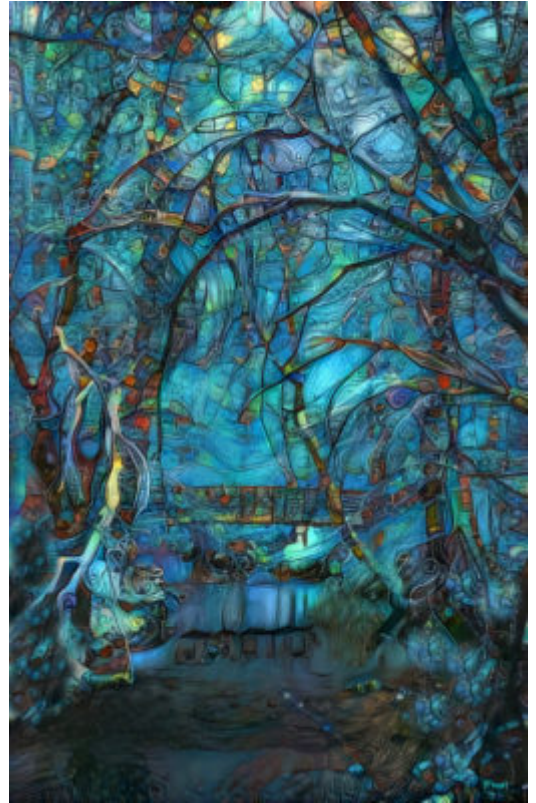


“Stay Awake” by Marjory Bankson

November 29, 2020



The First Sunday of Advent

On the surface, this text describes the end of time and a final glorious return of the Promised One. It's known as the Little Apocalypse, predicting Jesus as a triumphal figure – quite **opposite** the message which Jesus conveyed with his earthly life. Apparently, Jesus' followers couldn't quite give up their dream of a warrior king who would, in the end, save them from all distress.

But others see this text as an *inner journey*, where Christ comes through the turmoil of our lives, not in some external triumphant way. That's the path I want to explore with you today.

Periodically, a triumphal view of the “end times” grabs ahold of public imagination and people get ready for the “end of the world.” It happened in our lifetime when the calendar turned over to the year 2,000. Even now, some people claim the power to “read signs” and predict exactly when and how Jesus will come again, **but that’s not what the text says.** STAY AWAKE! Mark writes, because you do not know when or how the Promised One will come.

Today is also the first Sunday of Advent, spanning the four Sundays before Christmas. In more liturgical churches, Advent is associated with the waiting period of Mary’s pregnancy. It is seen as a time for retreat, solitude and introspection. It may also be a time of some fear and apprehension, because we never know the form and shape new birth will take.

Advent also marks the beginning of the new liturgical year, when the lectionary readings shift from Year A to Year B.

In the beginning, Seekers decided to follow the lectionary as a way of connecting with a wider movement for church unity among Catholics and Protestants. Although we periodically consider other ways of choosing scripture for our Sunday worship, we have continued this practice as an expression of belonging to the wider Christian community.

When I was growing up in Bellingham, Washington, we didn’t celebrate Advent because it would have done exactly that – linked us with Catholic, Episcopal and Lutheran churches. We were pleased to be different – more independent – more unique. Quite honestly, I never heard much about a desire for ecumenical church unity at our Presbyterian church.

The universe that I grew up in was very small – except for one thing. **My father loved the night sky.** I can remember the first time that he waked us up to go outside and see an eclipse of the moon. I was probably 8 years old. We watched (and shivered) as the shadow of the earth moved across the face of

the moon for probably 20 minutes – and then we went back to bed. It was the first time I realized that the earth belonged in a larger universe and could make a shadow because the sun was on the other side. My dad drew pictures of it for me the next day, and we played with making shadows.

Not long after, when the Christmas story began to show up in advertisements and we hung fragrant greens at the church, I associated that magical night of the lunar eclipse with the three wise men, traveling across the desert on their camels, guided by those same stars in the night sky. That experience set the biblical story firmly in the natural world for me.

When we arrived at Seekers, and found a church home here, we read Elizabeth O'Connor's book, *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*. The book gave me language for my spiritual hunger and a way to explore it. In *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*, we were encouraged to have a daily quiet time of reading scripture, pondering our place in God's story, and different kinds of prayer. As a self-employed potter, that seemed doable. And I had been keeping a journal for years, so that wasn't a problem.

