



Thin Places

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Thin Places, an ecumenical sampler of events and resources for spiritual growth, with a particular interest in the contemplative spiritual journey, is published by the Spiritual Life Community of Westminster Presbyterian Church.

Look for *Thin Places* at:
thinplaces.us
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At the threshold . . .

by the Rev. Dr. Matthew Skinner

The intensity of graduate studies has a way of dulling one's senses. At least for me, I lived in my head, always focused on the next deadline. The work also has a way of magnifying one's insecurities. I knew the job market awaiting me was unkind, and so I treated too many tasks as work instead of a calling. It took me a while, afterward, to realize how my study was changing my heart. I was in the process of slowly passing through a vocational threshold. Without my knowing it, my intellectual pursuits were part of a summons to service. It took an ancient seaport to help me reset my spiritual perception and get over myself.

Caesarea Maritima once sat on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea. The city, a Roman provincial capital, was built to keep ancient Galilee, Samaria, and Judea tethered to the wider imperial economy. I spent months studying the place from afar, as I was writing a dissertation on the incarceration of the Apostle Paul. The Acts of the Apostles briefly describes Paul held by Roman officials in Caesarea for two years, kept in secure custody before being shipped off to Rome. A handful of verses about Paul's legal status don't exactly make Caesarea one of the Holy Land's "sacred sites" for most people, but my own academic investment in the place has always imbued it with a sort of magnetism for me.

I had never visited. I gained knowledge of Caesarea entirely from books, articles, and photos, so when I had my first opportunity to lead a group of students on a study tour of the Holy Land, over fifteen years after my studies had concluded, I put Caesarea at the top of my instructions to the travel agents who drafted the itinerary. Once the trip was underway, I discovered most of the students had never even heard of the city. I joked with them that the entire travel course was simply an elaborate scheme to let me finally get to this place I'd imagined for years. They'd have to indulge me.

In visiting Caesarea, I wasn't expecting to hear a message from Paul's ghost, experience a miraculous cure for my recurring back pain, or be filled with a gust of inspiration blowing through the ruins. It was more about hoping to impose some order on the unsorted memories and worries that filled my head. I expected the visit to be special because of what the place represents to me in terms of what I had done and what kind of career I had built.

And in spending a couple of hours at Caesarea, I wanted to experience a sense of my own development or completion; I wanted some tangible feeling that would help me make sense of how I began by toiling dutifully in a library, eventually produced my own share of writings about the book of Acts, and now was there—literally on the site—teaching others about biblical literature and the early church's history. I expected

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the place, and my being there in person, to confirm some impression within me that it had all been worth it. To greet me and evoke gratitude within me. To reassure me that I had completed or arrived at something that mattered.

My initial response to that first visit to Caesarea was, surprisingly, an utter lack of surprise. Like most of the sites in the Holy Land, everything looked pretty much like it does in all the photos in any tour book and on the Web. It was all interesting, actually very interesting, but hardly moving. The past can be like that sometimes. My own desire to find self-validation there surely didn't help. So, I left the group in the capable hands of the tour guide and went for a walk, avoiding the crowds and getting as close as possible to the ruins at the water's edge.

Standing there, I turned toward the warm late afternoon sun in the western sky and started staring at the vast sea, which quite literally splashes up against the site and its ancient stones, the ones full of stories I've spent a lot of time trying to extract and retell. And that's when it happened. At one level, I grasped the grandeur of Caesarea and its harbor as engineering marvels and once-proud statements of Roman cultural and commercial dominance. But what stunned and held me in that moment was the breadth of the Mediterranean horizon. It was—and still is—an expanse of openness full of risk and possibility. I sensed all the possibility it held. Caesarea was built, essentially, as a passageway into and out of that wild horizon.

And I felt it at a deeper level: I was standing on a personal threshold, and I had been there for a long while. A transition from feeling satisfied with accomplishment to asking how I might yet serve others. A realization that faith involves perceiving reality differently. A reminder that encounters with the

Poised in mind, heart, and body

“When a person is poised in mind, heart, and body, balanced and alertly there, a shift can happen.

