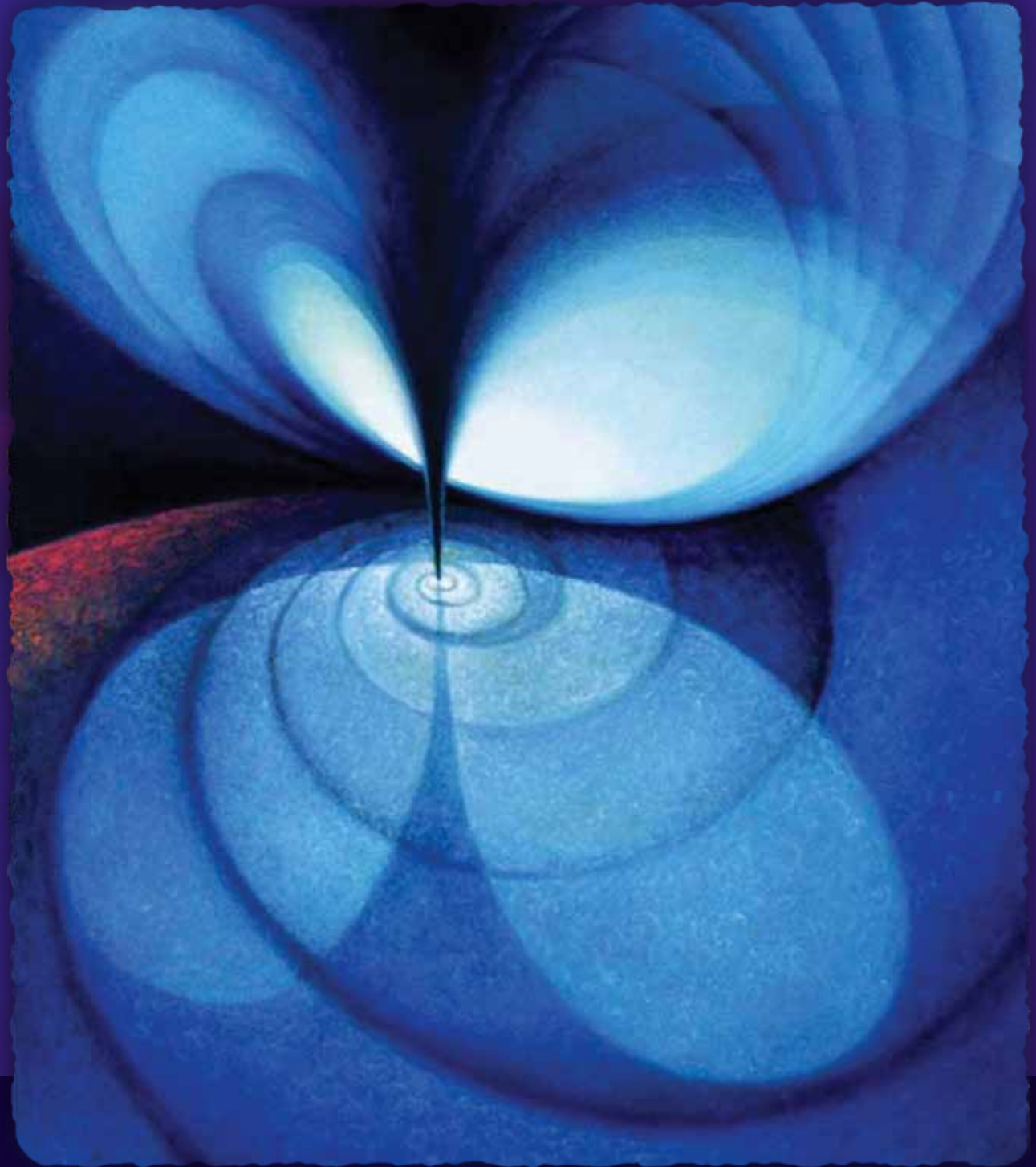


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ARTICLES

- Dreamwork: Four Techniques for Spiritual Direction
Lisa Gonzales-Barnes 7
- Inhabiting Our Interfaith Reality:
Spiritual Direction in an Inter-Religious Age
James M. Hembree 21
- Spiritual Guidance and Physical Disability
Nancy Jill Hale 28
- Benedictine Guidelines for Spiritual Direction
Michael W. Johnston 36
- Being Contemplative in a Digital World
Kathleen Bryant, RSC 44
- Singing Meditation: A Centering Practice of Renewal
Liz Hill 54

