

In the Awakening Season

Reader's Guide

Writing Process

In the Awakening Season was written as a part of my daily contemplative practice. The foundation of that practice is awakening to a deeper experience of this present moment, in the midst of my concrete, daily life.

Moments of awakening tend to occur out of the blue for me. They are usually accompanied by an experiential realization that everything feels like a part of an oceanic oneness, including me. My periods of enlightenment tend to come and go in flashes. Rarely, these moments extend for hours to days and lead to a more extended period of transformation.

I try to put myself in the way of these spontaneous moments of spiritual experience by removing obstacles to their occurrence. Basically, I try to remain open to holding whatever comes up without trying to fix or judge it. Fixing and judging, clinging and resisting, tend to pull me into the past or project me further into the future where the lessons of the present are not available.

How can I be in this moment and allow this moment to inspire, surprise and move me?

One practice that has been especially helpful for me is *Lectio Divina*, specifically as taught by Jim Finley, a former Trappist monk who had Thomas Merton as his spiritual advisor in the monastery. I met Jim through the Living School for Action and Contemplation.

Lectio Divina Practice

The way that we hold whatever comes up will be unique to us. In Jim's book *Christian Meditation* and in oral teaching, he related the way that he has developed his own process of *Lectio Divina*, first envisioned by Guigo, a Carthusian monk in the 12th century. Guigo had a vision of a ladder to heaven while gardening, and this ladder

was a way for him to have a firm foundation in spiritual teachings while safely exploring their depth and breadth. It is important when we are on a ladder that we can safely and securely ascend and descend in order to accomplish our particular task. It is just as important in contemplative practice to feel grounded and safe.

The process as described and adapted by Finley begins with reading or focused attention to a spiritual source. This is the first step of the ladder--bringing my intention and awareness to the fact that there is a beauty to which I am called that as yet I do not understand. I show up and humbly seek the wisdom contained within this particular source. The source serves as the foundation and the first step pointing toward a beauty not yet personally experienced. I purposefully focus all of my attention on this source.

The next step, or rung in the ladder, is discursive meditation. I ask myself: *What does this mean to me? What jumps out as important or grabs my attention?* A very powerful method to deepen this step is to ask: *How would I share what this teaching is trying to tell me if I were to try to relate it to another person?* This step allows me to tap into all parts of how this beauty is accessing the intimate experience of my self--body, mind and heart. I can discern what makes sense to me, given my unique past and present interactions with my culture and the natural world. Insight into this beauty begins to take place, a kind of first flowering. This is a very tender place and it is therefore helpful to know that I can easily return to the first step, the ground of this process, represented by the source material that is the focus of this practice. It is also quite easy to lose focus and be carried away by my ever present waves of usual thinking or new bodily sensations or any other distraction. Just as it is important for physical safety to be focused and grounded when climbing up and down a ladder, it is also important to maintain focus on the source material as a constant true north, pointing me in the direction of the good, the true and the beautiful. I commit myself to seeing with new eyes and hold whatever comes up, and try to understand it as much as possible. Once I feel comfortable that I could explain to another what this moment is trying to teach me, it is time to move to the next step.

From a standpoint of my experience with writing poetry, this second step is often where the poem begins to take shape.

The third step is an act of making visible my yearning. I develop an asking prayer, in some way signifying that I would like to bring more of this beauty into my life. *Help me... Guide me.... Allow me...* these and similar requests concretize my yearning and connection to that which is sought. With this step I open myself to growth, to becoming. I honor the insight of step two and acknowledge my trust in the original source by asking to transform my life in such a way that all steps are in firm congruity, a safe and sturdy ladder.

In writing, this is where I ask for further inspiration and guidance.

Finally, we are ready to move to the most tenuous of positions. The top rung of the ladder is the most unsteady and difficult and yet the activity is deceptively simple: just being in the clouded unknown. This is the step most would identify as the contemplative and meditative mind. It is as if my actions thus far have allowed me to be stable and grounded while experiencing a glimpse of heaven itself. The final step includes embracing the intentions to let go and stop striving to get anywhere, to be steady inside of awareness, acceptance, connection and communion with the beauty that I seek to experience deeper. In this step, I am exposed to my fragility and vulnerability, as well as the constant failure of just being present, open and awake without clinging or resisting, while all the while clinging to and resisting lots of things. The ladder allows safety and stability to hold this last step of being intimate with my self in my fragility. I am present in my focus on a source of beauty, in my personal understanding of it, and in my humble asking for deeper experience.

In my writing, this is where inspiration and surprise often occur.

I can safely and nonjudgmentally hold whatever comes up in this process and always take a step back or go all the way back to the beginning, grounded in the simple yearning that is my call to awaken the contemplative heart.

This does not have to take a great deal of time, and you can adapt the process to fit your needs.

Lectio Divina practice and *In the Awakening Season*

Since the poetry written in this compilation was developed using this path, it may be worthwhile for the reader to try this form of contemplation, using the poems as a source. Sample questions to guide readers after reading a poem are below. There are many other forms of contemplative practice available that may fit specific individual readers better. A good description is the tree of contemplative practices, resource link listed below.