Then, rather than being trapped in our usual mind—with its well-formed rut tracks of issues and agendas and ways of thinking—we seem to come from a deeper, steadier, and quieter place.

We are present, . . . fully occupying the now, in which we find ourselves. . . .”

Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*

Holy expand and don't confine what we can comprehend about our purpose in this unpredictable and occasionally demoralizing world.

I realized that what I've been interested in knowing and experiencing all along are thresholds—the explorations and encounters that beckon me toward new journeys. Caesarea jolted me from self-containment. That memory-saturated landscape became holy for me, in my own admittedly weird relationship with the place, not because it held answers but because it posed questions: Where did you come from? How on earth did you get here? And where do you want to go next?

Those questions reassure me that the stories of our vocations, just like the stories of our lives, are never finished. Sometimes the stories don't make sense. But that's just fine. Faith can provide at least enough confidence or courage to trust that God goes with us as we embark on those travels into what's next. Then, pursuing our vocations and rediscovering who we are as we move into the future has the potential to be an exhilarating ride.

Thresholds can reveal themselves in all sorts of places: high points or low points; in solitude or in crowds. What I realized that first time in Caesarea, and what I hear again when I return, is that grace can come when we turn and face the threshold with openness. The point is to cross them expecting to encounter the holiness of God on the way ahead . . . not to slide into them as portals to a tranquil nostalgia about what was. A sense of vocation often emerges when we look west, following God into an unknown but enticing future.

Matt Skinner is Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul and Scholar for Adult Education at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis. He's convinced that reading the Bible together can draw us into stories and memories that prompt us to examine our own lives, beliefs, locations, and ways of engaging the world. In his spare time, he enjoys gardening and cooking yet wishes he were better at both. Matt can be reached at mkskinner@luthersem.edu.

Ongoing Opportunities

The times are a-changing . . .

and perhaps improving. At least, there are reports that the number of first-time retreatants is up . . . and that

the age of the first timers is down.

And, with public health concerns beginning to moderate, many groups are moving toward more in-person gatherings, appropriately managed.

The information below was accurate as of mid-May, but additional in-person Opportunities may become available as the summer progresses.

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### **Weekly Contemplative Worship: "Silence and Song"**

One often feels totally present here, for Scripture, prayer, silence, and song.

The theme changes every few months. Recently, "Artistic Offerings: Spoken Words, Dance, and Music by Westminster's Artist in Residence and friends."

For June and July, the musical theme will be Bluegrass, drawing upon the Bluegrass Evening Prayer from Holden and other resources. Services will be held outdoors on the Marquette side of the building and will begin with singing old favorites, with the band [and in our masks]. Both in-person and live-streamed:

**Wednesdays, 6:00-6:30 p.m.**

**Westminster Presbyterian Church**

**1200 Marquette Avenue Minneapolis**

To join: go to [www.westminstermpls.org](http://www.westminstermpls.org) then click on "Livestream" and then "Wednesdays, Silence and Song"

For information: 612.322.3421 or [jteliczan@wpc-mpls.org](mailto:jteliczan@wpc-mpls.org).

### **ARC Retreat Community, Stanchfield, MN**

Adhering to current health guidelines, ARC now supports fully vaccinated people visiting with other vaccinated people, without mask or physical distancing: both for groups of up to 16 coming together for self-directed retreats and for organized retreats.

For the second year running, ARC was voted MN Women's Press Readers' Recommended Retreat Center.

**For more information** about the ARC Lodge, Cottage, and Hermitage (peaceful shelters in the midst of a pine forest), about our nutritious meals prepared with locally produced ingredients . . .

or about both self-directed and organized retreats:

- like **Forest Bathing & Outdoor Yoga Day Retreats** (June 10 and June 20, In-Person), or
- **ARC Family Friday Prayer and Meditation** (Fridays, via Zoom), and **Third Thursday Author Sharing** (via Zoom) . . .

Call 763.689.3540 or contact us at [www.ARCretreat.org](http://www.ARCretreat.org) or [ARCretreat@liorg.net](mailto:ARCretreat@liorg.net).

