

2010 Salad, Sharing a Study

An Altar in the World

A Geography of Faith

By Barbara Brown Taylor

Animated by Canon Jim Irvine



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LIKE ALL THE OTHER PRACTICES in this book, paying attention requires no equipment, no special clothes, no greens fees or personal trainers. You do not even have to be in particularly good shape. All you need is a body on this earth, willing to notice where it is, trusting that even something as small as a hazelnut can become an altar in this world. Page 34

An Altar in the World

REVERENCE

I learned reverence from my father. For him, it had nothing to do with religion and very little to do with God. I think it may have had something to do with his having been a soldier, since the exercise of reverence generally includes knowing your rank in the overall scheme of things. From him I learned by example that reverence was the proper attitude of a small and curious human being in a vast and fascinating world of experience. This world included people and places as well as things. Full appreciation of it required frequent adventures, grand projects, honed skills, and feats of daring. Above all, it required close attention to the way things worked, including one's own participation in their working or not working.

According to the classical philosopher Paul Woodruff, reverence is the virtue that keeps people from trying to act like gods. “To forget that you are only human,” he says, “to think you can act like a god—this is the opposite of reverence.” While most of us live in a culture that reveres money, reveres power, reveres education and religion, Woodruff argues that true reverence cannot be for anything that human beings can make or manage by ourselves.

By definition, he says, reverence is the recognition of something greater than the self—something that is beyond

human creation or control, that transcends full human understanding. God certainly meets those criteria, but so do birth, death, sex, nature, truth, justice, and wisdom. A Native American elder I know says that he begins teaching people reverence by steering them over to the nearest tree.

“Do you know that you didn’t make this tree?” he asks them. If they say yes, then he knows that they are on their way.

Reverence stands in awe of something—something that dwarfs the self, that allows human beings to sense the full extent of our limits—so that we can begin to see one another more reverently as well. An irreverent soul who is unable to feel awe in the presence of things higher than the self is also unable to feel respect in the presence of things it sees as lower than the self, Woodruff says. This raises real questions about leaders, especially religious leaders, who cite reverence for what is good as their warrant for proclaiming whole populations of people evil.

Woodruff posts a number of cautions for those ready to draw a straight line between reverence and religion. While a church service may seem like the most natural place in the world to teach people how to be reverent, Woodruff says, a formal worship service can be a confusing place to look for reverence. “To begin with,” he says, “worship is not always reverent; even the best forms of worship may be practiced without feeling (and therefore without reverence), and some forms of worship seem downright vicious.”

Some of the most reverent people I know decline to call themselves religious. For them, religion connotes belief. It means being able to say what you believe about God and why. It also means being able to hold your own in a debate with someone who believes otherwise. They, meanwhile, are not sure what they believe. They do not want to debate

anyone. The longer they stand before the holy of holies, the less adequate their formulations of faith seem to them. Angels reach down and shut their mouths.

Reverence for creation comes fairly easily for most people. Reverence for other people presents more of a challenge, especially if those people's lives happen to impinge upon your own. I live at the end of a dirt road in the country for a reason. I can see my nearest neighbor's house in the wintertime when all the trees are bare, but for the rest of the year *we* go about our business with no visual confirmation of each other's presence. We like each other very much. We also like our distance from each other. I cannot speak for him, but I know that I have an easier time loving humankind than I do loving particular human beings.

Particular human beings hug my bumper in rush-hour traffic and shoot birds at me when I tap my brakes. Particular human beings drop my carefully selected portabella mushrooms into the bottom of my grocery bag and toss cans of beans on top of them. They talk on their cell phones while I am having a nice quiet lunch at Blimpie's; they talk on their cell phones while I am waiting to pay them for my gas; they talk on their cell phones while I am trying to step past them on the sidewalk. Particular human beings rarely do things the way I think they should do them, and when they prevent me from doing what I think I should be doing, then I can run short on reverence for them.

One remedy for my condition is to pay attention to them when I can, even when they are in my way. Just for a moment, I look for the human being instead of the obstacle.