FEATURES

- Focus** 3
- Readers Respond** 4
- About Our Authors** 6
- About Our Poets and Artists** 60
- Reviews** 61
- Poetry**
- Let Me Now
Deirdre Buckingham 20
- Visions in Jet Lag
Breindel Lieba Kasber 35
- Hovering
Marcia Wakeland 49
- Falling Leaves (at Galilee): Relinquishment
John Pollard 59
- Reflection**
- A Pilgrimage on One Foot:
Journeying from Brokenness to Balance
Michele Tamaren 15



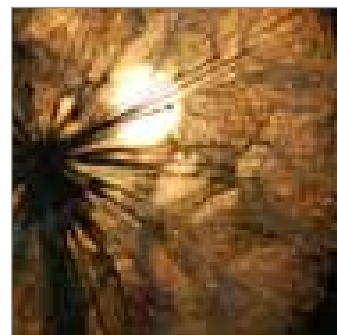
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31



39



46



A Pilgrimage on One Foot: Journeying from Brokenness to Balance

Michele Tamaren

“Have you lost your mind yet? Is it like being in prison? What do you do all day?” For months, these questions and many more preceded nearly every conversation during my winter confinement with a shattered ankle. As a spiritual director I questioned not my sanity but Spirit. “Where were you, God? Where are you? Where will I find you?”

My journey began on a late autumn morning, not with a single step, but with a flight off the toilet. Three days of flu, fever, loss of appetite, and dehydration had weakened me, and sitting in my bathroom, bare feet on cold ceramic tile, I lost consciousness. My body crumpled and landed in a heap atop my twisted left foot. When I revived and tried to stand, my ankle snapped and touched ground. Three broken bones severed my connection of foot to leg, limb to earth, self to balance.

Two weeks in the hospital fighting the flu was followed by three hours of surgery. A permanent six-inch plate, seven screws, and two pins were inserted to reconstruct my ankle. Additional hospitalization, a cast from toe to knee, and a diagnosis of bone loss prompted severe warnings. “Don’t,” cautioned doctors, nurses, and therapists, “put any weight on your left foot until the bones heal if you want to walk again!”

“How will I get to the bathroom? How will I climb the stairs?” I asked.

“We’ll get you a walker so you can hop to the bathroom on your right foot, but no stairs!”

“My home has twenty-four steps,” my voice quivered. “We live in a second- and third-floor townhouse.”

“Well, that’s not going to work. Given the severity of the break it may be months before you can bear weight, and for many more weeks after that it’s only a gentle touch down. You can’t safely manage stairs.”

My husband and I had to find temporary housing where I wouldn’t have to climb, some place where I could hop from bed to chair to sofa. We rented a tiny, dim, first-floor unit in our condo complex that had a hall, kitchen

space, and bathroom just wide enough for my walker. My connection to home and my active life were broken as well. Everything stopped.

I was lifted into the apartment on Thanksgiving eve. My heart sank. Our own home overlooked Marblehead Harbor and a historic lighthouse that blazed a steady emerald beam from dusk till sunrise. I looked for light through the glass slider in the narrow room where I would spend countless days, and saw only darkness.

In the morning after a fitful sleep, I looked out again, yearning for the waves that whisper sacred secrets from beneath our glass-walled bedroom. No breath-filled murmurs of ocean breezes, no lapping waters, no soaring, swooping gulls against endless blue ... just a sea of grey: grey buildings, grey pavement, grey sky. Huddled in my winter womb, shadows blanketed me.

How, I wondered, did night descend so suddenly, cut so deeply? I was safely seated in my own home when twilight tiptoed in to push me off my path. Ironically, only weeks before I had climbed slippery, rocky heights on a grueling pilgrimage on the wild Isle of Iona in Scotland and hiked over rough beauty in Ireland.

Five sister spiritual directors, each a different faith, traveled with two gentle guides to the tiny island jewel that is Iona. Awash in God’s sparkling palette, surrounded by azure sea, Iona is a land of white doves and double rainbows. The isle was described by the nineteenth-century Scottish writer Fiona McLeod:

To tell the story of Iona is to go back to God, and to end in God ... an Iona ... that is more than a place rainbow-lit with the seven desires of the world, the Iona that, if we will it so, is a mirror of your heart and of mine.

One of the sages who led our trip spoke of this journey as an “initiation,” spiritual preparation for our unfolding. The twentieth-century mythologist Joseph Campbell described *initiation* as the bridge in the Hero’s Journey between departure and return, the phase in which the pilgrim wrestles with the dark unknown. Ultimately the seeker, having faced daunting trials, transforms and is



“York Street Dam Mural”— Patrick McCully

blessed with expanded consciousness and new skills: gifts with which to return and craft an illuminated life to help repair the world.

