Plans having been delayed, it was late November before three semi-trucks arrived at our tree farm to deliver over thirty-four tons of retaining wall blocks. The trucks dropped their loads and pulled away, leaving me, my wife, and our two teenagers to set 864 eighty-pound blocks in place—before the deepest cold, the heaviest snows, and the building crew arrived in less than six weeks.

When our family imagined building a wood shop with a guestroom attached, the dream did not include erecting a retaining wall ourselves, certainly not in the winter. Still, engineering discoveries, cost overages, and calendar shortages added up, so we set to the task. We’d only finished a half day’s work before we had to shovel the first snow off the worksite. Then, from Thanksgiving to New Year’s Day, we lifted and set those blocks in place one-by-one until they became a wall one hundred-fifty feet long and eight feet tall.

We followed the supplier’s instructions to the letter: compacted layers of geo-grid fabric, drainage rock, and backfilled soil. Layer-by-layer a protective perimeter for the building site was reaching upward. At one point, my daughter rightly said, “Dad, we’re not building a wall. We’re building a hill!” Push-by-push, often working under flood lights in ten-degree weather, we set the last top blocks just as a major storm was blowing in.

There’s a sacred kind of satisfaction that comes with throwing your shoulder into a dream with people you love. The wood shop and guestroom would encourage spiritual practices rooted in the natural world—contemplation, manual labor, and hospitality. Despite the challenges and discomforts, together we had created a wall and a story that would stand for generations.

Until the following spring thaw! As warming days brought frost up from the ground, unstable gaps kept growing between the layers of blocks. What could possibly have forced this much weight to buckle? We learned from professionals that it had likely been impossible for us to sufficiently compact the frozen soil. And then, as those chunks thawed and collapsed, the entire wall quietly settled away from its joints.
Those weeks I was beyond psychologically stunned and physically spent. I had done the best I possibly could to steward a dream, pressing hard with the resources I had available. Unable even to imagine any next steps, I just let the frost and my weariness keep thawing, sometimes doubting whether I’d ever trust my discernment muscles the same way I did before this project failed.

By summer, the building frame was up. and I had caught my breath enough to accept what had to be done and to enlist the help of family and friends. We pulled down every one of those blocks and hired a backhoe operator to dig out the hill and the remaining materials. We reset every block—this time filling in with rock, not soil—to reclaim the dream of building a sacred space.

As we worked—often in 90-degree temperatures—I meditated on the fact that this project had become more about my inner world than about any grand accomplishment or physical outcome. Best intentions will eventually meet limitations. Supremely humbling encounters can hold grace and mystery. And when it’s not working, begin again. I find this ongoing process of reflecting under the work to be much like the way of contemplative prayer. Sit-by-sit, I seek to sink below my daily experiences and surrender to solidarity with the wider world. In contemplation my struggles can be better seen as part of a much larger story. Day-by-day, I try to return to the task at hand with a sense of presence and giftedness that might bring healing. But because it takes me to the edge of my knowing and my capacities, the process is not without difficulty. As Matt Licata notes in A Healing Space: “The [contemplative] invitation is not into certainty, resolution, or even simplicity, but into the core of the contradictions, paradoxes, and complexities of the human soul.” Thank God I do not go alone.

“Block-by-block . . . Sit-by-sit . . . Issue-by-issue . . .” As we mark together the final issue of Thin Places, I am reminded of an observation made by John Philip Newell (and recorded in Thin Places) at a gathering at St. Jane House in north Minneapolis. “The Contemplative Community here,” he said, “is more tightly knit than anywhere I go.” Thin Places maintained a humble yet significant role in this connectedness, coming to us for twenty-five years. Issue-by-issue, Thin Places offered lead Meditations and Afterwords reflections, remembered Words and recent Books, and an array of upcoming Opportunities—events that have helped contemplatives come together in-person to pray, to learn, and to feel connected. Equally important, Thin Places seems to have also provided a virtual sense of connection for contemplatives. Over the years, the most frequent comment made by readers to the editors indicates gratitude for this: “I don’t get to many of the gatherings, but I love knowing that they are happening.”

Knowing well the importance of a strong foundation (for retaining walls and communities), I would like to add my heartfelt appreciation to that of many other readers: “Thank you, Thin Places, for helping shape our region’s contemplative community in such a trustworthy and enduring way.”