My real stumbling block was silent retreat. I could not imagine what we would do with a whole weekend of silence, so I took six books to read – ones I had been meaning to get to. I was embarrassed when the retreat leader suggested that, if we'd brought books to read, that we lock them in our cars – in order to enter the silence empty-handed.

Enter the silence with empty hands? What did that even mean?

That night I was restless and wakeful, so I put on my winter bathrobe and walked outside – to be welcomed by a bright sky full of stars and just a sliver of moon. It was probably early December. Maybe even the beginning of Advent. It was not a Seekers retreat and I didn't know anyone else in attendance, so I was feeling kind of lost and lonely.

I remember walking down to the Lodge at Dayspring, and sitting in one of the rocking chairs for a long time, wondering what it was about silence that I didn't know and couldn't imagine.

In the darkness, I began to feel the connection between the night sky, jagged trees on the horizon, lights from the city, occasional sounds in the night, the life-giving blanket of air around the earth, and my own slow breathing. It felt amazing. Tender. Fragile even. The connections were like a spider-web. Ephemeral, but glistening in the starlight. As Kolya said last week, I felt like I was seeing with the "eyes of my heart."

What came to me that night was a simple thought: **everything's connected.**

Then a quote from Rumi floated up: "Somewhere beyond right and wrong, there is a garden. I'll meet you there." It felt like the Spirit speaking. You may recognize that night in the title of my book about Seekers, *Stalking the Spirit*.__It was that important.

What began to dawn on me that weekend in the silence was something I didn't even know I was doing, and that was making personal judgments about everything. In fact, that's what my education had taught me to do: Separate. Categorize. Compare. Contrast. Critique. Ask questions. Form opinions. Defend them if necessary. And I was completely unconscious about doing that all the time. Basically, I realized that I was operating from a platform of either-or, like or dislike, with a good measure of public service in the mix. **AND IT WAS KEEPING MY WORLD TOO SMALL.**

Although I didn't know much about the garden of non-judgment that was out beyond right and wrong, it was something I had touched – and could explore. Now I would say that it's what mystics like Cynthia Borgeault call "**non-dualistic thinking,**" – **a unitive consciousness – the essence of love – the power of attraction.**

STAY AWAKE Mark says. KEEP WATCH.

After that experience on silent retreat, Advent began to take on new meaning – especially in this community. I practiced silence during Advent and Lent. I left the radio off in our car and at home. I practiced listening intentionally and I read Elizabeth O'Connor's other books: Eighth Day of Creation, Our Many Selves and Search for Silence. All of them urged me to STAY AWAKE, to notice change, and practice, practice, practice.

In my mission group, I began to notice my feelings about other members of the group – and examine what they could reveal about my own defensive behaviors. I asked myself “Why does that bother me so much?”

That single question became a key to moving beyond judgments because it revealed my own unconscious judgments. In my written spiritual reports, I made notes about connections instead of reciting a list of activities. And I found my judgments softening, although they didn't disappear. I began to understand that having a common task could help us stay together and learn how to love one another even if we didn't naturally like each other. After years of doing good for others, I could feel myself beginning to grow spiritually.

I began to understand what entering silence with empty hands could mean.

Now, in retrospect, I see that the journey inward is not really solitary and self-centered at all. Instead, the terrain is as vast as the night sky. It's full of connections and wonder, of surprise and healing. It's also tinged with sadness and loss as I let myself FEEL the pain of others and the pain I have caused because I was simply unaware, preoccupied with my own version of reality.

This year, I have spent considerable time with a small book of

reflections by Julian of Norwich, a 14th century woman who would probably have been burned at the stake if her writings had been circulated in her lifetime. She spent 40 years reflecting on a series of visions that she had on what she thought was her deathbed when the bubonic plague swept through England, killing a third to a half of the population.

You probably know her famous saying: "All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." It's being widely circulated on cards and Facebook postings during our own pandemic, as a needed word of reassurance. Most people have no idea that it points to a unitive experience of God.

Until now, I was not able to understand how she could believe "All will be well" in the face of such disastrous circumstances. But Julian was a Medieval mystic, acquainted with that field of interconnectedness beyond right and wrong which she recognized as the Trinity, alive and present with us and in us and all around us in creation. For Julian, there was no condemnation, no final judgment, and no separating sheep from goats. It was that field of awareness which led her to proclaim "All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

So let this be my invitation to you: STAY AWAKE! Keep your eyes open. Enter the gates of silence with empty hands, and let this Advent season be a time to trust in the slow work love. Amen.