On the ancient Scottish Island of Staffa, the seven of us ascended a circular path of slick, uneven rock more than six stories above the crashing sea. At the summit we entered the basalt-columned cathedral, Fingal’s Cave. Nature carved this cavern as a reddish brown birth canal, 230 feet in length. Rushing primal waters thundered through the channel roiling beneath us. In Gaelic this inter-space is known as the “melodious cave.” Its fierce energy and phenomenal beauty inspired Felix Mendelssohn to compose the *Hebrides Overture* that echoes with the roar of creation. I felt present at the birth of the world, or my own.

The following day on Iona, under threatening skies, we climbed the rugged mount of Dun-I capped by a cairn centuries old. There pilgrims had piled rocks still resonating fervent prayers and cries. “Listen,” urged our guide, as he gazed out to sea. “Listen for what is yours.”

Close to the peak we stood at St. Brigid’s heart-shaped well, looked up into milky heavens and down upon verdant hills dotted with grazing sheep. At this Fountain of Eternal Youth, each in turn kneeled and cupped her hands

to lift the holy waters to her face. My body trembled as I heard rise within me, “*One with the One.*”

Wet, jagged crags, overgrown bogs thick with shoulder-high grasses and invisible sink holes, and rushing streams initiated us into the ways of the Celtic pilgrim. Our prayers in Greek, Gaelic, Hebrew, and English flew to God on crystal wings and lifted us as we lifted ourselves and our sister travelers from slips and falls. Mercifully, the seven of us returned home with hearts wide open, bodies strong and unscathed.

Departure

So where were you, God, when I began an unplanned pilgrimage: this time a journey of stillness, of silence, of endless grey?

Each morning my eyes swept across the parking lot, sidewalk, and buildings where nothing moved. Overlooking this static vista, on the other side of the glass slider, stood a wrought-iron deck set covered in frost. Chilled mist blown back from the ocean merged with the metallic dome of late-autumn sky. Only the occasional call of a mourning dove sliced through the fog.

In early December, one month after my fall, sitting still, still sitting, I noticed a streak of greyish brown reaching



from earth toward sky. A bare-boned, one-legged tree rose from the frozen ground. Its twenty-foot trunk, solid, steady, supported wing-like arms extended in graceful waves. Slender growths on the uppermost boughs shot skyward, stretching beyond the third-story rooftop. Light danced on those slim branches and the breezes played through their fingers. Cradled in the upper reaches of this wooden web was a hawk's nest, larger and sturdier than any I'd seen.

The tree and I, dormant, dull, stripped bare, became companions. Through the mist we whispered wordless secrets. Over the weeks I confided my confusion and constriction to my single-footed friend.

"Why," I asked, "am I in a home that is not mine, in a body I don't recognize? This one can't walk for miles, swim laps, or balance in yogic tree pose. It just sits or lies or hops."

"Who am I," I queried, "now that I have neither the mobility nor energy to visit elders or mentor youth, give or attend workshops, travel or teach?" Along with my atrophying muscles, my enthusiasm for writing and spiritual direction withered as well.

"Where is the life I lived, the joy I tasted, the sap that bubbled up and over? And where is God?"

Initiation

Branches beckoned and I heard across the grey divide, "Look at me. Look at me. I seem lifeless, but I'm not! I'm just resting a bit. There is so much moving inside, but no one sees, no one looks. Often even I'm not aware, but this spring when you come to visit you'll understand. You'll know who I am." Then my new friend revealed a bit of herself: "My name is Eartha."

On New Year's Day, nearly two months after my fall, Eartha invited me to a command performance where she was both stage and conductor. Early, fat red-breasted robins chirped in the wind section while doves and blue jays warbled distinct melodies from different boughs. Cardinals and finches joined in the avian chorus, and a crow came to poke around in the hawk's box seat. Red, blue, grey, and black sang in harmony as Eartha waved her baton.

Something stirred and lifted me out of the darkened corner. I reached for my walker and hopped to the slider for a better view. The orchestra began to play tag through Eartha's limbs. Awestruck, I stared and slid into

a yellow, tufted chair, wrapping my knitted shawl around me. Light glinted off the patio table as its frozen surface shimmered and cracked. Silver streaks skated along the crevices. I felt the sun.

My eyes closed and behind the lids shone veins of gold. Faintly colored orbs melted into liquid light. I inhaled deeply, breath filling belly. Slowly air escaped through pursed lips and sparks spiraled through my body: violet and cobalt, aqua and green, lemon and coral and crimson creating a symphony of their own.