### **An Encountering Series, Four Summer Saturdays**

This retreat series invites you to experience four

spiritual heroes of the Christian tradition in new and unexpected ways. We'll use art, music, guided reflection, and our imaginations to strengthen our existing relationships with these powerful women . . . or to meet them as new soul friends.

**Four Final Saturdays, 10:00-11:15**, via Zoom:

- **Encountering Mary Mother of God, May 29**
- **Encountering Mary Magdalene, June 26**
- **Encountering Hildegard of Bingen, July 31**
- **Encountering Julian of Norwich, August 28**

**Loyola Spirituality Center**

**389 North Oxford Street, St. Paul**

For more information about each **Encounter** or for information or registration for this or other up-coming opportunities—like our **Morning Centering Prayer** (Thursdays at 8:00 a.m., via Zoom) or our **Evening Examen Prayer** (Thursdays at 8:00 p.m., via Zoom): 651.641.0008 or [info@loyolaspiritualitycenter.org](mailto:info@loyolaspiritualitycenter.org) or [www.loyolaspiritualitycenter.org](http://www.loyolaspiritualitycenter.org).

### **Hermitage Retreats**

Pacem in Terris offers comfortable individual hermitages year-round in the beautiful setting of 240 acres of woods, wetlands, native prairie, and a wilderness lake. Our mission is to provide an environment where God's people can come be alone with God. There are no expectations.

Pacem offers a place where you can simply "be." The silence and the solitude of a cozy prayer cabin is ideal for contemplative prayer, holy rest, discernment, healing, and self-reflection.

Hermitages are very special places. It seems significant that many of our guests come back, over and over again:

**Available year-round, for stays of two to many days**

**The Pacem in Terris Hermitage Retreat Center**

**26399 State Highway 47, Isanti, MN**

**"Above all, trust in the slow work of God.**

We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay, . . . impatient of being on the way . . .

But only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be. . . .

Give Our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete . . ."

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,  
from *Hearts on Fire*

For more information or registration: 763.444.6408 or [www.paceminterris.org](http://www.paceminterris.org) (the website is particularly full of photos and details about what to bring and what to expect)

### Sacred Ground

. . . at its May Board Meeting modified our highly regarded program leading to a formal *Certificate in Spiritual Direction* to make it less residence-intensive, to make it more widely available to seekers from throughout the region. With the new format, students will gather in-person three times each semester, for the critical connections and cohort bonding so important to the program. During the other weeks, students will gather via Zoom for the key steps of inform . . . form . . . and transform.

Because of the intensive, highly personal nature of our program, **the incoming Autumn class** will be limited to 17 students. Now would be an excellent time to share this new training opportunity with those who may be hearing the call:

#### Sacred Ground Center for Spirituality

**Carondelet Center, 1890 Randolph, St. Paul**

If you are interested in being kept up to date on the Formation training program, email:

[director@sacredgroundspirit.org](mailto:director@sacredgroundspirit.org).

For information about other up-coming opportunities—like our **Extended Ignatian Exercises**:

651.696.2798 or [www.sacredgroundspirit.org](http://www.sacredgroundspirit.org) or [info@sacredgroundspirit.org](mailto:info@sacredgroundspirit.org).

#### This interim

“You are in the time of the interim  
When everything seems withheld.

The path you took to get here has washed out,  
The way forward is still concealed from you.

The old is not old enough to have died away, The  
new is still too young to be born.

You cannot lay claim to anything,  
In this time of dusk . . .

As far as you can, hold your confidence.  
Do not allow your confusion to squander  
This call which is loosening your roots  
That you might come free  
From all you have outgrown. . . .”

John O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us*

## One-Time Opportunities

### Deep Listening through a Spiritual Lens

Now under its new Executive Director, Karin Barret, **City House** is continuing its primary mission of inspiring hope, trust, and healing through spiritual listening with people who feel unseen and unheard.

It continues its partnerships with a wide variety of social service agencies serving people who otherwise would not have access to spiritual listening.