Samuel Rahberg is Director of the Graduate Certificate in Spiritual Direction, as well as Associate Director of Bridge-Builders for a Thriving Mission, at Saint John’s School of Theology and Seminary in Collegeville, MN. He is a spiritual director and retreat leader who experiences the Driftless Region of Southeast Minnesota as a thin place, so much so that

Remembered Words

The Thin Places Twentieth Anniversary Community Worship Service—In-the-Round in Westminster Hall, with torrential wind and rain outside, and with the Taizé Cross in the center and with Twelve Prayer Stations placed on the surrounding walls, each with an appropriate Work-of-Art and a brief passage from a spiritual master—was a powerful experience for many. Afterwards, a woman said, “I’ve been a reader for many years, but I can never calm my monkey mind. Tonight, the silence wasn’t long enough.”

These twelve Remembered-Words begin below:

“What we are asked to do is, not so much to speak about Christ, as to let him live in us . . . so that people may find him by feeling how he lives in us . . .”

Thomas Merton

“Grace is given not to lead us into another identity . . . but to reconnect us to the beauty of our deepest identity . . .”

John Philip Newell
Looking Back . . .

This issue of Thin Places . . . will be its last. Looking Back over its twenty-five-year journey, and Looking Ahead, it is intended as a reference that can be kept (on paper and electronically) as a means of staying in touch with the region’s thriving Contemplative Community.

From the beginning, Thin Places was envisioned as “a modest ecumenical newsletter, with a particular interest in the contemplative spiritual journey.” And so it seems to have been. Sent free to all who ask, its three thousand readers range from Mennonites and Quakers to Episcopalians and Catholics and include many clergy and religious.

But, gazing at a saved stack of completed issues, the thought occurs that it might also be called, A Thousand-Page Accidental History of the Region’s Contemplative Community over the Last Twenty-five Years And so it probably also is:

With a few exceptions, each issue’s Lead Meditation was written by a different person, including many leaders from the local Contemplative Community. From the early years, for example, leaders like the Rev. Dr. Tim Hart-Andersen, Senior Minister, and Mary Adams, head of the Spiritual Growth Committee at Westminster. Carol Weber, founding member of Minnesota Contemplative Outreach and long-time volunteer with Fr. Thomas Keating at Snowmass Monastery in Colorado. Dr. Jeannette Bakke from Christos Center for Spiritual Formation and the Rev. Matthew Linn from Sacred Ground. Mary Kaye Medinger and the Rev. Barbara Lund from Wisdom Ways, and Terry Shaughnessy from Men’s Ministry at Wisdom Ways and other spirituality centers. The Rev.


And, from further afield, Meditations by the Rev. Dr. Tilden Edwards, founder of the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, Brother John of Taizé, and a previously unpublished Meditation, “Prayer, The Way to a Transparent Life,” by Henri Nouwen.

Over two hundred churches, spirituality centers, and other organizations have offered several thousand Ongoing and One-Time Opportunities for people to come together for worship, a workshop or retreat, or a prayer group—like the long-time Centering Prayer groups at St. Olaf Catholic and Incarnation Lutheran Churches, led by Sr. Joan Tuberty and LeAnn Linder Scholer . . . and like the First Friday Taizé Prayer and the Taizé Evening Prayer at Sts. Luke and James Episcopal and Minnehaha United Methodist Churches, led by Larry Reynolds and the Rev. Becky Sechrist.


The Thin Places Logos

The Logo at the top of the first page of this issue—drawn by artist, Barbara Beshoar—is one of the nine she created to grace the great majority of the issues.

Grateful thanks to Barbara for these gifts from her gift.

“Waking up this morning, I smile. Twenty-four brand new hours are before me. I vow to live fully in each moment and to look at all beings with eyes of compassion . . . “

Thich Nhat Hanh

“What we take in by contemplation, that we pour out in love. What we plant in the soil of contemplation, that we shall reap in the harvest of action. . . . “

Meister Eckhart
There are significantly fewer Reading Opportunities sections than there are issues—when space was short, it seemed better to drop a book than to reduce the number of up-coming Opportunities. But many remain, written by classic, contemporary, and local authors. From early issues, books like The Celtic Soul Friend by Dr. Edward Sellner and The Critical Journey, Stages in the Life of Faith by Janet Hagberg. And the just published Receiving This Life, Practicing the Deepest Belonging, by the Rev. Kara Root, was written and ready for the Spring 2024 issue, when space ran out. (It’s well worth exploring.)