Embraced by the wings of the chair, I settled into my morning meditation chanting "Modeh Ani," the gratitude prayer uttered by Jews upon arising. Waves of appreciation flowed from crown to toes as a fresh sweetness tantalized me. Words fell away.

Kaleidoscopic images popped in the stillness, backlit by tones, scents, flavors, and textures. Steaming bowls of soup, homemade casseroles, savory breads, and fresh-baked fruit pies were carried in the open hands of family, and of friends who became family. The dishes were served with appetizers of hugs and laughter. I felt the warm hands and heart of one soul sister as she gently wrapped my cast in plastic and lifted me into the shower even before the visiting nurses began their visits. Late the previous night another companion delivered the adaptive chair that would hold me securely in the slippery tub. On my private screen flashed scenes of people coming singly, in pairs, in groups—week after week after week, lovingly cleaning and cooking, offering books to amuse and transport me, sharing gifts of reiki and music and storytelling, and conducting Jewish and Sufi and interfaith healing services.

I pictured my husband vacuuming and shopping, washing clothes and dishes and floors, serving my food, selecting my outfits and hanging them back up at the end of the day. I saw my grown son get down on the floor to put on my one shoe and tie it just as he had seen me do for my parents.

Yet, how strangely disturbing this was for me. I had always been the helper, the nurturer, the caretaker for my husband, my child, my special-needs students, my aging parents, my friends who died far too young. My sudden dependence and countless needs were as painful for me as my splintered ankle.

Each evening my brother would call from out of state to ask, "Who came to help you today? Who visited? Who

*Branches beckoned and I heard
across the grey divide,
“Look at me. Look at me. I seem lifeless, but I’m not!
I’m just resting a bit.”*

surprised you?”

I’d answer him then sigh, “It feels awful to just sit while others do for me.”

One night he confronted me, “Michele, how did you feel when you helped our family and your friends who needed you?”

I hesitated, “Well, I felt pleased and grateful that I could help.”

“So,” he retorted, “don’t you think it’s time for you to learn to receive and allow others the joy of serving you?”

After a long pause I grudgingly admitted, “You may have a point.” I began to wonder if those loving faces might perhaps be a glimpse of God.

In the lengthy stretches of silence and solitude new connections grew. I wandered inward and peeked at the spark in the center of my being. It flickered at first and I looked away. Day after day I stepped a bit closer until I could sit with my Self. The flame began to spring and sway. At its center was indigo, wrapped in orange, encased in a golden glow. The heart of my soul, beyond time or circumstance, danced in the darkness.

I began to dissolve into the moments: floating on tiny rainbows diffused through a hanging crystal; rolling blackberries on my inquisitive tongue, circling their smooth bumps then biting into firm flesh popping with a squirt of tartness. I slipped inside the chocolate eyes of my precious friend as she chopped vegetables and washed the counters. And how I delighted when I made my bed while lying in it. Divine.

For decades I had searched for wisdom and awareness

and enlightenment through workshops, women’s circles, and spiritual travel. I learned the value of meditation and contemplation and letting go. But in that dreary, confined space, away from breezes and sage and sun, I tasted oneness.

Return

It was mid-February, more than three months after crushing my ankle, when I returned home. In stages I had been released from wheelchair and walker, cast and boot, crutch and cane and was learning to walk again. My steps were uneven, tentative, draining: more a waddle than a walk. Throbbing and cramping shortened my once long and easy stride, yet I was free: free to shower and soap my own skin, make my bed and fluff my pillow, pick up a scrap of paper from the floor, all while balancing on two feet.

Outpatient physical therapy began the first week of March, and during my evaluation I glimpsed my latest X-ray. I saw the metal plate and long screws and pins beneath my still swollen and scarred ankle that remained stiff above my bruised left foot. The therapist tried to move my heel, but it would not give. She put her hands on her hips, looked me in the eye and announced, “We’ve got a lot of work to do!”

Twice a week I limped into the clinic and K.C. would shout at me, “Walk normal, pull back those shoulders, suck in your stomach, bend those knees, move those hips ... heel, toe, heel, toe!” Over the months, in the pool, on the mat, and on the floor I was coached, “March ...



I had always been the helper, the nurturer, the caretaker for my husband, my child, my special-needs students, my aging parents, my friends who died far too young. My sudden dependence and countless needs were as painful for me as my splintered ankle.

forward, backward, sideways, faster, harder ... now kick, lift, hop, jump, stretch, pump, pedal, faster, harder.” Then up on the table K.C. twisted and pulled and pushed my foot with all of her force and weight to get movement in the frozen joints and break down the scar tissue. At home I exercised, iced, and elevated my ankle, and with each step I heard, “Walk normal!”