And it has expanded its popular Deep Listening training to three sessions based on the belief that:

- Every human story is sacred . . .
- Every encounter holds something new . . .
- Every intention to listen matters . . .

You may arrange to have the training presented to your group, but it is also offered to individuals:

**Three Tuesdays, June 1, 8, 22, 1:30-3:00 p.m.**, via Zoom  
For information or registration: [www.city-house.org](http://www.city-house.org) or [joyce@city-house.org](mailto:joyce@city-house.org) or [wanda@city-house.org](mailto:wanda@city-house.org) or 651.494.8303.

### Come and See Open House

Are you noticing a desire to listen well to those around you? Do people comment on your ability to be attentive to others? Is life finding you aware of God’s presence more and more? This is an opportunity to explore the possibility of becoming a spiritual director. Christos is accepting applications for its spiritual direction training program, **“Tending the Holy!”**

Classes will begin in September at all three locations—in the Twin Cities, Chicago, and Fargo—and through distance learning. Come and See:

**Tuesday, June 8, 6:00-8:30 p.m.**, In-person

#### Christos Center for Spiritual Formation

**1212 Holly Drive, Lino Lakes, MN**

For information about our spiritual direction program: [Reina@christoscenter.org](mailto:Reina@christoscenter.org). For information about other up-coming opportunities: [www.christoscenter.org](http://www.christoscenter.org) or 651.653.8207 or [ladonna@christoscenter.org](mailto:ladonna@christoscenter.org).

### Cut It back and It Will Grow Again

This optimistic phrase is the motto of the Benedictine Monastery of Montecasino, Italy. As Benedictines, we are encouraged to be a resilient individual living in a resilient community. The theme of this retreat uses the wisdom of the *Rule* to learn and adopt resilience. This is a Conference Retreat with the Monastic Community:

**Sunday, June 13, at 7:00 p.m.-**

**Friday, June 18, at 5:00 p.m.,** via Zoom  
**Spirituality Center, Saint Benedict's Monastery**  
**104 Chapel Lane, St. Joseph, MN**

For information or registration for this and other up-coming Zoom Opportunities—like **Brothers and Sisters All: Pope Francis' Vision for the World** (explore his suggestions for creating a culture of peace and justice through dialogue, Weds, August 4, 11, 18) and **A Directed Retreat** (reflection guides, daily prayer with the Community at 8:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., plus an opportunity to meet with a spiritual director, August 8-13): 320-363-7112 or [www.sbm.osb.org](http://www.sbm.osb.org) or [mholicky@csbsju.edu](mailto:mholicky@csbsju.edu) or [eantony@csbsju.edu](mailto:eantony@csbsju.edu).

**Spend a Day with Diana Butler Bass**

When we join Diana Butler Bass for this virtual retreat—based on her latest book, *Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence*—we will explore diverse images of Jesus from the comforting ones like Jesus-as-friend to more challenging ideas such as Jesus-as-Lord.

Throughout the day, we'll practice "memoir theology," crafting stories from our memories of Jesus with biblical texts, history of Christianity, and insights from contemporary theologies. This is an opportunity to both affirm your experience and to delve into challenging ideas. This will be a day for heart and head, a time to focus on Jesus, on the ever-compelling—and sometimes confounding—figure who is at the center of Christian faith:

**Saturday, June 19, 9:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m.,** via Zoom  
**Franciscan Spirituality Center**

**920 Market Street, La Crosse WI**  
For information or registration for this and other up-coming opportunities—like **TOGETHER ON OUR WAY: Becoming Trauma-Informed Faith Communities** (five Tuesdays and Thursdays, June 1-17, Keynote June 1, 6:00-7:30 p.m., via Zoom) or **In-person Iconography Workshop** (July 11-16): [www.fscenter.org](http://www.fscenter.org) or 608.791.5295 or [fscenter@fspa.org](mailto:fscenter@fspa.org).

