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 Arlington Street Church
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Holy Emptiness

“Holiness is not a personal achievement.”

“It's an emptiness,” says theologian Brennan Manning, holiness is an emptiness “you discover in yourself. Instead of resenting it, you accept it, and it becomes the free space where G*d can create anew.”

These days, I'm up to my ears in theology. Don't worry; it's only a phase! An apology to my beloved atheists and agnostics, who squirm when I say the G-word. Please hear “G*d” as shorthand. For years, I translated “G*d” as “love,” for the Bible tells me so: 1 John 4:8 and 16: “G*d is love.” Recently, I'm interested in “possibility:” try on “God” as “possibility.” Here's that Brennan Manning quote again: “Holiness is not a personal achievement. It's an emptiness you discover in yourself. Instead of resenting it, you accept it, and it becomes the free space where [possibility] can create anew.” Let's try on the possibility of love, the possibility of justice, and peace.

And how about that word “holiness?” Anglo-Saxon: “hal” or “hale,” meaning “whole” – as in wholeness. Holiness: that which yields wholeness and health. All the same etymological root.

This is what theologians do: they cut up the text into little pieces, then eat it, and metabolize it, and, mostly, produce unbearably boring interpretations. Do you know what Unitarian Universalists bring to Bible study? Scissors.

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Holiness: that holy emptiness inside us, that g*d-shaped space, that space of possibility. Breathe with me for a moment, if you will.¹ * Just breathe. * Nothing else to do in this very moment. * Nowhere else to be but right here. Just be. * Breathe in love. * Breathe out peace.

Can you feel that space? What if we choose to cherish that space as holy

¹ Asterisks embedded in the text invite a single, deep breath ... at least!

emptiness? With attention and devotion, with spaciousness, possibility can create anew.

Ninety years ago this Christmas month, Rhoda E. McCulloch wrote a beautiful reflection for the YWCA Journal. She said,

If, as Herod, we fill our lives with things, and again with things,
if we consider ourselves so unimportant that we must fill
every moment of our lives with action,
when will we have time to make the long, slow journey
across the desert, as did the Magi?
Or sit and watch the stars, as did the Shepherds?
Or brood over the coming of the child, as did Mary?
For each ... of us, there is a desert to travel, a star to discover,
and a being within ourselves to bring to life.²

Holiness is not a personal achievement. It's the opposite of how we frame achievement: *Don't just do something; sit there!* Holiness is the sweetness of making time to slow down, to sit and watch, to contemplate and reflect. Holiness is brought to life in emptiness.

Are you breathing? * Ah, there it is: that hale-whole-wholeness-health-holy emptiness. *

My Episcopal colleague, Rev. Lauren Stanley, is sitting in her living room in Burke, Virginia, watching TV. An ad comes on, she writes, “loud and vibrant. The voice-over matches the intensity of the images. Our lives, we are told, are fast-paced and filled. We have no time for ourselves. We are constantly on the go.

“We are, the ad says, the Advil generation.

“We are *what?*”

We are the Advil generation. Lauren Stanley despairs that our lives are so fast, so filled, “so painful, that the only way we can get through the day is by taking a [pill].” We need a pain-killer to live.³

² Rhoda Elizabeth McCulloch (1884-1978), *The Association Monthly* (Journal of the YWCA), December, 1920 (originally, “For each one of us...”)

³ Rev. Lauren R. Stanley, “We, the Advil generation, can slow down if we want to,” 1/17/98, at texnews.com/1998/stan0117.html

Are we compelled by an alternative?

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Now the Benedictine monk, Brother David Steindl-Rast, is telling a story about the Angelus.⁴ Do you know about this? Three times a day, all over Christendom, people are called to prayer by the Angelus bell, meant to spread good-will to all. The Angelus – Latin for “angel” – is traditionally recited by devout Catholics three times a day. It begins, *Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariæ, et concepit de Spiritu Sancto*.⁵ “The Angel of the Lord declared to Mary: And she conceived of the Holy Spirit.”

Brother David writes, “[A] childhood memory of mine is connected with the Angelus prayer. All over my native Austria,” he says, “the chorus of Angelus bells rises from every church steeple at dawn, at high noon, and again before dark in the evening... [One] day, when I was in first grade [at the Christian Brothers school], I stood by an open window on the top floor, looking down on ... 'the campus.' ...It was noon. Classes had just finished, and children and teachers streamed out onto the [courtyards] and walkways. From so high up, the sight reminded me of an anthill on a hot summer day. Just then, the Angelus bell rang out from the church, and at once, all those busy feet down there stood still. 'The Angel of the Lord [declared to Mary: And she conceived of the Holy Spirit....]' We had been taught to recite this prayer in silence. Then, the ringing slowed down; one last stroke of a bell, and the anthill began swarming again.”

Brother David Steindl-Rast continues, “Now, so many years later, I still keep that moment of silence at noon. Bells or no bells, I pray the Angelus. I let the silence drop like a pebble into the middle of my day, and send its ripples out over its surface in ever-widening circles. That is the Angelus for me: the now of eternity rippling through time.”⁶

I love the spirit of the Angelus. Can we, too, choose moments each day to stop swarming on the anthill of our lives – full stop – and touch the holy emptiness? Holiness: not personal achievement, but emptiness: the emptiness we discover in ourselves, the space where G*d – possibility – can create anew.

Let's breathe together again. * Breathe with me. * Breathe into the holiness that is always as close as our breath. *

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4 pronounced AHN-jay-loos

5 pronounced AHN-jay-loos / DOH-mee-nee / noon-tsee-AH-veet / mah-REE-ay, / eht / kohn-CHAY-peat / day / SPEAR-ee-too / SANHK-toh

6 Brother David Steindl-Rast, *Praying the Great Dance*, in “Praying Magazine,” November/December 1996

Most mornings, I run through the woods in the slanting light. I run, but I'm not getting anywhere – that is, I'm just there, in the woods, running. I give myself half an hour of not getting anywhere, and it opens my day to joy. One day, I think, I need an Angelus – not *the* Angelus, but my own words to celebrate this “just being,” this place of possibility from which I can create anew. The words of a Rilke poem surface in me, and now, each morning, I pray this poem, down the long path to home. Rilke writes,

G*d speaks to each of us as [g*d] makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.⁷

Beloved spiritual companions,

“holiness is not a personal achievement.
It's an emptiness” we discover in ourselves,
a g*d-shaped space,
potential.

Let us cherish it, with attention and devotion.

“Let the silence drop like a pebble into the middle of [our] day,
and send its ripples out over its surface in ever-widening circles.”

“For each ... of us, there is a desert to travel,
a star to discover,

⁷ Rainer Maria Rilke, “Gott spricht zu jedem nur, eh er ihn macht” (“G*d Speaks to Each of Us”), in *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy

and a being within ourselves to bring to life.”

Let's breathe together.*

“Just keep going.”

“Give me your hand.”