

June 15, 2008

Dear friends in the Contemplative Society,

As some of you may know, this spring has served up a cornucopia of opportunities for spiritual pilgrimage. This March it was India; in May (after a week of Centering Prayer teaching in England), I was privileged to be able to spend two weeks in Turkey and on the Greek islands of Paros and Patmos.

The teaching in England went splendidly, thanks to my extremely gracious and competent hosts in Norwich and London, who are each in their own ways doing highly creative work. In London, Jill Benet's "Silence and the City" programme brings a variety of both local and international teachers of meditation to create an ongoing lively space for contemplative instruction and practice. The series is held at Westminster Cathedral (The Roman Catholic cathedral, not the Anglican abbey), and is open to any and all, regardless of spiritual or denominational affiliation. The evening proved to be a powerhouse of contemplative energy and probing questions. I was particularly uplifted by the presence of my Vancouver friend Jane Garland. She had made her way to the event newly arrived in London after a twelve-hour plane trip.

The Norwich event, "unassumingly" entitled "Meditation Master Class," was the brainchild of Nicholas Vesey, Anglican priest at two yoked parishes in Norwich and founding director of the Norwich Christian Meditation Center. The organization reminds me in many ways of the Contemplative Society: a grassroots, ecumenical support network for people wishing to go deeper into the contemplative journey along an inclusive Christian pathway. But Nicholas's energy and organizational genius were off the charts! Having brought me as guest teacher in May and Richard Rohr in January, he will be hosting James Finley in November, and his ongoing weekly class called "Developing Consciousness" provides a brilliantly neutral and attractive starting point for those wanting to go deeper on the transformative path without immediately needing to tangle with a devotional milieu. I learned a lot from him, and our Trinity Sunday Eucharist in the 11<sup>th</sup> century St. Augustine's church definitely rocked! Another highlight of the weekend was staying in the convent immediately adjacent to Julian of Norwich's famous anchorhold and celebrating mass right there in her oratory! As an amazing present, I was given a copy of Dame Julian's spiritual *Revelations* in the original Middle English (I also picked up a copy of the *Cloud of Unknowing* in Middle English, so I can begin my own work of refining the translations currently available).

In all things Nicholas was ably assisted by Liz Day, the Contemplative Outreach point person for the Norwich area. I was delighted to see the truly imaginative and unfettered contemplative work that is going on in this ancient corner of the world.

The Istanbul jaunt was largely a pilgrimage to visit some Sufi friends and teachers recently relocated to Turkey from the States. While there I was reminded once again of the extraordinary beauty and luminescence of this city, as well as its location, literally and spiritually, at the junction of two worlds.

I was drawn again to Agia Sophia, that extraordinary architectural testament to the human spirit. Small wonder that the place is named “Holy Wisdom!” I was saddened by her present station in life, however—as a museum rather than a place of worship. Decades ago, in his brilliant effort to “secularize” Turkey (i.e., rescue it from the destructive energies of warring religious factions), President Attaturk converted it from mosque to museum...undoubtedly a necessary step under the circumstances. But as I lay flat out under her wondrous dome (yes, several tourists stepped over me and at least a couple *on* me), I felt so clearly that what she really wants to be is a temple to the Vertical Axis, a sanctuary of the Divine Mystery open to the entire human family. What a sign of grace it would be to have her opened once again as a place of the spirit, where human beings could come together to meditate, pray, and perhaps share in each other’s rituals as a sign that what unites us to one another and to the invisible life of this cosmos is far greater than what separates us. My prayer as I left that sanctuary was that I might live to see it!

By comparison, Patmos left me with a deep feeling of sadness. I had gone with high hopes, knowing this to be the place where John received the Revelation, the last book of the New Testament, in the fabled Cave of the Apocalypse. Land of holy hermits and unflagging spiritual zeal, the whole island nests literally and figuratively in the shadow of the stark and striking Orthodox Monastery of St. John the Theologian at the peak of the highest hill. Patmos is one of those Orthodox wellsprings, and I was eager to refresh myself beside its waters.

The Cave of the Apocalypse was indeed all I could have hoped for. For three hours I was literally riveted there, unable to move in the intensity of its energy. Every so often a gaggle of tourists would come to invade the space, but for the most part small groups of meditators, the majority of them women, simply came and went, holding the space in very deep prayer. The silence was electrifying. And at the end, I rose with an obvious question—“What should I be doing now?”—to which came a most unexpected but unequivocal answer: “Make Christ liquid.”

The next day’s hike up to the Monastery/citadel proved to be far less illuminating however, “If by their fruits ye shall know them,” the fruits I tasted at this pinnacle of Orthodox spirituality were suspicion, arrogance, and downright surliness. Granted, they are a monastery that is daily invaded (for the five hours it is open to the public) by hordes of picture-taking, loud-talking, asking-dumb-questions tourists; and in a religious milieu which still sees monasticism as a thing apart, practiced in isolation from the rest of sinful humanity, one can well understand their relief to hustle us all out of there precisely at 1 pm. But the sense of unwelcome went far deeper than just because I was a tourist; at the heart of it, I felt, it was because I was a woman. While St. John the Theologian is not officially closed to women as is Mt. Athos, the spirit still strongly prevails that a woman is a hindrance to a monk’s work, and that my sheer physical presence within these sacred precincts constituted a liability. When I asked the monk on duty in the ikon-laden chapel whether there were in the monastery’s treasurehouse any ikons of Mary Magdalene, he responded dismissively (and I quote him exactly), “This is a *men’s* monastery. We have no ikons of women.” Sad, but tellingly true.

Overall, I left Patmos reconfirmed in my sense that so much of institutional Christianity remains stuck: depressed and defended, lost in its failure to come to terms with the feminine, living in a dream world while the real world goes unwelcomed and untended. The old dictum, “We are not punished for our sins but *by* our sins” holds true here. My sense is that if the various branches comprising the Christian world cannot individually and severally lift their head above their own event horizons, Christianity as an institution will soon pass from existence. And justifiably so, I would regretfully have to say. For the spirit of the living Christ, now more than ever, compels us to open our hearts to the oneness of all humanity—to the oneness of all sentient life—and to make this commitment to lived oneness our deepest priority. Will it come in time? Who will give it shape and voice? I give thanks daily for Thomas Keating, Bruno Barnhart, Joan Chittister, Michael Ingham, Richard Rohr, Katharine Jefferts Schori: Christian leaders willing to think and act out of a global vision, from a stance of compassionate Oneness. May their witness give us courage and hope.

And along these same lines, I give thanks for the life of Mary Carder, one of our grand founding mothers here, whose requiem was celebrated this past Ascension Day in Victoria. Mary is the first face that comes to mind when I envision what a spiritually mature Christian looks like: strong, courageous, principled, flexible, forgiving, and adventurous to the very end. The planet is a poorer place without her.

God willing, I will be seeing you all before much longer. Following our Christophany Retreat at the Olympic Park Institute August 27-September 2, I hope to be arriving in Vancouver on or about September 3. I can’t wait to reconnect.

For now, back to the Mary Magdalene book....

With gratitude and love,

Cynthia