**Devotional Chant: Hearing the Spirit, Transforming the Mind, Deepening Love, Remembering Wholeness**

Chant is a foundational practice found in virtually all faith traditions, including Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. While on retreat, we will explore the ways we have become separated from our own bodies, from the earth on which we dwell and from the wholeness of Creation. We will celebrate and re-connect using chant, movement, reflection, and

sacred dialogue.

Chanting, the melodic repetition of a sacred phrase, has the capacity of generating a great deal of energy. This energy has the potential of being focused and directed as a healing force. You can also use chanting to open your center of spirit and body, allowing the sounds to move through, transforming your small self into radiating transmitters of God's love. When we find the divine breath within and resuscitate sacred words, they come alive and become a vehicle of power and healing:

**Thursday, July 15 at 5:00 p.m.-**

**Sunday, July 18 at 12:00 p.m. – In-Person**  
**The Episcopal House of Prayer,**  
**14215 Fruit Farm Road, Collegeville, MN**  
**and The House of Prayer in the City,**  
**St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Minneapolis**

For information or registration for this and other up-coming opportunities [like **ONE SONG—Deep Spirituality and Sound in the Three Abrahamic Religions** (August 19-22) and **The Way of the Heart: An Interspirituality Exploration** (Sept. 30- Oct.3): 320.363.3293 or [houseprayer@csbsju.edu](mailto:houseprayer@csbsju.edu) or [www.ehouseofprayer.org](http://www.ehouseofprayer.org) or [www.ehouseofprayer.org/hopc](http://www.ehouseofprayer.org/hopc).

**"Make Me the Channel of Your Peace":**

**The Prayer of Creating Peace**

How can we each be a true channel for peace, in our times of pandemic, violence, and daily crises that shatter our peace?

When prayed, this "Prayer of St Francis" has brought inner peace to soldiers in both wars, addicts in

**At a retreat, with the Dalai Lama**

"In the silence, any anxiety fell away and a bond of trust and openness for what was to come took its place. Then, at last, he bowed his shaved head over the text and tracing the script with his finger, like a rabbi, read,

'How blest are those of a gentle spirit . . .  
How blest are those whose hearts are pure . . . '

And as he read, it was impossible not to be moved, almost stunned, by the power of these familiar words re-cadenced and re-keyed by a Tibetan voice, and a Buddhist sensibility. . . . "

Robert Kiely, in the "Preface" to *The Good Heart: A Buddhist perspective on the Teachings of Jesus*,  
By His Holiness, the Dalai Lama

the 11th Step of AA, and to families forgiving their assassins in South Africa. Taking our time, praying each phrase, coming together, we will find a deeper inner peace, and a path to become channels of peace in whatever situation shakes our peace.

This is a Healing Retreat for Men and Women. It will be led—as it has been each July for many years—by Fr. Matt Linn, SJ:

**Friday, July 16, at 8:00 p.m.-**

**Sunday, July 18, at 12:25 p.m., In-person  
Christ the King Retreat Center, Buffalo, MN**

For information or registration for this or other upcoming opportunities—like **The Practice of Sabbath in Our Lives: Some Tips for Sanity in an Over-Stimulated Time** (August 6-8), and **Nurturing Serenity: Soul-Support for Daily Living** (October 1-3): 763.682.1394 or [www.kingshouse.com](http://www.kingshouse.com) or [anita@kingshouse.com](mailto:anita@kingshouse.com).

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Space Runneth Short. . . . But there are many more possibilities . . . increasingly, with both in-person and virtual Opportunities. All just a click or call away:

- **Cloister Walk:** www.cloisterseminars.org or furcherthuff@gmail.com.
- **St. Scholastica Monastery - McCabe Renewal Center:** 320.260.8233 or retreat@duluthosb.org or www.retreatduluth.org.
- **Ghost Ranch, Casa del Sol at Ghost Ranch, Abiquiu, NM:** www.ghostranch.org or 505.685.1000 or info@ghostranch.org.

Last Words from Nan Merrill,
chosen to open the Memorial Issue
of *Friends of Silence* dedicated to her

“Awakening is an ongoing journey. To begin to see, to turn our lives, is only the beginning. . . . This road humbles us and give us strength to simplify and discard all that is not Life-giving and to abandon ourselves into Love’s hands.

