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Arlington Street Church
8 March, 2009

Opening the Door of the Soul

Nearly forty years ago, with no experience in the parish, my colleague Stephen V. Doughty arrived at a tiny congregation in the Green Mountains to serve as their “summer student pastor,” but, he says, to be their “*guest* comes much closer to the reality.” Steve writes, A “rich gift ... arose from the congregation over the next ten weeks, and has continued to press itself upon me in all the years since.” Here is one of my favorite stories from that time:

“It was midsummer now. As I recall, he not only put down the hammer he was using; he unbuckled the belt that held all manner of other tools tight about his waist. He laid the belt on the workbench and took seven or eight steps directly toward me.

“Half an hour before, I had been in the office at the church. A knock came on the door. It was one of the summer residents.... Her face ... was drawn.

“‘Steve,’ she said in [a] direct and measured [tone], ‘we just had a call from your parents. Your grandmother has had a stroke. It’s not good....’”

“My grandmother lived in Western Massachusetts. We had eaten dinner together every Sunday all four years I was in college. The whole family had gathered for her ... birthday just six weeks before. When the cake, with ninety candles on it, caught fire, she had laughed harder than any of us....

“I... got in my car and drove off to ask the chair of the congregation if I might have some time away. He was a ... year-round resident, ... a carpenter, ... and right now he was building an addition on the home of a summer family.

“‘Ed,’ I spoke his name through the open walls of the [construction site].... The sun was bright and shone on his white hair. Normally, he would have turned, smiled, given a few more licks with the hammer, or finished sawing a board.

“Ed.’ I am sure I said his name only once, and not very loud[ly]. He looked directly at me. Then, without hesitation, he put down the hammer, laid aside his tool belt, and walked directly toward me.

“After my explanation of why I was there, [kind] words followed from him.... [concluding with] ‘Don’t even think about it...!’

“His words freed me to go. Some days later, when I returned from the memorial service for my grandmother, the warmth of the welcome I received lifted me. What I remember most, though, is a solitary image: on hearing the tone of my voice, and after a single look at my face, he laid down his tools so he could be completely there ... for me.”¹

As we well know, what Ed did for Steve Doughty appears utterly ordinary, yet is, in fact, extraordinary: He heard. He listened. He stopped, his hammer midair. And his soul took flight on the wings of compassion. Let's picture ourselves there. Are we ready to change on a dime? Can we switch horses mid-stream with some kind of equanimity, some kind of grace? Can we open our lives to fill with grace, so that that which is truly important rises to the surface of our harried, hurried days?

The headlong rush through life is habitual, a steel trap, closed on our souls. Breaking free is no less than a Herculean spiritual feat. Counterintuitively, it requires us not to armor ourselves against that trap, but, rather, to open the door of our soul, and leave it ajar, and make room for what might come: to prepare a little room there, so that something new might enter in, and we might entertain it.

Pope John XXIII used this image when he convoked the Vatican Council: *Apriamo le finestre*, he said. *Let's open the windows*. And what was the reaction of the church hierarchy? Panic! Terror! If the windows are open, g*d only knows what's going to come in. Obviously, we need to defend ourselves against being entirely undone by all the vicissitudes of life and death, but the point is not to hermetically seal off our lives from life.²

The mystical Persian poet Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī writes,

This being human is a guest house.

1 *A Readiness Remembered* by Stephen V. Doughty. First published in *Weavings*, September/October 1997

2 Thanks to Thomas Moore, “Life Needs a Point of Entry....” in *Original Self*, p. 27

Every morning a new arrival.
 A joy, a depression, a meanness,
 some momentary awareness comes
 as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
 Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
 who violently sweep your house
 empty of its furniture,
 still, treat each guest honorably.
 He may be clearing you out
 for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
 meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.
 because each has been sent
 as a guide from beyond.³

My hope for us is that we will enjoy delightful house guests, and avoid the unexpected from tromping into our home with muddy boots, bad manners, and an insatiable appetite. In accompanying some of you through the rude awakening of entertaining uninvited intruders such as illness and loss, however, I have seen the wisdom of your reserving your energy for healing and recovery, rather than spending it railing against bad fortune. And I have been inspired by your courage, in determining to learn something from even the most boorish intruder. Ironically, more often than not, tragedy teaches us about love.

