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Arlington Street Church
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A Path with Heart

for Annie, with love

Kem and I left the perfect darkness of the bottom of the Grand Canyon at three a.m., racing against the rising of the sun and the killing desert heat. After an hour of backpacking up Bright Angel Canyon toward the cool shade of Ribbon Falls, we stopped to sit and rest for a few minutes. In the first light, a diminutive woman wearing a huge pack came booking down the trail in the opposite direction. We had a remarkable exchange, in which we learned that she hailed from Montana; she had lived in a Tibetan refugee camp for a year, and was out here in the wilderness, recovering from another recent deployment as a trauma psychologist; that she would be leaving the canyon to work on a voluntary trail crew in Yosemite; and she was approaching her seventieth birthday.

We only spoke for perhaps three minutes. But as she headed off again, down into the abyss, Kem and I looked at each other. *Holy cow!* There were so many things we wanted to ask her, so much to hear and tell. We didn't even know her name.

Days later, topping out on the rim, we scanned the small parking lot at the trailhead for a car with Montana plates. No luck. We drove over to the Backcountry Office, where we learned from the young ranger that there were only two women who had pulled permits to hike alone in that part of the Canyon. No, she couldn't give us their contact information. I handed a piece of scrap paper with our names, an e-mail address, and a cellphone number across the ranger's desk, asking that, if she happened to cross paths with this woman after she climbed out, to please pass along our contact information to her. Think: needle in a haystack. Think: stalking! Still, we felt compelled to try to find her.

Why? Neither of us could really say. But that slim encounter had left us feeling both blessed and bereft.

As we drove toward Phoenix, when we finally came into range again, Kem's phone beeped on and she opened her e-mail. And then, in a voice mixed with disbelief and wonder, she said, "Honey. Her name is Annie Looby."

There's more to the story, now – much more, including the astonishing fact that Annie was also looking for us. All of it has brought us only joy, and the deep confirmation that, indeed, by some providence, we are supposed to know each other.

The only reason any of this was possible for me – I'll speak for myself, here – the only reason there was time for even a brief exchange, time to notice the quality and possibilities in the opening it created, is that I had chosen to *slow down* to the pace of a long walk for fourteen miles uphill carrying a heavy pack. Thankfully, I was compelled to rest for three minutes. What other flirtation with chance luck, freak coincidence, the hand of g*d – however we name those out-of-the-ordinary encounters – what else might unfold in our lives – your life, and mine – if we choose, even for just three minutes, choose to slow down? Wendell Berry's beautiful piece from *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems* comes to mind. Here are just the first and third of four verses. Wendell Berry writes,

I go among the trees and sit still.
All my stirring becomes quiet
around me like circles on water.
My tasks lie in their places
where I left them, asleep like cattle.

Then what I am afraid of comes.
I live for a while in its sight.
What I fear in it leaves it,
and the fear of it leaves me.
It sings, and I hear its song....¹

I cannot bear to think about all the beauty I miss as I tumble through life at breakneck speed – all that all of us miss, consumed by the distractions and demands of our lives in so-called civilization. A demanding walk in the wild is one antidote, but there is at least one other that comes to mind, a way of engaging the spirit each of us can practice in the everyday mayhem of our lives.

¹ Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems*, 1979-1997

It is simply, as the poet advises, to *sit still.*

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While attending his first ten-day meditation retreat, a psychiatrist from Stanford medical school was astounded by the contents of his mind. While he'd studied psychoanalysis and been in his own "talk therapy," he had never actually just sat still. As he discovered on retreat, there's nothing quite like the stories, obsessions, worry, and fearful thoughts that can be uncovered and encountered in day upon day of what looks like doing nothing. Later, he wrote an article detailing this experience of what it feels to a professor of psychiatry to sit and watch himself go crazy. Before I get too enthusiastic in encouraging us to sit still, let us note that we don't want to sit still for too long by ourselves. Indian master Sri Nisargadatta said, "The mind creates the abyss, and the heart crosses it." The *skillful* practice of undertaking wise reflection is most successful in spiritual community. You are here.

Buddhist teacher and author Jack Kornfield writes, "To see the preciousness of all things, we must bring our full attention to life. Spiritual practice can bring us this awareness.... As the qualities of presence and simplicity begin to permeate more and more of our life, our inner love for the earth and all beings begins to express itself and brings our path alive."²

That path, at best, is a path with heart. The Mexican shaman, Don Juan, said to Carlos Casteneda,

Look at every path closely and deliberately.
 Try it as many times as you think necessary.
 Then ask yourself and yourself alone one question....
 I will tell you what it is:
Does this path have a heart?

To walk a path with heart – to open our minds and hearts and hands and open to life – is to sow the seeds of joy. Mother Teresa said, "...We cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love." Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, whose life work lifted the curtain on dying and death, said that *moments* are what comprise a life – moments that, when it comes times to die, we can recall and string like pearls that glow from within. No one arrives at the end of their lives wishing they'd spent more time away from who and what they love. *Why wait?* It was a harsh lesson, but I've never forgotten hearing a teacher say, "The problem is that you think you have time."

² Jack Kornfield, *A Path with Heart*, p. 13

This is so counter-intuitive: To be deeply engaged, to set out each morning on a path with heart, we have to stop rushing at life and just sit still.

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A young meditation student had gone on retreat was struggling with everything. His teacher said, “How is it that the food bothers you, the sounds bother you, the chores bother you, even your mind bothers you? Doesn't it seem odd? What I want to know is, when you hear a car [go] by, does it really come in and bother you, or are you going out to bother it? Who is bothering whom?”³

To walk a path with heart, we begin by sitting still, and letting it all just be. Jack Kornfield writes, “You ... have heard of 'out-of-the-body' experiences.... A true spiritual path demands something more challenging: ... an 'in-the-body' experience....” This is the wisdom of a Las Vegas casino: *You must be present to win.*

He continues, “To live in the present demands an ongoing and unwavering commitment. As we follow a spiritual path, ... over and over, we feel the familiar tug of thoughts and reactions that take us away from the present moment. When we stop and listen, we can feel how each thing that we fear or crave – really two sides of the same dissatisfaction – [each thing] propels us out of our hearts into a false idea of how we would like life to be. If we listen ... more closely, we can feel how we have learned to sense ourselves as limited by that fear and identified with that craving.... To [walk a path with heart is to] come into the present, ... to discover a greatness of our own heart that can include the happiness of all beings, ... inseparable from our own.”

Jack Kornfield concludes, “When we let ourselves feel the fear, the discontent ... our heart softens. Just as it is a courageous act to face all the difficulties from which we have always run, it is also an act of compassion. According to Buddhist scriptures, compassion is the 'quivering of the pure heart....' With greatness of heart, we can sustain a presence in the midst of life's suffering, in the midst of life's fleeting impermanence. We can [sit still, and] open to the world....”⁴

Beloved spiritual companions, “The problem is that [we] think [we] have time.” This is it. We are here ... present, to win. I invite you to join me in the spiritual practice of just three minutes of sitting still, alone ... and together. “The mind creates the abyss” - “who is bothering whom?” – “and the heart crosses it.”

³ Kornfield, *op cit*, p. 26

⁴ Kornfield, *op cit*, p. 27

Pay attention. Listen: The world sings. Ask, “Does this path have a heart?” If we can answer *Yes*, we can get up again, rested, filled with the spaciousness of wise reflection.

May our hearts open in compassion.

May our quivering hearts, with greatness of heart, open to the world.