul's challenging reminder, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?” (1 Corinthians 6:19). God is most certainly at home. God is with us.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF BEING HOME

How do we know if the true self is emerging? What are the characteristics of a person who is “at home” with God? What fruits are found in the life of someone who is aware of and celebrates the common union with God? Though the list is far from exhaustive, there are ten traits of people who have come home to the present moment where God intends them to be.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TRUE SELF
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relational</li> <li>• Self-giving</li> <li>• Unflappable and unthreatened</li> <li>• Focused on the here and now</li> <li>• Contemplative approach to life</li> <li>• Wonder and awe</li> <li>• Trustful surrender</li> <li>• Compassionate</li> <li>• Awareness of being a spoke in the larger wheel of creation</li> <li>• Passion for peace and justice</li> </ul>

The first characteristic goes to the very heart of being created in the image and likeness of God. Since the First Council of Nicaea in 325, Christians have affirmed that God is a trinity of Persons: Father, Son and Spirit. The Father is only a father because he has a son. And the Son is only a son because he has a father. And they are in relationship because the Spirit binds them together. The point is obvious: the very essence of God—what makes the divine Presence divine—is God’s relational nature. “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 John 4:16).

Those of us rooted in the true self are *relational*. We too foster and exist in a trinity of relationships between God, others and self. Just as dimensions of God’s divinity are revealed in the relationships of the Trinity, dimensions of our humanity are discovered when we are in relationship with God and others. Indeed, only then do we discover who we really are: members of a family inextricably bound together—sharing a common union—because of

the divine image and likeness stamped on our souls.

Christianity has never promoted an individualistic “me and Jesus” spirituality. Such thinking is an anomaly and an aberration. Even as early as the fourth century, when hermits started retreating into the desert to live solitary lives in radical devotion to God, the Christian tradition remained consistently adamant: love, charity and hospitality are absolutely essential, expected and required. As one desert hermit taught, the charity shown to a sick brother is worth more than a lifetime of penitential practices. Jesus said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Lovers abide in God and God in them.

Born to be in relationship, the true self is also *self-giving*. The great temptation, especially for beginners in spiritual formation, is to think that spiritual growth is about the byproducts that we sometimes experience. Beginners hanker after the spiritual buzz, the feelings of peace, the sunshine of inner joy that we occasionally enjoy as gifts from God. John of the Cross calls the desire for such sensations and emotions “spiritual lust.” When all is said and done, the journey of the spiritual life is a deepening in selfless love, not spiritual experiences.

The selfless quality of this self-giving is no more clearly evident than in Jesus’ injunction “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:27-28). It’s not about me, but about thee and Thee.

Love, indeed, is the acid test of spiritual growth. “It is love alone that counts,” as Thérèse of Lisieux summed it up the day before she died. Paul reminded the Corinthians who were overflowing with spiritual gifts,

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

For a number of years, I was the spiritual director of Mother Teresa of Calcutta's sisters in Asia. I am fortunate to have gotten to know Sr. Lucina. I still clearly remember the day when she was caring for an elderly person in the home that the sisters run in Hong Kong. I was helping her.

A wealthy potential benefactor walked in, watched what was going on and asked Sr. Lucina, "What's the point of your work? It doesn't look like much except caring for old people."

I became defensive and was just about to speak up when Sr. Lucina looked at me with a stern first-grade-teacher's glance. She simply smiled and said to the woman, "You are right. It's not much. We just take care of people one on one." And, hearing that, I realized Sr. Lucina had no need to defend a selfless act of love and charity.

Those who are at home are *unflappable and unthreatened*. They waste no time and have no emotional need to protect their reputation or justify what they are doing. They just do what they are doing, knowing full well that the Presence in the present moment validates their lives and actions.

The vast majority of us suffer from amnesia of the present. We think that the real action is somewhere else. Some of us have lost touch with the present moment because we prefer to live in the past. We are forever mulling over yesterday—regretting it, analyz-

ing it or glorifying it with nostalgia. Sentimentality, regret and guilt are the prices we pay when we live yesterday today.

Others of us are always jumping ahead to the future: anxious about next weekend, planning next month, wondering about next year. With antacids in our pockets and ulcers in our stomachs, we race toward tomorrow. Anxiety and worry are the prices we pay when we leave the home of the present moment and try to live tomorrow today.

