

THE GREATER PRAYER OF BEING

In Quakerism, whatever you believe needs to be grounded in the evidence of your own life. In Quakerism, [there's an] insistence that everyone has within himself or herself a source of truth – an inner light or inner teacher. Of course, truth is not the only thing we hear from within. We also hear the voices of ego, of fear, of greed, of depression. So Quakerism puts an equal emphasis on the role of community in helping people sort out what they're hearing.

– Parker Palmerⁱ

Each of us walks about in a cloud of affections: our love, our pain, our desires, our history. Then, we need help from each other to outwait the cloud, so we can regain our direct experience of life. We need to break the trance of what we want or wish for or regret. No matter what life gives us, the task is not to replay what we go through, but to integrate what enters our heart. Not to linger in what might have been or what has fallen short, but to make the most of what's before us. The challenge is to feel what's real while it's real.

And we each need help sorting what we're hearing. For fear and worry are dark spiders constantly weaving webs in the corners of our mind, till one day we walk into those webs, surprised and entangled. This is why we have to still our mind and open our heart: to clean out the webs of fear and worry. Otherwise, a dark gauze grows between us and life. So just as we need to dust our home, we need an inner practice to dust our mind of all the webs we spin.

When overwhelmed by worry, fear, or regret, we start to disempower where we are, by imagining that somewhere else is better. The urban dictionary offers a contemporary expression of this painful yearning, the word *fomo*, which is an acronym for “fear of missing out.” This is considered a symptom of technological withdrawal, a state of anxiety

that arises from feeling bereft, and even panicked, at not having access to the internet, to calls or texts, to Facebook or Twitter. This is a modern expression of the underlying sense that humans have struggled with forever: that life is happening without us. This perilous inner state arises from investing our being in the hope that, “If I could only get over there, then life would be worth living.”

But when we can sort what we’re hearing and outwait the cloud of our affections, we land in the beautiful if gritty terrain of where we are. Once grounded enough to meet what is with our care, then I can love you. And the depth of that love dissolves images of life being “over there.” Then my grounded sense of self starts to let others in, so that when you’re in pain, I’m in pain. And when you’re overflowing with wonder, I’m saturated with that wonder. This is how life grows and joins, a pain at a time, a wonder at a time—despite our clouds of affection, our webs of worry, and our fear of missing out. This is the greater prayer of being: how we grow where we are, only to dissolve through our compassion into a greater union with the life around us.

This brings to mind the story of two sisters who were very close and very competitive. Lisa, the older, was obsessed with being exceptional. She needed to excel in everything. Gail, the younger, was obsessed with experience. She needed to meet as much of life as she could. Gail would question Lisa, “Why all the work to make things happen?” And Lisa would question Gail, “Will you ever accomplish anything?” They never really understood each other, though they secretly envied each other’s devotion. It was later in life, after many years apart, that Lisa fell ill and Gail came to care for her. Forced by her illness to be still, Lisa could no longer accomplish anything. It made her feel lost but her limitations opened her to her deeper self. And forced by her love for Lisa, Gail had to become competent in her care, accomplishing a great deal from day to day. It was the

fragility of life that stopped Lisa and Gail from insisting on the face each showed the world. They met in the quiet moments of one caring for the other.

Each of us is scoured over time, though we hate the scouring, hollowed to something beautiful, though we fear the hollowing. Each of us is hovered over by unseen angels and demons who want our attention. Each of us worn to a small chamber in which what matters can be heard despite the noise we make while running to and from. This scouring by angels and hollowing by demons is how we're refined while here, no matter how clouded and lost we may get along the way.

Just the other day, I was trying to outwait the cloud of my own affections. The January sun was splaying through the anatomy of trees. My dog was sniffing about, scenting mice gone underground. The only noise was the snort of her nose in snow. I was drawn again to the bare tops of trees, thinner than the rest. Drawn to the life of the tree moving all that way from its gnarly, buried root, stretching up the trunk, and twisting through the limbs, to its most exposed gesture reaching to the sky.

Then I could see that, like the length of a mature tree, from root to leafless tip, this is how we establish ourselves in the world. The deeper our roots, the higher we can reach. Now I wonder, if trees could talk, would they tell us that their roots feel the wind from the sky and that their uppermost twigs feel the earth packed around their roots?

When taking root where we are and reaching toward the light, we too feel everything all the way through. The clouds go drifting by, more visible because of the windblown twigs, just as the Truth of the Universe is more visible when we are fully here.

This is the greater prayer of being: how we grow where we are, only to dissolve through our compassion into a greater union with the life around us.

Questions to Walk With

- *In your journal, describe one fear or worry that has spun a cobweb in the corner of your mind. How might you sweep it away?*
- *In conversation with a friend or loved one, describe a time when your love for another began to dissolve your singular sense of self and how you grew for this experience of love.*

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Mark is offering a new 3-session webinar THE LIFE OF EXPRESSION: Finding Your Voice June 13, 20 and 17 1-2:30 pm ET | 10-11.30 am PT. The webinar will also be available for downloading you are unable to attend the sessions. **REGISTRATION is at live.marknepo.com**