


Missives from a spiritual director

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During my years as a pastor, spiritual director, and instructor in spiritual formation and direction at Eastern Mennonite Seminary in Harrisonburg, Virginia, I have been invited to be present to others as the Spirit stirs



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their hearts and minds towards God's immanence. Their journeys have shaped my own experiences of God. Growing in awareness of God is a continuously unfolding process that is always true to God's steadfast love found in Christ Jesus. My own contemplative awareness has been shaped by responding to nuanced thought, noticing a word emerging from Scripture, reflecting on experiences that evoke meaning, and living in a community that shapes the moment. I do not claim to be a theologian, but I am a practitioner, one who is on a journey with others, following Jesus into the daily journey of discovering the love of

Christ that is present for all—as in the apostle Paul's prayer for the church in Ephesus (Ephesians 3:14–21). What follows are a few of the missives that I have sent over the past seven years to the spiritual director peer groups that I supervise.

June

Greetings, All:

With the summer equinox in reach, I trust all is well on your present journey.

My past several months have been a certain “fullness of time” and I feel very grateful for the many gifts received along the way—family, companionship of friends, a new emerging awareness of God, fullness of grief in the death of someone near, the painfulness of empathy for/with others—all with much grace, paired with the hope of God present in the midst of it all.

Yet it is emerging impasses that create dependence on God (with ego kicking and screaming the whole time)—a dependence beyond the self-assured stance of “I can do this God, you just bless it.”

Grateful for the prayers of “kindred spirits” like you all. You have been in my thoughts much, even more so since it seems a long time since we have been together.

September

Greetings, All:

Yesterday afternoon I found myself in awe of the wonder and beauty of the day. The memory of it is still full of texture and breath.

The scene: sitting in my parked car, all windows down, with the wind blowing a certain freshness of life, and my view across a very large open field of clover framed 180 degrees by the Blue Ridge Mountains. Clear sky, warm sun, and the fullness of solitude—mine to enjoy.

Yet I was not alone: thousands of clouded yellow butterflies in a dance that covered the field with motion. These inspiring beauties were animated by the wind, while fully engaging each other in their own rhythmic movement in fullness of life. They became a mesmerizing prayer of desired abandonment to enter the invitation to dance with others in the Spirit of Christ.

I now recognize that a day and a moment are paradoxes of time and the eternal coalescing. The late summer breeze was signaling a shift. The butterflies seemed to know it, and I sensed it somewhere within. It was the familiarity of a seasonal turning, the length of light becoming more of darkness, reminding me of the need to let go—not fully ready just yet to enter that particular movement of life eternal (seasons do change), but somehow wanting to be willing.

The moment has passed in real time, but the awareness lingers in remembering. Sheer Grace!

September

Greetings, All:

The journey of Autumn's approach has begun to enter my senses: cool night air, night sounds, shifts in community activities and in learning communities, and the shortening of daylight. The phrase "the living daylight" is capturing my imagination. This summer, a directee was reflecting on a reading that invited her to pay attention to the 'living daylight' within.

Of course, some of us remember this term in more negative contexts. Yet, when I looked for how the phrase was originally used—for its more positive meaning—I learned that it expresses something of one's eyes—or, more fully, of one's whole being: The living daylight is an archaic idiom in English believed to be early 18th century slang for somebody's eyes that subsequently figuratively referred to all vital senses. (Thanks, Google.)

OK, of late, I have been prayerfully reflecting on two scriptures—words of Jesus and a prayer of Paul—that engage my inner and outer "vital senses," "the living daylight" of my life. I recognize that in the present cultural context and in the lives of those we companion, there seems to be a slow eclipse of the usual ways of seeing faith, hope, and love, leaving behind a longing for vision and vitality.

The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! (Matthew 6:22–23 NIV). I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you. (Ephesians 1:17–18 NRSV)

Now I have an "archaic idiom" to companion my thoughts and to deepen my awareness of "faith, hope and love" in the daily. Looking forward to "seeing" where this goes.

November
Greetings, All:

Watching the free fall
 of once verdant leaves,
move through the bent light of an autumn sun,
 brilliant visual,
 fragrant in gathering.

Opens a deep lament of longing
 of the greater possibility,
 of tomorrow.

As prayers wander
 in free fall likeness.

In moments, grace

Trust you are enjoying the splendor of these days of transition in
the midst of the daily living.

January

Greetings, All:

As the days are now increasing in light, there is a perceptible nuanced awareness of a “shadow of turning.” That is an interesting term in and of itself, but the reality is experiential—mostly. One morning during the deep freeze, I reluctantly (but needfully) arose before dawn to relight the fireplace. I love to watch the fire flames start small, and continue to grow as the logs finally come to full flame.

Once the fire was in fullness, I noticed the light of dawn evenly fill the room and the landscape just outside the west window beside my fireplace. (Remember, I live in Hopkins Gap between Little North Mt. [due east] and North Mt. [due west].) As the sun began to rise in the east, the west mountain top began to glow brightly. In the stillness of the moment, liquid light began traveling down the mountainside. In the wonder of that slow but steady movement, I noticed birds and deer moving as if animated by the light.

Then I noticed the room become perceptibly darker, illuminated now just by the fireplace and the descending ‘reverse sunrise’ light in the west. The sun was now casting a dark shadow into the gap because of the barrier made by the east mountain. Time seemed to slow even more, until at last the gap was filled with the liquid light in the fullness of day.

Did I mention? Up to that moment, I seemed to be in a several-days “funk,” one that was not of the post-holiday-crash type. So much pain in the world, so much hate, so much division, so much killing of humans and creation—rooted in political and religious ideologies that blur the reality of the Holy who is present. So much . . . so much!

I continue to reflect on what shifted for me that day. Light is a wonderful metaphor, as is the dark. But maybe in the “so much” there is a steady “reverse sunrise” leading to a certain fullness and light-giving hope.

March
Greetings, All:

In my thoughts:

*“They say that I am crazy
because I refuse to be crazy
the way everyone else is crazy.”*

–Peter Maurin

April
Greetings, All:

*I had a comeback for the crazy quote in last month’s email,
from a colleague as crazy as me:*

*“The whole system of being human works
because we are not all crazy on the same day.”*

–Anne Lamott

My response: *“Whose turn is it?”*

August

Greetings, All:

I wonder if birds intentionally sing in harmony.

Over the course of the summer, I have intentionally paused from time to time just to listen. As I find myself a few years older, just engaging in this practice reminds me that there is a difference between “hard of listening” and “hard of hearing.” Even though some tones are no longer accessible to my hearing, sounds still abound in almost every environment—so that listening becomes a choice. In order to learn discerned hearing, I am practicing not just noticing sound but hearing beyond the physiological.

In a summer morning’s crowded field of multiple bird calls—I have counted more than fifteen on any given morning—intentionally hearing just one call against the variety of background sounds is not easy. There are a community of multiple voices in the ear. Similar voices echo back on the same theme but from a different location. The pattern of that one call fluctuates and varies. Yet, in time, my choice to listen deeply and singly becomes a way of intimacy, of hearing the deeper essence in the movement and seasons of life between listener and speaker. To borrow a phrase from John of the Cross, “Ah, the sheer grace.”

Yes, I have come to believe that birds do intentionally sing in a harmonic way (at least those in Hopkins Gap). They remind me of the God who listens and invites me into discerned participation—to intentionally listen and hear the one sound of grace beneath it all.

About the author

Kevin Clark is a spiritual director in Harrisonburg, Virginia.