The late Anthony DeMello, S.J., compared our daily predicament to that of a person who, at the very beginning of the symphony, suddenly realizes he has locked his keys in his car. Anxiety divides his awareness and freezes him in a semiconscious state. He is unable to enjoy the music unfolding before him, because his worry has returned him to the parking lot. He is filled with regret. He is also worried about what will happen after the concert. Who will he call? How much will it cost? He is stuck, straddling the moment, unable to enjoy the present, unable to fix the past, unable to hasten the future.

Contrast that man's response with a woman's in a more precarious situation. One day, a woman decided to take a walk through the jungle. While she walked along, enjoying the sounds of the jungle, a disturbed tiger suddenly started to chase her. The woman ran as fast as she could and found herself at the edge of a cliff. Luckily, there was a thick vine hanging down the face of the cliff. The woman grabbed it and started her descent. Halfway down, she looked up and noticed two mice chewing on the vine. It was evident that her makeshift safety rope would soon give way. Looking down, she saw a pack of hungry wolves anxious for their next meal. The woman looked around and spied a strawberry bush growing on the side of the cliff. Rather than regret her decision to

take a walk or worry about her impending death, she plucked a strawberry from the bush, put it in her mouth and savored the taste. “There’s nothing like a fresh strawberry!” she exclaimed.

Those who have returned to where God has placed them, who live at home, are *focused on the here and now*. “There’s nothing like a fresh strawberry!” they are prone to say, even in the most uncertain of circumstances. They recognize that the past and the future are mental constructs that refer to the nonexistent. There is only one reality: the Presence in the present moment: “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:14). And so, like Moses before the burning bush, they take off their shoes and develop the habit of living right here, right now.

This focus on the here and now leads to a *contemplative approach to life*. People rooted in the true self are well aware of what the Jesuit Jean-Pierre de Caussade called “the sacrament of the present moment.”

Hasidic Jews believe that angels enter our lives one hundred times a day. Each day, they say, each one of us experiences one hundred messengers of God. From this Hasidic point of view, the amazing thing is not that the angel Gabriel entered Mary’s life, but that Mary recognized this annunciation of God (see Luke 1:26-38). Mary was a great contemplative, intensely focused on each individual who entered her life. She looked beyond the veil of human flesh and offered hospitality to each person as a messenger of the divine. She saw Thee in thee. She was a woman totally aware that everyone she encountered was a God-bearer. The eyes of her heart were wide open, and she was wide-awake. She was living in the present, in the here and now, attuned to the Presence. From such a stance, she discovered the annunciations of daily life, the epiphany of the now, the sacrament of the present moment and the tabernacle of her neighbor.

A contemplative approach to life is constantly receptive to the visitation of angels when we least expect them and at the most inconvenient of times. One thinks of God's visit under the guise of three travelers as Abraham rested during the heat of the day (see Genesis 18:1-16). When asked by a sinner for a way to make up for lost time in the spiritual life, Eckhart said it in a curious way: "Be in all things a God-seeker and at all times a God-finder, among all kinds of people and in all kinds of circumstances."

A practical consequence of this is that if I am "looking" for God, I am not living in the here and now, where the present moment is pregnant with the Presence. And if I am not living in the here and now, then where, pray tell, am I living? After all, there is no other reality than the present moment.

This contemplative stance combined with living in the here and now gives birth to lives of *wonder and awe*. In the words of the dying priest in George Bernanos's *The Diary of a Country Priest*, "Grace is everywhere." Indeed, the true self knows only too well that "the God of all grace" (1 Peter 5:10) dallies and sometimes dances within every moment and situation. The awareness of this fact drives these people to their knees in adoration.

On a cold January afternoon, I discovered two other traits of those who have come home to the sacrament of the present moment and are rooted in the true self.

Margo lay in a hospital bed that her parents had bought and placed in the family's living room. She was only sixteen years old and was dying of Lou Gehrig's disease. What immediately struck me were the clarity of her eyes and the simplicity of her smile. A silent beauty radiated from her diseased body.

