

METANOIA

A Soul-Tending Resource for Character Formation

by Ann Starrette

The Dawning of Desire

"And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom." -Anais Nin

For some, Lent and Easter can usher in the dawning of desire to say Yes to God and Yes to something larger than ourselves. The season can stir our inner resolve to change directions, take a step, or muster up the courage to risk taking a stand. The day my quiet desperation turned to desire, little did I know that I was entering into a lifelong process of *metanoia*: a slow walk in a new direction.

Much like Dag Hammarskjold wrote in his private journal, I too don't know Who—or what—put the question to me. But at some point I responded with a Yes. My time had come to risk growing and becoming, though I had no inkling as to how or why, or what I would become.



All I know for sure is that I sensed being on the cusp of a new dawn, in that crucial in-between space where everything actually happens and yet nothing appears to be happening. That space where eye cannot see nor ear hear nor mind perceive what God is up to. It's the waiting period when the cake bakes, the seed sprouts, the womb nurtures. It's that space where real transformation, *metanoia*, takes place. But first it must be desired, opened and surrendered to.

However, this vague, often uncomfortable in-between space of unknowing provides little comfort to the soul that craves structure or to the organization that awaits sure-footedness before stepping out. Though it can be terrifying, what this liminal space can do is help us hunker down with willingness to say Yes to our longings, hoping

against hope that the fog will lift and the dark will become a trusted companion in our *metanoia* process. The alternative, of course, is “. . . to remain tight in a bud. . .”

FOLLOW YOUR STAR

Looking at the etymology of *desire*, it means to wish or long for. It comes from the Latin phrase *de sidere* "from the stars." This concept relates to expressions such as "to wish upon a star" or "to follow your star." Motivational speaker Les Brown famously said, "Shoot for the moon and if you miss you will still be among the stars." Desire connotes a strong emotion, a willingness to risk stepping beyond our comfort zone into the unknown.

A PAUSE FOR ILLUMINATION

*I don't know Who--or what--put the question,
I don't know when it was put.
I don't even remember answering.
But at some moment I did answer
Yes to Someone--or Something--
and from that hour I was certain
that existence is meaningful and
that, therefore, my life
in self-surrender, had a goal.*

-- Dag Hammarskjold (1905-1961)
Swedish Statesman and United Nations official

“What shape waits in the seed of you to grow and spread its branches against a future sky?”

David Whyte

I've always had a strong desire to be my personal best spiritually, personally, and professionally. Yet every day I wake up feeling like the new kid on the block. Some days I'm willing to step into ambiguity and unknowing, and some days I'm not. My question is, in a spiritual sense, how can we help ourselves and others develop a true desire to risk the pain and privilege of blossoming? How can we kindle the embers of our own desire and then help others do the same? I'm not talking 'pumped-up motivation,' I'm talking about a holy longing that will uncover *“the shape [that] waits in the seed of you to grow and spread its branches against a future sky”* (David Whyte). That's what God is yearning for.

VALUING AMBIGUITY

Since the desert mothers and fathers of the third century CE, spiritual guides have encouraged us to let our need to know take a back seat. A quote I scribbled in my own journal sums up this theme:

*“Let your intellectual seeking for knowledge
take the back seat for a while to your own
'courage to be.' ... Celebrate the value of
ambiguity, a place we often find ourselves,
where 'what has been' no longer rings true,
and 'what will eventually come into being' has
not yet been born. This place of fertile growth
opportunity often holds us open to God's Spirit
and confuses us enough to be authentically
surprised by God's grace.”*

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We assume we need what will make things better in the moment. God is looking at what will move us toward freedom, growth and transformation.

HONORING UNKNOWING

The Exodus is a favorite story of mine. In Exodus 4, God appoints Moses to return to Egypt to bring His people out of slavery. Moses and Aaron, obedient to God's instructions, ask Pharaoh to give the Israelites a break from their brick making so that they may worship God. This infuriates Pharaoh. He not only says “no” but makes things even tougher for them, saying, “I will not give you any more straw. Go and get your own straw wherever you can find it, but your work will not be reduced at all” (Exodus. 5:11).

Have you ever felt like your “straw” was taken away: something or someone you felt essential to your livelihood or to building the life you thought you wanted? An ability? A dream? When it is taken, it can sting like vinegar poured in an open wound. It can take your breath away. At times like these it's almost impossible to value ambiguity and honor unknowing. We want to know what is happening! We want to know the next step! We want to point blame or fight back or cry or run.

As the Exodus story continues, God sends plagues of locusts, frogs, and boils upon the Egyptians, and eventually the Pharaoh gives the Israelites their freedom. However, as they pass through the wilderness, the Israelites complain. They doubt if God is among them and even want to go back! Where is their desire to move forward with God to possess the Promised Land?

God listens to their complaints and provides them with food, manna and quails. God tells them only to gather food for that day and says in Exodus 16:4b, “In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions.”

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding.”

Proverbs 3:5-8

IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS

In the final analysis it wasn't about the straw or the frogs or the manna or the quail. It was about God building trusting relationships with His people in His way and in His time. The story of Exodus surprises me with twists and turns that remind me to look at my life differently when I think I need one thing but God has grander ways than I can possibly understand.

Like the Israelites, God is inviting us to surrender to the process of metanoia, of living wholeheartedly in the duty of the moment - trusting, trusting, trusting that our plans are too small for what God has in mind. And yes, sometimes He has to *take away the straw* to move us into a position to receive. Poet David Whyte reminds us of the smallness of our desires in these lines in his poem *What to Remember When Waking*:

*“What you can plan is too small for you to live.
What you can live wholeheartedly will make
plans enough for the vitality hidden
in your sleep.”*

SOUL-SHAPING EXPERIMENT

Read

Read the Exodus story. Focus on the people and their “on again/off again” relationship with God. What does it teach you about your own story.

Reflect

Being brutally honest with yourself before God:

- Bring before God those areas in your life in which you groan for liberation yet lack the courage to step into uncertainty. Ask God to empower you to trust the protective cloud of unknowing hovering over you.
- What will you do to prepare the soil of your life to make room to be authentically surprised by God's grace; for what wants to come into being but has not

yet been born? It does not have a chance of happening if you do not prepare the soil.

- What conversation needs to take place in your life right now? Poet David Whyte says that moving from tight bud to blossom begins with “the conversation.” It begins when we ask ourselves, “What's the courageous conversation that needs to take place in my life *right now* about the longings of my heart--first with myself, if only a lament--and then with others?”
- What is your “wish upon a star?” We all have one or two or three just hanging there, afraid to be spoken aloud. What would that desire manifested look like? What are three simple steps you can take, this week, to follow that desire?

SUGGESTED FORMATION RESOURCES

- *What to Remember When Waking: The Disciplines of an Everyday Life*. A teaching CD by David Whyte. It can be purchased from Amazon.
- Spiritual Formation Coaching
- Spiritual Direction
- Trust Circles for Group Spiritual Direction

If you desire to find a soul friend or supportive community to help nurture your spiritual growth, please email me direct at Starrette@mindspring.com and request information. A spiritual companion can support us in our desire to say Yes and also in the critical conversations and steps that we must follow if we're willing to risk blooming, to spread our branches against a future sky.