I’ve learned to love and to trust the Mystery, not needing to know the future. I no longer take Grace for granted—it is pure gift. . . .My essential course of action is simply to be in the Eternal Now, ready to follow the small, still voice heard in Silence.”

from *Journey into Love*
Nan was the founder and long-time editor of
Friends of Silence, and the author of many books,
perhaps especially, *Psalms for Praying*

- **The Benedictine Center, St. Paul's Monastery:** info@benedictinecenter.org or 651.777.7251 or www.benedictinecenter.org.
- **Franciscan Retreats and Spirituality Center:** 952-447-2182 or www.franciscanretreats.net or director@franciscanretreats.net.
- **Wisdom Ways Center for Spirituality:** www.wisdomwayscenter.org or 651.696.2788 or office@wisdomwayscenter.org.
- **Wood & Water Retreats: A Spiritual Start-Up** <https://wood-water-retreats.square.site>.
- **Minnesota Contemplative Outreach:** info@minnesotacontemplativeoutreach.org or www.minnesotacontemplativeoutreach.org.

Reading Opportunities

Eleanor: A Spiritual Biography, by Harold Ivan Smith

It is a little embarrassing to report that there was a moment of surprise when the sub-title of this book was first read. A focus on her “*Spiritual Biography*” perhaps surprised because her name so immediately triggered images of Eleanor’s role as counselor and provocateur to her husband, as—after his death—a skilled and effective politician in her own right, and as a life-long social activist. And embarrassing because the surprise could only have come from thinking that our spiritual and our everyday lives are separate or parallel parts of our biographies . . . from forgetting that our spirituality and how we live intimately inform and guide each other.

Four passages, noted along the way:

The author notes that, at boarding school as a teenager, Eleanor was required to memorize many passages from the *Bible*. He adds that two—by Micah and Jesus—remained central to her for the rest of her life:

Contact Us

Do you know of anyone—it’s free to all who ask—who would like to receive this ecumenical newsletter?

If you do, please contact Kristin Kieft at news@wpc-mpls.org or 612.332.3421.

If you know of an up-coming *Opportunity* that would be of interest to other readers, or

if you have any other questions or comments, please contact us at: thinplaces_us@msn.com.

- "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God," and
- "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

"Eleanor's spirituality was not an abstract notion but a reality explored, lived, and celebrated. . . . All those mornings and nights when she picked up the gavel to call a UN committee session into order, few believed, fewer hoped, she could create in the diplomatic ideological chaos anything close to [what she sought], a Universal Declaration of Human Rights. . . ."

"Particularly during her years at the United Nations, she interacted with people from all faiths and no faith. Her understanding of and appreciation for alternative spiritual paths was stretched long before the word spirituality became popular in American culture. . . . She became an early voice insisting that Americans must prepare themselves to listen to Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs [if we are to accept] the outrageously extravagant grace of a Creator who could not be bound by theological doctrine, dogma, or liturgy. . . ."

"Eleanor would have appreciated the writings of contemporary voices in spirituality, like Joan Chittister, Brian McLaren, Joyce Rupp, Thomas Moore, Richard Rohr, Diana Butler Bass, and numerous others [offering] spiritual moorings in a time of social, political, and economic unsettledness. . . ."

"The Bible finds a fine balance,

. . . in its entirety, between knowing and not knowing, between using words and having humility about words. . . . [There is] a need for clarity, certitude, and identity, especially to get us started when we are young. Religion, though, also needs a balancing agent to unlock itself from the inside, which most of us would call the mystical or prayer tradition. Without this unlocking, we will not produce many . . . who can build bridges to anybody else.