I felt very awkward and had no idea what to say. But, with a cordial sensitivity that set me at ease immediately, she faced the issue

squarely and bluntly—the very issue I had been asked to discuss with her yet did not know how to broach. With a soft voice in which I could not detect any self-pity, she asked, “I guess they told you I’m dying, huh?”

I nodded my head. “Yes.”

She calmly stated that the time must be getting close because she noticed her breathing was becoming more and more difficult. She explained that this muscular disease would cause her to gradually lose control of her lungs and, in the end, she would suffocate.

I was taken aback by her bluntness. I searched my mind and heart for something to say, and these are the words, I am now embarrassed to admit, that tumbled out of my mouth: “Margo, do you find it hard to die?”

“Not really,” she replied instantly. “The suffering of the past year has forced me to let go of so many things—my privacy, the ability to go to the bathroom alone, the ability to feed myself and change the television channel. It seems like every day I’m challenged to let go of something else. And so, I’ve gotten really good at letting go and surrendering to the present moment. I suspect when death comes, it’s just going to be another moment to let go and surrender. So I don’t think it will be hard to die. I suspect it will come quite naturally to me.”

*Trustful surrender* is natural for those rooted in the true self. It is born of a sense that the Presence in the present moment, as mysterious and even confusing as it might be as in the loss of a loved one, opens a pathway to deeper life. We are challenged to bow and surrender to each moment in life, knowing that the burning bush blazes so brightly at times that we might experience it as darkness. The moment we surrender, pain becomes praise. Weakness becomes strength.

This characteristic is a subtle reminder that all emotional stress and suffering in life are self-imposed. Our obsession and need to control and manipulate life, others and sometimes even God are the primary reasons we are frustrated and stressed. Those who have come home simply surrender to the mystery of the Presence. Like floating in water, they simply give themselves over to the here and now and float in the stream called daily life. Though this appears to be some form of a weak, passive resignation, it is, in fact, an active choice for trust.

A little later, Margo seemingly contradicted what she had said by adding, “You know, it’s hard to die.” She spoke of how deeply hurt her parents and friends would be by her death. She spent much of our time together that afternoon telling me how her death was going to be a tragedy and trial for her loved ones. “How will my parents cope?” she asked. “How will my friends be able to get on with their lives after I’m gone?” I could not help but see the irony in the situation: in the face of her own suffering and death, Margo was worried about how others would deal with the loss of her presence.

Margo was filled with *compassion*, a deep sensitivity and sharing in the sufferings of others. She could have chosen, like many do, to walk the dimly lit, lonely alley of self-absorption that leads to the dead-end of self-pity. But instead, she looked beyond “me” to thee—and, with that choice, Lou Gehrig’s disease was transformed into an instrument of love. Pain became praise. Weakness became strength.

Those at home in the here and now live with an *awareness of being a spoke in the larger wheel of creation*. They know that all creatures are interrelated, forming one universal web of interdependent relationships. They live in a communion. This marvelous web

of creation binds all reality together into one family and becomes a visible sign of the perfection of our common Creator, the generous love of our gracious God.

That was one of the marvelous insights of Francis of Assisi. He saw in all creation—the sun, the moon, the birds of the air and the water flowing in a stream—his brothers and sisters. However, the awareness of this familial bond with other elements of creation did not come all at once to him nor was it something that he discovered early on. On the contrary, *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, his famous hymn composed to celebrate the presence of God in his inanimate brothers and sisters in creation, was written only at the very end of his life. It was the expression of his spiritual maturity.

As part of the familial web of creation, we human beings have been given the commission by God to preserve and promote this family of creation. We are the caretakers and stewards. The business section of the morning newspaper and the evening news on television sometimes highlight controversy as ecologists and environmentalists remind us that trees serve other purposes than just producing paper. But sadly, utility often replaces childlike wonder. With air pollution, global warming and endangered species, one can only wonder if we have become the arsonists of our own planet.

An experience of mine in China highlights another characteristic of the true self.

One day, while walking alongside the Yangtze River to an outdoor market to buy some pork and Chinese vegetables, I ran into Fang Po Zhi. He was a proud, elderly Chinese scholar whose thoughts and reflections never ceased to amaze me because they were often so uncharacteristic of the Chinese. This day's encounter would be typical.

