

September 19, 2009

Dear friends and fellow contemplatives,

What a wild ride this summer has turned out to be! When I broke camp back in Colorado shortly after Easter and headed back to my hermitage in Maine, I expected several months of hermit reclusion in the classic style, my nose to the grindstone on the Mary Magdalene book. The manuscript did get completed—in about two months, rather than the four I was allotting—but what opened up for the rest of the summer flung me and my hermit dreams literally into the stratosphere.

Perhaps the unplanned trip to Hong Kong in late May could be chalked up to family obligations. My daughter and her three kids, newly arrived in this strange new universe and left to fend on their own while my son-in-law was called away on a business trip to Tokyo, needed an additional pair of hands to help out, and I needed to get over my fear of the Far East. It all worked out fine. By a magical serendipity, the sixteen-hour “straight over the north pole” nonstop from JFK to Hong Kong offered fair weather and spectacular visibility all the way. I peered down at the polar ice cap, the mountains and steppes of Siberia...land I never even dreamed I would see in my lifetime, even from a vantage point of six miles up. It was my own version of traveling to the moon and looking back on earth as for the first time I really grasped the beauty, vastness, and yet intimacy of “this fragile earth, our island home.” It was a striking visual introduction to the theme of this summer: that we are really, indeed, One World: a living, breathing vessel of God’s self-communication, and any other perspective on our essential humanness is way too small!

Then came Assisi (yes, Assisi! land of St. Francis and St. Clare in the very heart of Italy). Again the opportunity came totally out of the blue. I’d known that the Global Peace Initiative of Women was sponsoring a conference there August 9-11 (coinciding with the feast day of St. Clare), but I’d written off going because of the expense and need to keep the time free for writing. But two weeks before the conference, following a chance conversation with a friend in Minnesota, all the doors opened, and on August 8 I found myself on a jet bound for Italy.

I can’t begin yet to sort through all the impressions...Many people had forewarned me that Assisi was “magical,” but I was caught completely off guard by the living presence of St. Francis and St. Clare, broadcasting a message of conscious love and solidarity among all sentient beings of this planet that was both timeless and completely contemporary. The contemplatives gathered from around the world for the GPIW conference gradually fell under its sway, and I saw that in this most sacred of Christian sacred places the presence of the universal heart and unitive wisdom of Jesus, manifested through his spiritual “firstborn son” Francis is palpably present and yearning to be transmitted to a planet sorely in need of it. God willing, a group of us will return next summer to do exactly that. Plans are already underway to create a study/ pilgrimage to Assisi through the Episcopal House of Prayer (in Minnesota) next August 6-13. Mark the dates on your calendar! I hope many of you will be able to join us there.

Finally, as the kind of “triple crown” in this impromptu exploration of our one planetary heart, I am still just unpacking my bag from a weeklong Buddhist/Christian meditation retreat on Holy Isle, off the west coast of Scotland. This tiny jewel of an island (a couple of island chains south of the fabled Iona) has since 1992 been owned and managed by a group of Tibetan Buddhists of the Kagyu lineage under the visionary leadership of Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche (check it out on www.holyisle.org). The island came to his community in a serendipitous way: its Roman Catholic former owner was visited in a dream by the Virgin Mary, who told her she should give the island to Lama Yeshe! That’s basically what happened, and Yeshe has been developing it ever since as an international centre for Peace and Health, giving equal importance to spiritual dialogue and environmental restoration. Holy Isle is a haven of tranquility in which 35,000 trees have been planted, native species are actively being restored, and herds of wild sheep, goats, and ponies wander unfettered and gentle. For six sun-dappled days, a group of Buddhist lamas and nuns and a small band of serious monastic contemplatives, mostly from the UK shared conversation, deep meditation, Buddhist prayers and Christian Eucharist. It was powerful, honest, daring, and deeply healing.

Remember the old sixties saying, “Think globally, act locally”? I’m beginning to get the idea that it’s now the other way around...at least in the Imaginal Oneness to which the contemplative is naturally drawn. As we ground ourselves deeply in the small patch of place and time we’ve been given to tend, our prayers “rise like incense” to create a new atmosphere—maybe a “spiritual ozone layer” if you’ll excuse the funky analogy—sheltering and protecting this fragile earth, and drawing the many into a palpable One. It’s important work, and moving to see that contemplatives and hermits worldwide seem to be rising to the occasion.

What used to be only the mystical vision of a few God-crazed mystics—the world joined together as a single living organism—has now become scientific reality. The days of division, competition, exploitation, religions and nations warring against each other—are a luxury this planet can no longer afford. We are learning the hard way that every action has an impact, and that we are all in this together: humans, nations, the plants, the animals, the rivers, the sky, the whole “gay great happening illimitably earth” (in the words of poet e.e. cummings.) Unexpectedly, what I thought was going to be a summer of solitude wound up being a baptism in that universal heart. I don’t yet know what the implications will be, but feel the yearning to continue moving toward that Assisi/Holy Isle vision.

And yes, the Mary Magdalene book is complete and accepted by the publisher. Look for it next summer!

With blessings and gratitude,

Cynthia