

# Let Your Heartbreak Be Your Guide

*Lessons in Engaged Contemplation*

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# Lost and Found

A few years ago, in the days leading up to my ordination as a priest, I was trying to make sense of the journey I had taken to get there. As I re-examined how God had generously led me, my mind and heart reached back to a community where I had once lived. The community was an ecumenical Christian community—a quasi-monastic community, if you will—located in the slums of India, where prayer and works of mercy met beautifully in sacred service offered to victims of AIDS, abuse, homelessness, and social estrangement.

As I re-experience that environment, I see clearly all the people who were brought to us every day. I see their broken souls. I see their gangrene-infected bodies, filled with maggots. I still smell their wounds. I feel their very visible pain.

But I also hear the bell calling everyone to chapel for morning prayers, and then I see the procession of broken and deformed bodies moving slowly toward the place of worship. Some are walking, some crawling; and because some are missing limbs, some are limping. All of them are moving slowly toward prayer, understanding that what is

about to take place will somehow infuse them with new life. Making their pain visible to God and their brothers and sisters and siblings will strengthen them and make them better.

I also see the Missionaries of Charity, all those sisters of Mother Teresa's, who liked visiting us sometimes. They would arrive after a two-hour drive, spent silently praying the rosary, and make their way into our community, entering it gently, always starting with the tuberculosis ward, filled with patients who struggled with multi-drug-resistant TB. It felt like each time they would find just the right person, the sickest and the weakest person, approach them gently, touch their feet as a sign of reverence, and then care for them in a way that, even today, moves me to tears. In their minds they were meeting Christ, and the pain they were witnessing was the pain of their savior who was being crucified in front of them. That pain was to be met, embraced, and cared for.

So when I reflect on my calling today, and on how I hope one day to have the guts and fortitude and courage to say yes to God, I am reminded of that place where I witnessed people whose complete yes to God created a container of grace where people were able to come in and be reassembled. Time and time again, brokenness was turned into wholeness, chaos into clarity and purpose, and the lost were finally found. God really lived there with us in that little community of broken people.

I desperately want this same Engaged Contemplation to fill my life today, in my work as a priest and in my role as

a member of the human family in the place where I make home. Each of the reflections in this book are born from this deep desire for devotion and faithfulness, and for companions who are broken like me, like all of us, in one way or another.

Are you familiar with the following two parables in the Gospel that are so full of rich images that speak of our human predicament and our tendency to get lost?

In the first—the Parable of the Lost Sheep—we are presented with an image of a sheep that leaves the fold and wanders off on its own. Early Christians did not hesitate to view the lost sheep as a metaphor for what happens in our own lives. We become distracted; we move quickly or thoughtlessly from one thing to another, but then there are glimpses of God that we see along the way.

In the second—the Parable of the Lost Coin—the image we are given is that of a woman with a lamp who refuses to give up and tirelessly searches for a lost coin. Again, early Christians didn't hesitate to compare our very lives to that lifeless coin. The coin, with an image of a king imprinted on it, has value but only if it is found. Other than that, it is lifeless; it cannot move, and certainly it cannot find its own way back. We too can find ourselves spiritually lifeless and incapable of any movement. We too forget that we have an image of the one who gives us our being and life imprinted on our hearts. And we too need help from that Godly presence and each other to help sort through the dust of our lives, to feel and see again, to be home again and to know who we are born to be, and to whom we belong.

In our lives, most of us have had glimpses of who we are in God or who God wants us to be. I know I have, and yet, it hasn't always been easy to respond and commit to that. Still, when I look back and reflect, I know that God was there, during my childhood, making himself visible in the faces of the heroic priests of my youth in Poland who protested totalitarianism because they knew that saying yes to God has to mean also saying no to everything in this world that violates God's love and justice. Some of them, including our parish priest, paid for it with their lives.

God was also there letting himself become known to me when, as a child, scared of all the chaos and violence that was taking place in Poland as the totalitarian state was collapsing, I felt called to assemble a home altar and mimic what I saw priests do in church: say mass, and feel that even though everything around me was falling apart, I was being held by this Motherly presence of a loving God capable of dissolving my fears.

And God was there calling me by name when, on a busy Indian street, after I went to India thinking, like many others, that I would be able to get closer to God in the silence of some remote Himalayan monastery, God showed up on the street and she grabbed me by the hand and asked me to accompany her on her journey of healing and hope. This time God had the face of a thirteen-year-old homeless child; her face burned with cigarettes; her body bought and sold many times; and her conscience nearly killed by the heartlessness and abuse of countless men. It is that child that brought me to the community I told you about at the

beginning. I went there convinced that I was going to make a difference and help find those who are lost. But instead, it is I who was served. It is I who was found. It is I who was given new life.

Before that day, I was a lost sheep. I was a lost sheep making my own plans, always caring about God but imagining my own ways of getting closer to and serving him. And most of it had very little to do with God. I was just wandering from one patch of grass to the next, and the grass always seemed greener wherever I was not. But there came a time when the aimless wandering had to stop because Christ in the form of a homeless child showed up and knocked on the door of my heart and asked, *May I come in? Do you have any space for me there?*

From then on he began walking with me. His wounds became a mirror for my own wounds. Like those crawling, limping, walking siblings rescued from the streets, there was no reason to pretend that I was more than I actually am. There was no need for niceness and pretense, no need to waste time on anything that is not a real cry of the heart. After all, as Henri Nouwen said, “Fruitfulness comes out of brokenness.”<sup>1</sup> And, like soil that becomes fruitful when you break it up with the plow (Matthew 13), we too can only receive God’s gift and life when we name the need for it.

It is for this reason that all the sheep in the parable are meant to move together and stay in their fold. We too are meant to travel together, with each other, in community, mirroring to each other what Christ would want us to see in ourselves. Together we can learn how to take off our masks

and be who we really are. Together we can help each other see and celebrate. Together we can give each other strength and learn how to take turns holding each other's pain. Together "we keep on returning to those we belong with who keep us in the light." Together we can not only say yes to God's constant searching for us but can join the search and become part of the rescue team.

I find these images of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and our Motherly God tirelessly helping us sort through the dust of our lives most helpful. These images help us, as contemplative activists, to see who we are meant to be and why we are here. As we meditate upon them and relate them to our own lives, I ask you: How are you being called today? Where do you find yourself on the map of lost and found? How have you found the places that are home for you? And how are you home for others, who come and are longing to be affirmed, cared for, and seen?