

Crossing the Abyss to Spiritual Opportunity

Thomas Merton Brightman

On August 24, 1984, I spent my last day as a corporate employee. I had resigned in July. I did not have a new job. It didn't matter. I wasn't sure where I was going, but anywhere might be better than where I had arrived some nineteen years after setting out with my high hopes and the family's first college degree.

No promise of pay, power or perks could change my decision. I would not waiver for the wants or wishes of anyone else. The pain of remaining the same was clearly greater than any pain I could imagine from change. The decision came from a depth that I could not begin to explain. People often comment on the courage of my choice. I remember its necessity. My action seemed drastic to most, but my spirit was amazingly calm, even peaceful.

On one level it was the calm after the storm. Much of my life had been a whirlwind. The bull had one piece of china left in the shop, himself, and something told him not to break it. Why would I want to do to myself that which I lamented about others doing to me? Fate had more in store for me. The storm wasn't over. I was resting in its eye. God had given me a brief respite before moving me to a level that defied my comprehension.

My own arrows had wounded me as much as those of anyone else. The bow from which my parents released me was not perfect, but my own attempts to course correct were as faulty. One remaining option was to accept that course correction would come from the greater bow that sends all of us forth into the fray. My part was to allow that to happen. I was to trust in myself and in God.

I could surrender or continue self-inflicted suffering. I could keep living for others or begin to live for myself. I needed to get out of my own way. I felt like I was about to lose everything because I was on the verge of losing me. Something blessed inside wasn't willing to let me disintegrate. I know now that I had everything to gain, not lose, by letting go of the false self in which I had so much invested. I meticulously crafted this self as a substitute for loss of my true self through raising my parents.



I had fashioned illusion into delusion as had my ancestors. Hope, energy and will had barely weakened the web, cutting perhaps a single thread. I was still wearing most of the masks devised to protect the very core that was now in imminent danger. Something was missing in the receipt. I needed to trash the masks not me.

To escape my sentencing to a society of false faces, I needed to let go of identification with objects and patterns. One sign of progress was that life's material things were about as interesting to me as they would be to spirit that had just departed a body. Objects no longer computed. What I'd received through things and thinking had left me hollow. It was time to leave the outer world and cross the abyss to the inner.

Beyond stopping what I was doing, I wasn't sure where to start. To others, my lights still appeared to be on, but I knew that the house was empty. It was evident that no one could find me, but me. I had climbed to the top of a ladder only to discover that it was against the wrong wall. A cartoon correction of flipping to another wall wasn't an option. My descent was at hand.

I rejected the very things that those around me aspired to have. My fine feathered friends faltered one by one. They needed to make me wrong or at least discount me if they were to hold onto their beliefs, their masks, their false faces.

They sloughed off, staying behind where I left my withered skin. Some were eager to try it on for size and fill the space that I had vacated. Pity and greed were the purview of most. "Poor Thomas, he really is having a hard time. Pass the potatoes please." Turning in my rose-tinted glasses let me see clearly.

What none of them could see and what I did not understand, was that I had this little smile inside, an infant glow. A peaceful sense of awakening was beginning to emerge. I was beyond the kind of fears that had driven me until now. I had begun my healing.

There would be new depths of fear and much tribulation ahead, but I was given the serenity of shock which takes over when the unpleasant truths of one's life can no longer be denied. I had been told most of my life that the protestations of others were for my own good. It sure didn't look that way from where I stood.

In metaphor, I was approaching the woodlands of the western mystery tradition. I was entering the woods alone, at a point where I had never gone before. The quest was begun at forty-one. "A bit old for such an athletic journey," I thought. But then I wasn't listening much to my thoughts these days, I was following my heart and it was almost empty. There was just a little love left for myself and that had to last the whole journey.

The first step was to quit work. The second step was to sit still. The third step was to begin to feel. The fourth step was to stay alive. This is how it went, step by step, moment by moment, left foot, right foot, left foot. There must have been a twin spirit on the other side who took over much of the time.

How did I get into this mess? I had lots of help. Some highlights may give you a glimpse of how I arrived at this precipice. And, the final accountability was all mine, even as responsibility was widely shared among care givers who passed on their inequities.

I had many worthy and worthwhile things to my credit. These were the darling demons of my denial. I wouldn't even sneak a peak at the ugly behavioral creatures of the deep, those neon denizens that adapt to our darkest depths. The more I hid out in the light the longer the shadow I cast. When I finally felt the breath on my neck and turned to face it, I almost died a sudden death.