And finally, the Afterwords—back-page reflections on subjects like the deeply accurate insight, “Deus semper major . . . “ and “Psalms, our oldest examples of journaling” “Atonement, spelled At-One-Ment” and “Being There, the hermitage experience . . .”

Altogether, an accidental yet richly detailed history of a flourishing Contemplative Community.

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Many thanks for the kind emails and letters that have been received. As the Rev. Dr. Tim Hart-Andersen observed when the decision was first made, “The Thin Places journey began in hope and is ending in gratitude.” Amen.

For additional information or if you have questions, the Thin Places email address and phone will remain open for the next two years: thinplaces_us@msn.com and 612.866.8752.

In addition, issues from the final five years will remain available on the webpage www.westminstermpls.org/media-room/thin-places

Principal Partners, Looking Ahead

Although Thin Places is ending, the many groups and organizations that have been its Principal Partners over the years remain open and active. Here is some key information about each of them so that you may learn more about them and their up-coming Opportunities.

[You might wish to keep this information at hand, physically or electronically, for possible future use.]

ARC Retreat Community, Stanchfield, MN
For information about them and their up-coming Opportunities: retreats@arcretreat.org or 763.689.3540 or www.arcretreat.org.

The Benedictine Center, St. Paul’s Monastery
2675 Benet Road, St. Paul
For information about them and their up-coming Opportunities: info@benedictinecenter.org or 651.777.7251 or www.benedictinecenter.org.

The Center for Action and Contemplation
Albuquerque, NM
For information about up-coming opportunities or to be added to Fr. Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation mailing list: info@cacradicalgrace.org or 505.242.9588 or www.cacradicalgrace.org.

“The distance to the Beloved is only one step—Why not, then, take that step? . . . ”

Rumi

“This place where you are right now, God circled on a map for you . . . ”

Hafez
Christ the King Retreat Center, Buffalo, MN
For information about them and their up-coming Opportunities: christtheking@kingshouse.com or 763.682.1394 or www.kingshouse.com.

Christos Center for Spiritual Formation
  1212 Holly Drive, Lino Lakes, MN
For information about them and their up-coming Opportunities in the Twin Cities, Chicago area, and Online: info@christoscenter.org or 651.653.8207 or www.christoscenter.org.

Earth & Soul, with John Philip Newell
  Offices: Box #254, 2921 W. 38th Avenue
  Denver, CO  80211
For information about them and their up-coming Opportunities: info@earthandsoul.org or www.earthandsoul.org.

The Episcopal House of Prayer,
  14215 Fruit Farm Road, Collegeville, MN
and
  St. John the Evangelist, 60 N. Kent St., St Paul
For information about them and their up-coming Opportunities: houseprayer@csbsju.edu or 320.363.3293 or www.ehouseofprayer.org.

Flying Cloud Zen:
  A Contemplative Spiritual Practice Community
  at Aslan Institute,
  4141 Old Sibley Memorial Highway, Eagan
For information about them and their upcoming Opportunities: www.flyingcloudzen.org or bussho@flyingcloudzen.org.

Franciscan Spirituality Center
  920 Market Street, La Crosse  WI
For information about them and their up-coming Opportunities: fscenter@fsp.org or 608.791.5295 or www.fscenter.org.

Franciscan Retreats and Spirituality Center
  16385 St Francis Lane, Prior Lake, MN
For information about them and their up-coming Opportunities: secretary@franciscanretreats.net or 952-447-2182 or www.franciscanretreats.net.

Loyola Spirituality Center
  389 North Oxford Street, St. Paul
For information about them and their up-coming Opportunities: info@loyolaspiritualitycenter.org or 651.641.0008 or www.loyolaspiritualitycenter.org.

Minnesota Contemplative Outreach
  Co-coordinators:
    Adam Gordon, 612-719-2636
    John Keller 612-201-6625
For information about them and their up-coming Opportunities:
  minnesotacontemplativeoutreach@gmail.com or www.minnesotacontemplativeoutreach.org.