“Hey, Albert, I need your help with this!” he said. “The situation is so tense and someone must tell the West that there are other opinions here in China besides the official one put forward by my government.” As with most conversations with Old Fang, as he allowed me to affectionately call him, this one seemed to have already started without my being aware. His mind was always working away and analyzing something. A familiar face often became the unknowing audience to his latest ruminations.

“*Zenma yang* [What’s up]?” I asked.

Aware of the sensitivity of his latest thoughts and fearing our conversations might be overheard, Old Fang spoke in his impeccable English. “These military exercises with live ammunition that my government is sponsoring so close to the island of Taiwan are crazy! They are simply trying to intimidate the people of Taiwan and influence their presidential elections next Saturday. Actions like this cannot be justified. I must let people in the West know that there are Chinese who see the absurdity and injustice in the situation. You must give me the address of the *New York Times* so I can write a letter to the editor.”

It was the week of March 18, 1996. The island of Taiwan, traditionally viewed by the Communist government of mainland China as a renegade province, was preparing for the first fully democratic presidential election in the four thousand years of Chinese history. President Lee, up for reelection, had spent the final two years of his term advocating a style of diplomacy that hinted he was in favor of Taiwan declaring itself an independent country in spite of its cultural and historical links to the mainland. Such a declaration would be totally unacceptable to the mainland government. And so, partly as an intimidation and fear tactic and partly to try to influence Taiwan’s election, the mainland government had decided

that some six weeks before the election was an opportune time to conduct military exercises.

Old Fang continued, “My country has been good to me. I love it. But I will never allow any form of propaganda to blind me to what I know in my heart is the truth. I want to die knowing that I stood up for what was right. So, do you have the *Times’s* address?”

“I can easily get it for you in a few days,” I replied. “But aren’t you taking a tremendous risk? You’re not really going to sign the letter, are you?” With him, such questions were superfluous, but I couldn’t help but ask anyway.

Old Fang paused and looked into my eyes. He then said, “Albert, my wife is always quoting a line from the Bible that after these seventy-five years, I am just now beginning to understand: ‘The truth will set you free.’ Why send the letter if I don’t intend on signing it?”

Old Fang hardly considered himself an unpatriotic liberal or revolutionary. Rather, he was the most patriotic of citizens, continually looking for the truth in his country’s situation and willing to risk so much for the sake of witnessing to it. He was a free man who refused to be blinded by any government’s agenda, including his own, or by the particular spin a situation was given by authorities who could potentially do him harm. This and other experiences with Old Fang taught me that he was undeniably grounded in the true self. Despite the consequences his actions could bring, he had discovered political freedom in what is probably the hardest place to find it, a Communist country.

Old Fang’s heroic witness to the truth is a reminder that those rooted in the true self have a *passion for peace and justice*. Such people are well aware that active nonviolence can be a positive force for social change, as witnessed in the lives of Mahatma Gandhi and

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Love motivates their critical analysis of institutions, be it government or church, and social structures. They promote a transformation of society so that justice can be experienced by all, most especially the poor, the marginalized and those who have no voice in the world. And they believe in an equitable sharing of the world's resources.

For those who live “at home,” these are not liberal political agendas. They are expressions of a Christian spiritual life that has its roots in Paul's letter to the Romans: “For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. . . . Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (Romans 14:17, 19).

There are moments in life when we come back to being the people God created us to be. We move beyond our self-absorption with yesterday or tomorrow and focus our attention on Thee, the Presence in the present moment. That Presence dwells within and surrounds us like the air we breathe. Such occasions, celebrations of the sacrament of the present moment, are experiences of God. Again, as Eckhart said, “God is at home.”

And then, sadly, he added, “It is we who have gone out for a walk.”

#### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When am I more likely to experience the divine Presence in the present moment?
2. When am I most myself?
3. When did my life begin to be riddled with guilt (obsession with the past) or anxiety and worry (obsession with the future)?
4. How do my prayers or behavior suggest that God is “up there”

and I am “down here”? How can I better experience the reality of Emmanuel, “God with us”?

5. What am I trying to “get” in the spiritual life?
6. Which true-self characteristics are already operative in my life?
7. Which true-self characteristics are still lacking in my life?

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