Emily Dickinson wrote,

The Soul should always stand ajar
 That if the Heaven inquire
 He will not be obliged to wait⁴

³ *The Guest House*, trans. Coleman Barks

⁴ Thomas Moore, *op cit*, p. 26

Author and energy medicine pioneer Caroline Myss recounts this story from a man named Christopher. I invite you to try not to judge what brought Christopher to this fierce awakening, and consider, instead, what he learned of the wisdom of slowing down and opening the door of his soul.

“By my mid-forties,” Christopher says, “I was drifting more and more into a numbness of mind and spirit. The only way I could connect with life was through ...[a] ... rush, racing motorcycles and balancing on that fine line between life and death. Now, this is a very seductive high.... I lived from high to high, not seeing the beauty in the ordinary or feeling a sense of gratitude for just being alive.

“All this changed one beautiful moonlit night on a lonely country road. The moon was so bright that I was awestruck. I was traveling at double the posted speed limit on a motorcycle that felt as if it were a mere extension of my thoughts. Man and machine were one, and adrenaline flooded my senses. Through this trance, I caught the reflection of two eyes – a deer’s – glowing in the bushes. Time started to slow down; it was as if some power were taking over. I knew this was my destiny on that beautiful night. The deer responded as if on cue, and started charging across the road. I slammed on the brakes, and we collided at eighty miles per hour.”

Christopher continues, “The sound was horrific. The flight into midair was wrenching, and the motorcycle cartwheeled. Then we all lay silent. The deer was dead, the motorcycle was a wreck, but I was still alive. I could ... [barely] breathe, let alone move, and I was in the middle of the road. As I lay there a voice – that inner, guiding voice – kept affirming, 'You will be fine.' It was dark, and I was dressed all in black leather, impossible for an oncoming car to see. I thought, 'Did I survive the crash only to be hit by a car?' I heard a car approaching.

“Then I heard the door slam, and the sound of purposeful footsteps coming toward me. It felt like grace descending as she spoke, her voice calm but authoritative. Her presence was so reassuring; I will never forget the feeling of her compassion. This beautiful spirit from out of the night orchestrated my rescue and subsequent transportation by helicopter to a local trauma unit.

“While in her presence, I felt ... [an] outpouring of love and security.... As I was taken from her side, the night became truly cold and painful. I have never really believed in angels, but I met one that night. Though I never saw her face, I know her love.

“Months later, I tried to find her. I searched the police reports and ... found no mention of her. It's as if I was the only one who knew that she had been there at the scene. This was an angel who came to comfort me in my time of need, who taught me to trust in another, and who demonstrated the marvelous ways Spirit works.

Christopher concludes, “My life took on new meaning and purpose. I sold the motorcycle, and I am grateful to the deer for [giving her life for] my awakening. My perspective ... truly shifted. Spirit works to awaken us, and it seems that, if we don't [pay] attention to the subtle messages, the messages increase in volume and severity. On the very day of the crash, I had been warned to slow down by a rabbit crossing my path. I remember how close I was to crashing then, and how strange it was to see an animal act in this fashion.

“Now I know that this was a sign to slow down and pay more attention. I am grateful for the crash, and I will never call it an accident, because of the profound gift it provided. Years have passed, and I remain grateful to be able to breathe and walk and to share my love with others.”⁵

My spiritual companions, may we, too, remember to be grateful that we are able to breathe and walk and love, and that, sometimes, blessings come in disguise. When someone calls our name, may we, too, put down the hammer, lay aside the tool belt, and step forward. May we open the windows and the door of our soul, open our hearts to be of use, and, when unexpected visitors arrive, open our hands and welcome in the possibility of grace.

5 Carolyn Myss, *Invisible Acts of Power*, pp. 223-224