I had a history of serial addiction and serial (almost) monogamy. The last time I left home, I was taken in where alcohol was a way of life. I drank until blackouts scared me sober. Next, I ate myself to 235 pounds. Then, I sought the solution in sex. At last, I found the delight of capitalist democracy – work. I loved it. If I did enough of it, no one or nothing else mattered. Now, I sat in my wreckage.

I was society's shining child of abuse, alcoholism, overeating, sex addiction, and workaholism. Sound like the shadow America you know? Perhaps there is someone close to you that no one wants at the family reunion, church gathering, board meeting, or political convention? That was me. I made them very uncomfortable. There is something about a closet that makes a skeleton terribly restless.

I escaped by the skin of my teeth from things that could have sunk me sooner. But this time, I went down. I was left with ninety days' pay, a car, a few belongings in a small apartment, and the debts of a second failed marriage. I had collected baggage for forty years. My bag had burst.

I called my daughters and told them they would have to go to a state college as I could not afford private school tuition now that I was setting up my own business. My youngest daughter touched my heart deeply. She sensed my hard times and wanted to encourage me. Children are so naturally hopeful.

She said, "Dad, don't worry, your name is going to be a household word any day now." "It should be so easy," I thought. I had one or twenty hurdles to leap. Her spontaneous spark of hope was a welcome companion to the faintly flickering flame left inside. Her comment fueled the beginning of a new fire in my belly.

Ninety days later, January 2, 1985, I spent the first day with my first private client. The agreement assured me that I could service my debt, have food to eat and clothes to wear. It had been so long since I had lived on so little, I had forgotten that it doesn't take much to live if one only needs the basics.

The extras are what get expensive. They can grow until one's upkeep is their downfall, or until gross habits cannot keep pace with net income. Wow, I forgot that I used spending as a solution. Darling denial is so diligent. She's always available.

I crafted this particular box in the movie tradition of War of the Roses. Remember my “almost” of a few paragraphs ago? I had co-created an affair as a cowardly way out of a marriage that was increasingly maddening. I do not claim to be a victim as I chose the marriage and the affair. But, I surely paid a high price.

Yet, I can postulate that without that painful price, I might have gone on to even more dire depths before waking, wide-eyed, to new possibilities. It often took a lot to get my attention.

Don’t mistake my humor for insensitivity. In the midst of the madness there was not much at which I could laugh. Today’s humor is rooted in playful acceptance of full personal accountability. I went to a plane beyond the victim-rescuer-persecutor trap that plagued me from the moment I began to watch my parents play this ghastly and grisly game.

In another context, relationship is an ancient and revered spiritual path. For me, relationship pitfalls and potholes almost awakened me to the insanity of languishing in lethal life loops. As a slow learner, I was to go onto a third marriage before I completed the curriculum. The second was **nearly** impossible. I needed a third that was **totally** impossible. I got it. God is so cooperative in giving me what I need to grow.

The second divorce spilled into my job in a seditious way. My wife solicited a senior vice-president who had recently been fired after a two year political battle with me. When events got too much to stomach for one of my detractors, he confessed to me that my wife had called the fired employee to ask if he hated me enough to help her get me. He joined her vendetta and they got another officer who supervised the mailroom to have clerks send all my mail to him for opening before I got to see it.

They finally found one personal letter that could be stretched to infer a relationship with another person. They made copies and sent one to the president, my mentor. The president’s secretary came into my office, closed the door and showed me the letter. Even in hardball corporate politics this seemed a bit much. But I had a life conditioned to naïveté that censored subtlety. No power greater than myself had yet restored me to sanity.

These events were followed by legal maneuvers in the divorce that led to home foreclosure, loss of retirement and profit sharing, rising legal bills, and a looming collective family debt. All of these were logical consequences of the drama. Society, family, friends and enemies alike were all trying to hold me accountable in a way that served their interests. I decided to become fully accountable in a way that served me.

So, August 25, 1984, became the first day of the rest of my life.

I remember a song lyric that echoed in my mind those fierce and fateful first days. “As long as you have yourself, there is nothing they can steal.” Now, I’d change that to, “As long as you have your heart, there is nothing they can steal.” A precious part of me, in the center of my heart, knew that if I was to be in this much pain, the payoff had to be more than what I’d gotten from life thus far. I began anew and had lots of questions.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. Yet, all the king's horses and all the king's men could not keep Humpty Dumpty from rising again.