After five months in therapy, in mid-July, the words I longed to hear were finally spoken.

“Congratulations, Michele, You’ve done it. You’re being discharged!” K.C. continued, “When I first read your history and saw the X-ray, my heart sank. I knew that more than 90 percent of people with severe triple fractures of the ankle never fully recover. Many continue to need assistance in walking. Their ankles swell and often there is poor circulation so the foot remains cold, numb, and discolored. This is true for people of all ages and physical conditions, including athletes. Michele, how did this miracle happen?”

So how *did* this miracle happen? Was it the exceptional medical care, endless exercise, the prayerful petitions, the meditation and contemplation, the silence and the solitude, the alternative therapies, good fortune, or the love and the laughter that surrounded me? Or was it something far more mysterious? Might it have been that all of these gifts had opened me to receive God’s healing presence: a presence that is forever with us?

What a journey this had been. Nine months since life as I knew it was blown apart. It wasn’t just my ankle that was re-created. As I stepped back into my life, so much

had changed. I had changed. I was different: more aware, appreciative, amazed. So much of what I had believed to be me—my work, my home, my physical well-being—was stripped away for a long, dark time. I was initiated into the secrets of my soul, all that didn’t dissolve as I disintegrated in my cocoon.

Yes, that inner-space was grey, and my ankle broken, but twirling, colored sparks led me in ecstatic dance as my body remained still. In the silence I heard my own heart beat and the heartbeat of the dove. A single tree whispered, and I listened.

Before my chrysalis time I believed that I was grateful. But after I emerged from my constriction, appreciation freed itself from my mind and coursed down through my entire being. I understood William Blake when he said, “Gratitude is heaven itself.” The miracle was greater than my newly working ankle: it was the miracle of my life and the miracles in the moments of my life. It was the miracle of all life.

Pain, I learned, can cut a path through the fog. It prunes the overgrowth that obliterates our sight and tangles us in what is no longer ours. When the cocoon breaks open we return to our essential nature, to the light within, our divine flame filled with the blessings that are uniquely ours. These are the soul gifts that we are to take back and share to help heal the world. Here is our connection to God, to self, to others. Here is our true joy.

In late spring I began to walk outside. When were the colors this electric, the blooms so juicy, the briny breeze as sweet? When had I noticed the leafy shadows of the



great oak dancing on the grey walkway? When was each step a prayer?

One steamy, summer afternoon at a seaside park I was caught unprepared by a storm. Unable to sprint home, I walked to the water's edge and turned my face to the shower, melting into the rain. Around me thirsty flowers drank deeply, mallards and drakes and ducklings splashed in the harbor, the sky rumbled and the ocean roared. I heard the echo of Iona, "*One with the One.*"

In the distance a flash telegraphed my chrysalis questions: "Where were you, God? Where are you? Where will I find you?"

Silence ... Then thunder boomed, "*I am in the gold and in the grey.*"

As my connections strengthened—bone to bone, head to heart, past to present, and myself to the One—I recalled Eartha's invitation. "Come visit me when you are able and you'll see who I am." I strode up the hill, rounded the corner and gasped: before me stood a stately maple crowned by a lush green canopy. My fingers caressed her grey-brown bark and Eartha whispered, "Ah, you've returned. Come and sit awhile."

In Eartha's shade, nestled against her shingled trunk, I gazed up through her fullness and listened to the universal symphony. I thanked this gentle presence for her spiritual companionship when I most needed to breathe the breath of God. Together we remembered and blessed our still season, as it had blessed us.

EARTHA

Eartha,
 So alive in her stillness,
 So sure in her single footedness,
 Expansive in her rootedness,
 Grounded and airy,
 Captive and free.
 Eartha,
 Leafless and lacy,
 At home and a home for robins, hawks, blue jays and doves,
 Breathing out and breathing in,
 Waving and winking to heaven.
 Bountiful Eartha,
 Balanced Eartha,
 Blessed Eartha,
 B'Earth ... AH. ■

Let Me Now

Let me now
 learn more
 gracefully

Less harshly
 yet ever poignantly

Let me now love
 less bitterly
 more mutually
 sweet and softly

Let me rest in the
 Pink bed
 where ever I go

Danger and Bitterness
 far from my grasp

Let me flower
 Gingerly
 In the arms of
 a patient
 gardener

Steady and Sacred

Whose hands have known
 The Dirt from
 Where we all have
 tread and
 Whose heart is filled
 With the fragrant
 Scent of the Lord's
 Infinite Garden ■

Deirdre Buckingham