This balancing act emerged as two streams in the world of spirituality: the knowing tradition and the not-knowing tradition, . . . the apophatic or 'negative' way, where you move beyond words and images into silence, and the kataphatic or 'affirmative' way, where you use words, concepts, and images. I believe both forms are necessary, and together they create a magnificent form of higher consciousness called biblical faith. This great and healing balance is still rather rare, however, because the ego insists on certitude and perfect clarity . . . "

Richard Rohr, Daily Meditation for 31 January 2021

Two first take-aways:

- Eleanor Roosevelt's example reminds us, whether we think about it or not, that our spiritual and everyday lives are deeply intertwined . . . and that our Christian grounding calls us to action, with especial clarity in the familiar words from Micah and Jesus.
- Eleanor was far ahead of her time in what is now sometimes called "interspirituality," the going beyond respectful and sincere interfaith dialogue to fully recognizing and celebrating the truth humans have found on the many different paths to God.

Eleanor: A Spiritual Biography, by Harold Ivan Smith

Afterwords: continued from back page.

but with many lapses.

And then something harder happened. A wise friend—after listening to a strongly expressed opinion—said, gently, and with a twinkle in her eye, "***You may think that way and still be wrong!***" The words struck home, making me wonder about the soundness of my opinions, reminding me that my opinions are necessarily constrained by the extent of my experience and by the very real limits of my understanding. It was a humbling but helpful awakening.

Helpful, yet still hard. It is one thing to seek to be welcoming to the ideas of others and to seek to understand them and the experiences from which they come . . . quite another to begin to think that my own opinions might not be any sounder—or even less sound—than any others. And then other words from Richard Rohr came along. In his book on the enneagram, he notices "***the gift of serenity, meaning a nonreactive heart, holding the world with compassion and patience . . .***"

Here was a stance that could be understood and that offered a way forward . . . at least for one.

A stance that did not depend upon what you thought and what you believed. A stance that was a lessening of interest in or focus on the self . . . of seeking to be nonreactive to false-self issues . . . of seeking to be nonjudgmental . . . of being welcoming . . . of being present . . . And a stance of being connected, . . . of being a part of the Whole.

A challenging stance, much-easier-to-say-than-to-do. But, perhaps, bringing with it the gift of a measure of serenity.



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“At the threshold . . .”
 “Make Me the Channel of Your Peace . . .”
 “A nonreactive heart . . . (Part 2)”



Thin Places

Afterwords: “A non-reactive heart . . . (Part 2, One Reader’s Personal Story)”

Richard Rohr suggests [Page 7] that on our faith journeys many of us work out a balance between knowing and not knowing, between using words and concepts and having humility about them. The last four years provided opportunities to re-think and balance many points of view that had seemed natural and normal. The frequently heard assertion that **“You are entitled to your own opinions, but not to your own facts,”** became such a starting point for one. It seemed sound enough when it first began to be heard: facts are things “that are known or proven to be true,” they cannot be created by mere assertion, are not personal property, cannot be owned—but opinions *are* our own, and can be extremely personal, even unique.

Over time, however, the statement came to seem more problematic. More problematic because the word “entitled” suggested that we get to do whatever we want with our opinions . . . more problematic because our opinions—especially our unexamined assumptions and our fiercely held opinions—often affect how we act, and how we re-act, without our consciously realizing it . . . and more problematic because, too often, our opinions can tempt us to conflate opinions that differ from our own and the person who holds them.

Such thoughts weren’t new and didn’t imply that we ought to avoid forming opinions, or that all ideas are equal. As a remembered topic offered for debate at a high school forensics tournament years ago put it, **“The trouble with having an open mind is that your brains may fall out!”** Opinions *do* matter. Intelligence and careful thinking are *huge* gifts. And--perhaps especially in the first half of life, when we are exploring what the world is like and who we are and what we value—it is essential to make distinctions, between what seems right and wrong, important and incidental, true and untrue.

But, necessary and useful as opinions are, words read somewhere, **“My own judgmental attitude is the thing that most grieves the heart of God,”** resonated more and more strongly. And over time it seemed to become easier—despite the many lapses—to seek to be more fully present when talking with another, to listen to another’s experiences and opinions without silently matching them with one’s own, judging them, labeling them. A little easier to not be guided by opinions, to not need answers, to listen to what was going on beyond the words. A little easier,