It is not necessary to invent new practices, of course. Praying for thine enemies is as old as the Sermon on the Mount. So is the laying on of hands, the anointing of the sick, and the bathing of the dead. If you have ever done any of these things, then you know that it is just about impossible to do them without suffering a sudden onset of reverence. They accomplish this, I think, by giving you something so important to do that you are entirely captured by the present moment for once. For once, you are not looking through things, or around them, toward the next thing, which will become see-through in its turn. For once, you are giving yourself entirely to what is right in front of you, and what is right in front of you is returning the favor so that reverence is all but unavoidable.

Simone Weil was a French Jew who died of hunger during World War II. She did not have to die of hunger. Her family was wealthy, she was extremely well educated, and she never fell into the clutches of the Nazis. She remained so affected by what was happening to other, less-protected, people under the Third Reich that she decided to live as they lived. She worked in factories when she could have been teaching in schools. She lived on tinned rations when she could have been eating fresh eggs cooked in butter.

"The great trouble in human life is that looking and eating are two different operations," she writes in *Waiting for God*. Human beings have a hard time regarding anything beautiful without wanting to devour it. A child may love looking at a shiny red apple so much that she hates the idea of biting into it, but her appetite will win out. What good is looking at a lovely thing when you can take it inside of you? The same instinct drives compulsive shoppers, promiscuous lovers, and petty thieves. "It may be that

vice, depravity, and crime are nearly always, or even perhaps always, in their essence, attempts to eat beauty, to eat what *we* should only look at," Weil guesses, before quoting one of her favorite passages from the Upanishads. Two winged companions, two birds, are on the branch of a tree. One eats the fruit; the other looks at it. "These two birds," Weil says, "are the two parts of our soul."

Weil's second bird guided her relationship with the church. Although she grew up a secular Jew, she was drawn so strongly to the sacramental life of the church that her desire for baptism became almost overwhelming to her. Yet she declined to be baptized, saying that she could not seek her own soul's safety in any church that denied salvation to those who did not belong to it. This meant that she spent the rest of her short life regarding the bread and wine of Holy Communion without ever eating them. Regarding them was enough for her, even as they strengthened her resolve to stay hungry with those who were hungry, to remain outside the safety of the church with those who were outside. Weil died in an English sanatorium on August 29, 1943, at the age of thirty-four.

Assignment

The easiest practice of reverence I know is simply to sit down somewhere outside, preferably near a body of water, and pay attention for at least twenty minutes. It is not necessary to take on the whole world at first. ... If you cannot go outside, then find a pencil and a piece of paper and spend twenty minutes drawing your hand. Be sure you get the freckles right, the number of wrinkles around each knuckle. If you are old, marvel at what has happened to your skin. If you are young, find your

lifeline. Pay attention to the scars, if you have them. On my left hand alone, I can see the gray shadow left by the pencil lead that broke off in my palm when I was nine. There is also a pale ellipse at the top of my index finger from a sewing accident in 1974.

Autumn Study...

Home Tonight

*Further reflections on the
Parable of the Prodigal Son*

HENRI J.M. NOUWEN

5 sessions beginning September 14 / 16

An Altar in the World

GROUNDEDNESS

Not everyone is able to walk, but most people can, which makes walking one of the most easily available spiritual practices of all. All it takes is the decision to walk with some awareness, both of who you are and what you are doing. Where you are going is not as important, however counterintuitive that may seem. To detach the walking from the destination is in fact one of the best ways to recognize the altars you are passing right by all the time. Most of us spend so much time thinking about where *we* have been or where we are supposed to be going that we have a hard time recognizing where we actually are. When someone asks us where we want to be in our lives, the last thing that occurs to us is to look down at our feet and say, "Here, I guess, since this is where I am."

This truth is borne out by the labyrinth—an ancient spiritual practice that is enjoying a renaissance in the present century. For those who have never seen one, a labyrinth is a kind of maze. Laid out in a perfect circle with a curling path inside, it rarely comes with walls. Instead, it trusts those who enter it to stay on the path voluntarily. This path may be outlined with hand-placed stones out-of-doors or painted right on the floor indoors. Either way, it includes switchbacks and detours, just like life. It has one entrance, and it leads to one center.