The Ministry Lab,
  United Theological Seminary
  767 Eustis Street, Suite 140, St. Paul

Minnesota’s own Taizé Cross

Brother Eric, for many years the principal artist at the Taizé Community in France, made two five-foot tall, wooden, painted Crosses. One of them has traditionally been used at their Friday Evening Prayer for “Praying Around the Cross.”

The second, made as a back-up, was never used. Due to a long friendship between Br. Eric and a retired Lutheran Pastor, the ELCA Bishop’s Office, Minneapolis Synod, and Thin Places were able to bring it to Minnesota in 2001. It is housed at Westminster Presbyterian, but—over the years—has been used in worship services at many churches (Methodist, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Catholic, Presbyterian) and Spirituality Centers throughout the region.

If you are interested in borrowing it for worship at your church or prayer group, contact the Rev. Dr. Meghan Gage-Finn for details at 612.322.3421 or MGage-Finn@wpc-mpls.org

“Here alone with you in the gathering darkness, it would be easier, Lord, if I could reach out and embrace you with the power of my mind. But only love can pierce the darkness in which alone you can be found . . . “

  from The Cloud of Unknowing

“Music needs the hollowness of the flute; Letters, the blankness of the page; Light, the void called a window; Holiness, the absence of the self . . . “

  Anthony De Mello
For information about them and their up-coming opportunities: ministrylab@unitedseminary.edu or 651.279.1677 or www.theministrylab.org.

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
1935 St. Clair Avenue, St. Paul
For information on this or other up-coming opportunities: communications@pilgrimstpaul.org or 651.699.6886 or www.pilgrimstpaul.org.

Sacred Ground Center for Spirituality
Carondelet Center, 1890 Randolph, St. Paul
For information about them and their up-coming opportunities: info@sacredgroundspirit.org or 651.696.2798 or www.sacredgroundspirit.org.

The Six Faiths Taizé Evening Prayer
St. Frances Cabrini Catholic Church, Prospect Park
United Methodist Church, Faith Mennonite Church, Compassion of Christ Catholic Community, Dignity/Twin Cities, Church of Gichtwaa Kateri
For information about them and their truly ecumenical Taizé Evening Prayers: chris@cabrinimn.org or 656.339.3023, ext. 115 or www.cabrinimn.org

Spirituality Center, Saint Benedict’s Monastery
104 Chapel Lane, St. Joseph, MN
For information about them and their up-coming opportunities: mholicky@csbsju.edu or eantony@csbsju.edu or 320-363-7112 or www.sbm.osb.org.

St. Scholastica Monastery
1001 Kenwood Avenue, Duluth
For information about them and their up-coming opportunities: retreat@duluthosb.org or 218.723.6699 or www.retreatduluth.org.

Westminster Presbyterian Church
1200 Marquette Avenue Minneapolis
For information about them and their up-coming opportunities: jteliczan@wpcmpls.org or 612.322.3421 or www.westminstermpls.org.

Westminster Town Hall Forum
1200 Marquette Avenue Minneapolis
For information about them and their up-coming speakers: info@westminsterforum.org or 612.322.3421 or www.westminsterforum.org.

Wisdom Ways Center for Spirituality
Carondelet Center, 1890 Randolph Avenue, St. Paul
For information about them and their up-coming opportunities: office@wisdomwayscenter.org or 651.696.2794 or www.wisdomwayscenter.org.

Wood & Water Retreats
For information about them and their up-coming opportunities: info@woodandwaterretreats.com or 320.428.0371 or www.woodandwaterretreats.com.

Reading Opportunities

_How to Be Compassionate: A Handbook for Creating Inner Peace and a Happier World_,
by His Holiness the Dalai Lama

On retreat, as the Dalai Lama entered and quietly took his seat

“In the silence, a bond of trust and openness for what was to come began to grow. 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 days are coming, says the Lord, when I shall send hunger upon the land, not hunger for food or thirst for water, but a hunger to hear the Word of God . . .”