I recommend setting aside 10-15 minutes and finding a quiet place where you will not be interrupted. Find a comfortable body position, dignified and gentle, steady. Bring your focus and attention to your breath and observe the breath as you breathe in and out, no need to change it. When you are distracted, which will occur, just bring your focus back, gently and with discipline, to watching the breath.

Being present includes the mind, body and heart all being in the same place at the same time. There are some resources listed below that can guide you in that practice. Once you feel calm and present, read a poem through twice, either out loud or mentally. Then sit with this first set of questions:

What jumps out at you in reading a particular poem?
What inspires you, surprises you, touches or moves you?
How would you explain it to another?

After a little while, sit with these questions:

What does this realization have to teach you?
How would you ask for more of this realization to be brought into your life?

Then take a minute or two and sit in silence.

You can take some time to do something creative afterwards to express what you have experienced. How does your body, heart and mind feel? Allow that to guide your creative actions. Most of all, be gentle with yourself and enjoy the process. This is a gift that you give to yourself. Keep the whole process filled with curiosity and openness.

Treat yourself as you would your own grandchild.

Author Discussion of Poems

Each of these poems had a particular source of inspiration that deepened with subsequent editing and revisions, often based on feedback from readers and editors.

The entire set of poems was written over several years and is compiled into three sections: Awaken, Falling and Deeper. The main editor of the compilation, poet Lise Goett, first saw these patterns, and I am indebted to her guidance.

Upon reflection, the three parts form a continuous cycle of the endless process of *Awakening*. The *season* I tend to notice most is *Awakening*, the moment of enlightenment when some insight is gained. Yet getting to this experience requires falling and letting go of previous ways of seeing and being. As I fall, there is an opportunity to sink my taproot in deeper, to support further, vigorous new growth and awakening.

Here is a brief glimpse into how several of the poems speak to me, with a few from each section.

from *Awaken* section:

“**Connected**” was written after a silent retreat with Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, whom I consider to be one of my greatest teachers. The poem describes a moment of *Awakening* that stayed with me for days and continues to resonate today. The moment of a leaf suspended mid-air was like some kind of miracle, and this poem flowed out of contemplation of how all living things are connected to their origin and their destination in mysterious ways.

“Resurrection” was written during my 2-year Living School studies as a way of understanding what Jesus meant when he said that you must die to be born again. Thomas Merton wrote that we must die to our false, separate sense of self in order to embrace our connected, true self. This poem is a meditation on this theme as it applies to every moment of my life.

“Destiny” was written after reading Rainier Maria Rilke’s *Book of Hours*, a compilation of poems he wrote after spending time in a monastery. This poem speaks to me about being open to whatever comes up on the path in such a way that I can learn its lessons, even though that can take a very long time, and oftentimes my individual likes and dislikes are not that important in the process.

from *Falling* section

“Student of a Groundless Fall” was written after Jim Finley told a story in group about the practice of meditation. He used the metaphor of jumping from a plane. Experienced jumpers were only scared of the landing, as there were so many variables. What would it be like if I could take the landing out of the equation? For the practice of meditation or the lived experience of becoming something new, what would it be like if I had nothing to fear?

“Sleepwalking” was written as I was overlooking a mountain stream in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. My wife and I were on a short vacation alone, and this poem came out nearly complete as I reflected on the wonder of the moment and also noticed the hope that I would not lose the ability to experience everyday beauty.

“Kenosis” was written as a way to try to understand the word *kenosis*, as this had mystified me. So I sat with what the felt experience would be on all levels of being of everything being filled to overflowing by a great universal love.

from *Deeper* Section:

“Group” was written as an extension of the cancer-support groups which I have taken part in for the past 25 years. It is a way of trying to understand how simply holding whatever comes up without trying to fix it can have such incredible benefits. This process of sitting with myself and others includes the middle way of just being present and open, without being too invasive and without abandoning. This is the practice of a lifetime for me.

“Isolation” was written in the early days of the COVID 19 pandemic as a way to describe the surreal feeling of life during a beautiful spring in northwest Georgia while a deadly, invisible virus changed every aspect of normality.

“Radiant Medicine” came through as a combination of hearing *Radiant Medicine* as a possible title for this compilation and clinical experiences that I was having at the time. There is an energy that feels present in every created thing and person, and sometimes it makes itself known in mysterious ways at unusual moments.

Resources

Organizations

The Center for Action and Contemplation: www.cac.org

The Andrew Weil Center for Integrative Medicine at The University of Arizona:

<https://integrativemedicine.arizona.edu/>

Cancer Navigators: <https://cancernavigators.org/>

Selected books

Christian Meditation by James Finley

Peace is every step by Thich Nhat Hanh

Adams Return by Richard Rohr

The Universal Christ by Richard Rohr

The Wisdom Jesus by Cynthia Bourgeault

Love, Medicine and Miracles by Dr. Bernie Siegel

Wounded Healers by Rachel Naomi Remen

8 Weeks to Optimal Health by Dr. Andrew Weil

Rilke's Book of Hours by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy

Links

The Tree of Contemplative Practices: <http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree>

Matt Mumber website: www.drmattmumber.com