The important thing to note is that the path goes nowhere. You can spend an hour on it and end up twelve feet from where you began. The journey is the point. The

walking is the thing.

I cannot imagine the possibilities available to those who walk the path wearing their own skin. The labyrinth may be a set path, but it does not offer a set experience. Instead, it offers a door that anyone may go through, to discover realities that meet each person where each most needs to be met.

A few years ago a friend of mine was walking the Mother Labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral with a group of other pilgrims when she noticed an older man and woman standing near the entrance watching. After about twenty minutes of looking, they walked straight to the center of the labyrinth and bowed their heads in prayer. Then the woman took off her shoes and handed them to her husband, along with her purse. As he watched, she took the long way out of the labyrinth, following the path this time. She cried on the way. He cried just watching her. When they had pulled themselves together, my friend went up to ask them what had just happened.

They had come to celebrate the end of the woman's treatment for breast cancer, they explained. They had never even heard of a labyrinth before they walked into the cathedral that day. The woman could not explain why she was drawn to walk it, but when she did her husband decided to hold down the center, giving thanks for her life while she found her way out.

"I began to feel at peace in my body again after being very angry that it had let me down," the woman explained. Walking, she found herself remembering all the people

who had walked with her through her surgery and treatment. "I now know this is why we came here," she told my friend.'

Solvitur ambulando, wrote Augustine of Hippo, one of the early theologians of the Christian church. "It is solved by walking." What is "it"? If you want to find out, then you will have to do your own walking.

Assignment

If you have visited Saint Catherine's monastery in the Sinai, then you have likely paid a visit to the legendary descendant of that bush. When I went, I was asked to remove my sandals before I entered the Chapel of the Burning Bush. Before I could even focus on the spindly bush growing against one wall of the chapel, I had to look down at my feet, which were disappearing into the gaudiest red plush carpet I had ever seen. Since the bush was no longer on fire, I guess the monks thought a fiery-looking carpet was the next best thing.

But you do not need to go to the Sinai desert to engage the practice of going barefoot. Just choose a place outdoors that you are willing to encounter in the flesh without your customary cushion and protection—a mossy knoll, if you are a beginner, or a rocky streambed, if you are not. Take off your shoes and feel the earth under your feet, as if the ground on which you are standing really is holy ground. Let it please you. Let it hurt you a little. Feel how the world really feels when you do not strap little tanks on your feet to shield you from the way things really are.

It will help if you do not expect God to speak to you. Just give your full attention to where you are, for once. Walk as if your life depended on it, placing your heel

before your toes and getting a sense of just how much pressure you put on the grass, the clover—watch out for the honeybee!—the slick river stones, the silted streambed, the red clay, the pine bark on the woodland path, the black earth of the vegetable garden. As you press down on these things, can you feel them pressing back? They have been around so much longer than you have, most of them. *You* are the new kid on the block.

You might even walk in a small circle, so that you have a chance to see the same things over and over again, seeing something different in them each time. The last time you walked by the day lily, a drop of dew was hanging from one orange petal, shining like a small sun. This time it is gone, thanks to a small breeze that is cooling your upper lip. "Consider the lilies of the field," Jesus said, but you do not consider them, not usually, or at least not like this. What else have you missed in your rush from here to there?

You may have to handle your anxiety about being seen walking in circles with no shoes on, but even that can be revelatory. Why are you so afraid of what people may think about you? Since when did looking good become your god? If you like, you may take your mind off this by giving a thought to people who go barefoot because they have no shoes. What would it be like to

walk through the world with so little cushion? What might your feet look like if you hunted for your lunch in a garbage dump?

Done properly, the spiritual practice of going barefoot can take you halfway around the world and wake you up to your own place in the world all at the same time. It can lead you to love God with your whole self, and your neighbor as yourself, without leaving your backyard. Just do it, and the doing will teach you what you need to live. Or keep your

shoes on, if you wish. As long as you are on the earth and you know it, you are where you are supposed to be. You have everything you need to ground yourself in God.