_Amos 8:11_
Along the Way, all of us (at least from time to time) and some of us (more often) may be tempted to feel that our (or our denomination’s, or our faith tradition’s) spiritual path is the right or best one. And it certainly may be that our personal path is the best path for each of us. But most of us will probably acknowledge that every sincere spiritual path can be equally viable and consequential, . . . that we are all Children of God, . . . that we are all made in God’s image, . . . that the Beatitudes were not offered as being descriptive of only some of us.

Some of us may consider a “bleeding heart” to be a liability, but most of us probably do value and admire the personal quality of Compassion. . . . Compassion, literally, suffering-with, but enriched and filled out by its consequent senses of fellow feeling, and empathy, and understanding.

And some may place a value on exclusiveness (be it by maintaining “strict standards” or by liking to live in a literal or figurative gated community). But most of us know that viewing the world as made up of “us and them” often encourages conflict and/or a sense of superiority—while inclusiveness often fosters acceptance and an accompanying sense of inner peace.

This has been a roundabout introduction. But How to Be Compassionate: A Handbook for Creating Inner Peace and a Happier World is, at its core, about compassion leading to inclusiveness, and inclusiveness nurturing inner peace. And, permeating it, an underlying sense of separate spiritual paths leading to essentially similar spiritual outcomes, based in love.

The Dalai Lama’s insights, naturally, do reflect basic teachings from Tibetan Buddhism. But—even more—he draws upon the experiences of his long and active life (he will be eighty-nine on July 6th). He shares them in more general chapters on The Malleable Nature of the Mind, and We Are Our Own Troublemakers, and in more focused chapters on Compassion, the Road of Relationships, Compassion, the Road to Relief, and more.

A gentle spiritual leader’s understanding of inclusiveness . . . and inner peace . . . based in love.

“I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out until sundown—for going out, I found, was really . . . going in . . . “

John Muir

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart, and try to love the questions themselves . . . ”

Rainer Maria Rilke

The concept of Thin Places was based on the belief that there are at least two levels of reality: the world of our ordinary experience and the reality of God’s Being. It was also based on a belief that there are places or times or situations where the boundary between the world of our ordinary experiences and the world of the sacred may become porous, where the veil momentarily lifts, and we experience or behold the sacred.

All of us probably remember having experienced a Thin Place. It may have happened in some actual place, perhaps in some treasured spot in nature—as it was for Sigurd Olson and for many. Or perhaps during a moment in worship or through sacred music. Or perhaps this experience of briefly but intensely feeling God’s presence came through prayer or silence.

In a sermon at House of Hope Presbyterian Church last March, Marcus Borg declared categorically that “the creation of Thin Places . . . should be the purpose of much which we do as a Church.”

Believing this to be so, the Spiritual Growth Committee is launching this Periodic Sampler of “places” at Westminster, at other churches in the Downtown Coalition, and throughout the area.

If this first Sampler speaks to you, please accept it as an invitation to a journey. We all live most of the time in our own world or ordinary experience. But if we want to, we may seek to welcome Thin Places, where our hearts can be opened.

[September/October, 1999]

Concluding thought, after walking with Thin Places all these years:

The ultimate thin place is not in a specific place, or in a brief period of time, or in a special happening.

The ultimate thin place is the divine spark within each of us.
Afterwords: “Alpha and Omega . . .”

The beginning and the ending. Perhaps in them a measure of wholeness. Offered as the “Afterwords”—in this final issue of *Thin Places*—are the opening words from the first issue:

“The Singing Wilderness, Olson recalled his sunset climb to a great ridge called Robinson Peak. He remembered sitting there looking out over the lakes and rivers and rugged hills of the Quetico-Superior, watching the sunset, listening to the soft sound of the thrushes and his own breathing:

“The sun was trembling now on the edge of the ridge. It was alive, almost fluid and pulsing, and as I watched it sink I could feel the earth turning from it, actually feel its rotation. Overall there was the silence of the wilderness, that sense of oneness which comes only when there are no distracting sights or sounds, when we listen with inward ears and see with inward eyes, when we feel and are aware with our entire beings rather than our senses.

I thought as I sat there of the ancient admonition, “Be still and know that I am God,” and knew that without stillness there can be no knowing, without stepping back from the outside influences we cannot know what spirit means.”

Here on Robinson Peak, Sigurd Olson describes what Houston Smith and Marcus Borg—drawing from medieval Celtic Christianity—have called a “Thin Place” experience.