An Altar in the World

COMMUNITY

Once, two elders who were living together decided that they should have a quarrel like ordinary men. Since they had never had one before, they were not quite sure how to begin. So one of the elders looked around, found a brick, and placed it squarely between him and his brother in Christ. "I will say, 'It is mine,'" he instructed his brother. "Then you say, 'No, it is mine.' This is the sort of thing that leads to a quarrel."

"Are you ready?" he asked his brother.

"I am ready," his brother said.

"Okay," he said, regarding the brick. "It is mine."

"I beg your pardon," his brother said, "but I do believe that it is mine."

"No it's not; it's mine," the first monk said.

"Well, if it's yours, then take it," his brother said. Thus the two elders failed to get into a quarrel after all.

One elder who lived all alone undertook a seventy-week fast, eating only once a week during all that time in order to become more receptive to God. When he was little more than bone and vapor, he asked God to reveal to him the meaning of a certain Bible passage, but God would not do it. The elder, disappointed by how little his fast had done for him, decided to go ask one of his brothers what the passage meant. The minute he closed the door to his cell, an angel of God appeared to

him, saying, “Your seventy-week fast did not bring you one step closer to God, but now that you have humbled yourself enough to go to your brother, God sent me to reveal the meaning of the passage.” Then the angel told the elder what it meant and went away.

As often as I think I am seeking other people out in order to get something for myself, the deeper truth is that I am hoping they will draw me out of myself. If you have ever gotten into a conversation so compelling that you could not believe what your watch said when you looked at it, then you know what I mean.

If you always do what you have always done, then you will always get what you have always got.

The world’s great religions have always required communities of people to make them work. Whether they call themselves congregations, covens, ummas, or churches, these communities are the concrete places where the teachings of the religion are tested. Sometimes the teachings explode in people’s faces. Other times they save people’s lives. Either way, the teachings mean little apart from the embodied practices of the community.

Abbot Pastor, one of the most often quoted Desert Fathers, once said, “If you have a chest full of clothing, and leave it for a long time, the clothing will rot inside it. It is the same with the thoughts in our heart. If we do not carry them out by physical action, after a long while they will

spoil and turn bad.”

Of course, religious communities are not the only communities in which neighbor love is practiced. In the small rural county where I live, people also count on community theater, contra dancing, quilting circles, book clubs, singing groups, Rotary Club meetings, and *even* a cockfight or two to keep kinship bonds strong. The only problem with any of these groups, as far as I can tell, is that they tend to attract like-minded people, the same way most churches do. However different the people in them may be, and however often they may tangle with one another, they still share central convictions, commitments, values, or disciplines. On the one hand, this is what keeps them together. On the other hand, this is what keeps other people out.

At its most basic level, the everyday practice of being with other people is the practice of loving the neighbor as the self. More intricately, it is the practice of coming face-to-face with another human being, preferably someone different enough to qualify as a capital “O” Other—and at least entertaining the possibility that this is one of the faces of God.

In biblical tradition, the practice of encounter shows up most often as the practice of hospitality, or *philoxema*. Take the word apart and you get *philo*, from one of the four Greek words for love, and *xenia*, for stranger. Love of stranger, in other words, which is about as counterintuitive as you can get. For most of us, *xenophobia*—*fear* of stranger—comes much more naturally, but in that case

scripture is unnatural. According to Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of Great Britain, “the Hebrew Bible in one verse commands, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ but in no fewer than 36 places commands us to ‘love the stranger.’” ... You shall love the stranger first of all because you know what it is to be a stranger yourself. Second of all, you shall love the stranger because the stranger shows you God. Abraham and Sarah encounter God when they welcome three strangers into their tent. Jacob encounters God when he stays up all night wrestling a stranger by the river Jabbok. When the people of Israel are in exile in Babylon, God anoints a Persian stranger named Cyrus to bring them home. In his first sermon in Luke’s gospel, Jesus gets in terrible trouble for pointing out that God sent Elijah to save a widow in Sidon, and Elisha to heal a leper in Syria, when there was no shortage of widows and lepers in Israel. Why should we love the stranger? Because God does.

We have just enough religion to make us hate one another,” Jonathan Swift once observed, “but not enough to make us love one another.” Because *we are* human, which is to say essentially self-interested, *we* are always looking for ways to add a little more authority to our causes, to come up with better reasons to fight for what we want than “Because I want it, that’s why.” If we can convince ourselves that God wants it too—even if that means making God in our own image so we can deny the image of God in our enemies—then *we* are free to engage in combative piety. We are free to harm others not for our own reasons but in the name of God, which allows us to feel holy about doing it instead of just plain bad.

Assignment

Here is someone who exists even when she is not ringing up your groceries, as hard as that may be for you to imagine. She is someone's daughter, maybe someone's mother as well. She has a home she returns to when she hangs up her apron here, a kitchen that smells of last night's supper, a bed where she occasionally lies awake at night wrestling with her own demons and angels. Do not go too far with this or you risk turning her into a character in your own novel, which is a large part of her problem already. It is enough for you to acknowledge her when she hands you your change.

“You saved eleven dollars and six cents by shopping at Winn Dixie today,” she says, looking right at you. All that is required of you is to look back. Just meet her eyes for a moment when you say, “Thanks.” Sometimes that is all another person needs to know that she has been seen—not the cashier but the person—but even if she does not seem to notice, the encounter has occurred. You noticed, and because you did, neither of you will ever be quite the same again.

Simple and maybe even silly as this may sound, it is such a profound practice that those who attempt it often meet with huge inner resistance. I do not *want* to encounter another human being at the cash register, thank you very much.

An Altar in the World

BREAKTHROUGH

Pain is provocative. Pain pushes people to the edge, causing them to ask fundamental questions such as “Why is this happening?” and “How can this be fixed?” Pain brings out the best in people along with the worst. Pain strips away all the illusions required to maintain the status quo. Pain begs for change, and when those in its grip find no release on earth, plenty of them look to heaven—including some whose formal belief systems preclude such wishful thinking.

Pain makes theologians of us all. If you have spent even one night in real physical pain, then you know what that can do to your faith in God, not to mention your faith in your own ability to manage your life.

Every time I woke up, the pain in my right eye shot through me like an electrical shock. Every time it did, I cried out loud. I took more aspirin and fell asleep again. I woke up and got shocked again. My right eye felt as if there were still a large chunk of pine bark in it, so I felt my way downstairs and lay down in the bathtub, letting warm water run from the faucet straight into my eye. The pain got worse, not better. While the grandfather clock in the dining room tolled hour after hour, I prayed the kind of prayers I never thought I would pray. I began the kind of

bargaining with God that I do not even believe in, and when that did not work I called God's honor into question. I begged God to do something. I dared God to do something. Finally, close to dawn, I found myself turning away from the God in charge of pain removal toward the God who had stayed with me through the pain no matter what I said. By the time I saw an optometrist who told me I had a torn cornea, my midnight wrestling match was over. The pain had not only changed the way I prayed. It had also changed my ideas about the One to whom I prayed.

Pain is one of the fastest routes to a no-frills encounter with the Holy, and yet the majority of us do everything in our power to avoid it.

Pre-Advent Study...

JESUS

GEZA VERMES

Nativity: pages 1 – 166

5 sessions beginning October 26 /28

An Altar in the World

BENEDICTION

There remain a great many people who excuse themselves when asked to pronounce a formal blessing. They are not qualified, they say. They are not good with words. They would rather jump off a high diving board than try to say something holy in front of a bunch of other people. My guess is that even if you asked them to bless something in private—thereby separating the fear of public speaking from the fear of pronouncing a blessing—they would still demur. If you are one of those people, then only you know why. All I can tell you is how much the world needs you to reconsider.

Through the centuries, people practiced at pronouncing blessings have come to some common wisdom, which they have laid down for the rest of us following along behind them. The first piece of wisdom is that a blessing does not confer holiness. The holiness is already there, embedded in the very givenness of the thing. The mosquito does not need your help to make it holy. The heavy boy at the airport does not need you to place him in divine custody, suggesting that perhaps while he is there he could lose a little weight. Because God made these beings, they share in God's own holiness, whether or not they meet your minimum requirements for a blessing.

This idea begs debate, especially in a culture sold on cosmetic surgery, home improvement, physical fitness, and

the Protestant work ethic. Surely it makes more sense to withhold a blessing until something has become the best it can be? Surely there are some things that are so repulsive, worthless, or destructive that blessing them would be like aiding the opposition? The only way to find out is to try it. Practice blessing something simply because it exists alongside you and find out what your mind does with that exercise.

In Jewish tradition, every blessing prayer begins by blessing God.

“Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, by whose word all things come into being.”

“Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has made the works of creation.”

“Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who feeds all living things.”

Such prayers are addressed to the God whose rain falls on the just and the unjust, whose sun rises on the evil and the good.

A second piece of wisdom about pronouncing blessings, directly related to the first, is that the practice requires you to ease up on holding the line between what is bad for you and what is good. Once you get into the blessing business, you give up thinking you are smart enough always to tell the difference between the two. You surrender the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (see the book of Genesis). You say a blessing when you break a bone the same as you do when you win the lottery. The two events may be more alike than you

know. Live with either of them very long and you may discover that neither of them is as bad or as good as you first thought it would be. The blessing covers your ignorance and seeds your curiosity all at the same time. So this is what life has brought you! How will this change things? What can you make of this?

This last piece of wisdom may be only for those who are very advanced at blessing prayers, but what most of them say is that pronouncing a blessing puts you as close to God as you can get. To learn to look with compassion on everything that is; to see past the terrifying demons outside to the bawling hearts within; to make the first move toward the other, however many times it takes to get close; to open your arms to what is instead of waiting until it is what it should be; to surrender the justice of your own cause for mercy; to surrender the priority of your own safety for love—this is to land at God’s breast.

To pronounce a blessing on something is to see it from the divine perspective. To pronounce a blessing is to participate in God’s own initiative. To pronounce a blessing is to share God’s own audacity. This may be why blessing prayers make some people uncomfortable.

Assignment

I hope that was an accident,” Ed said when my father surfaced, his Cabela’s outfit soaked through with the same green water he was spewing out of his mouth. That my father had laughed at this memory was a testament to his love for my husband, who in the present was kneeling down on the linoleum floor by my father’s bed to

fit his head underneath my father's bony hand. As I watched, Ed reached up and put one of his big hands on top of my father's hand to make sure it did not slip off. Then he held still while my father's lips moved. After he stood up, he leaned over to say something else in my father's ear.

"What was that?" I asked when he came back to slump beside me again.

"I asked him to bless me," Ed said. "I asked him to give me his blessing."

This kind of blessing prayer is called a benediction. It comes at the end of something, to send people on their way. All I am saying is that anyone can do this. Anyone can ask and anyone can bless, whether anyone has authorized you to do it or not. All I am saying is that the world needs you to do this, because there is a real shortage of people willing to kneel wherever they are and recognize the holiness holding its sometimes bony, often tender, always life-giving hand above their heads. That we are able to bless one another at all is evidence that we have been blessed, whether we can remember when or not. That we are willing to bless one another is miracle enough to stagger the very stars.

*Communion under
Special Circumstances*

An Altar in the World

Brothers and sisters in Christ,
God calls us to faithful service
by the proclamation of the word,
and sustains us with the sacrament
of the body and blood of Christ.
[*Hear now God's word, and*] receive
this holy food from the Lord's table.

Most merciful God,
**we confess that we have sinned
against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our
whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbours
as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly
repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus
Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us,
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your name. Amen.**

The priest shall say...
Almighty God have mercy upon you,
pardon and deliver you from all your
sins,
confirm and strengthen you in all
goodness,

and keep you in eternal life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Before Communion...
As our Saviour taught us, let us pray,
**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against
us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.**

The gifts of God for the People of God.
Thanks be to God.

After Communion...
Glory to God,
**whose power, working in us,
can do infinitely more
than we can ask or imagine.
Glory to God from generation to
generation,
in the Church and in Christ Jesus,
for ever and ever. Amen.**

Dismissal...
Let us bless the Lord.
Thanks be to God.