

**“INSPIRITED PIONEERS: PROBING THE FRONTIERS OF  
CONTEMPLATIVE AWARENESS”**

SHALEM SOCIETY FOR CONTEMPLATIVE LEADERSHIP ANNUAL  
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Artwork by Monica Armstrong, SGP S'07, Philadelphia, PA; [www.MonicaArmstrong.com](http://www.MonicaArmstrong.com)

Let's take several minutes now to deepen the place from which we listen. First, do whatever you need to do with your body to help it be an alert receptor, opening any tight, closed-off places....

Now take a slow, full breath, pause, and with the monotoned sound of "ah", slowly exhale....Let's repeat that breathing and sounding together three more times....

Let go whatever remains of the scattered surface of your mind and sink to your poised spiritual heart. Let that deepening happen in whatever way is most natural for you now....

In our open spiritual heart we live deeper than labels like self, other, and God can convey. There we can live confidently in the flow of *what is*; there we can trust and commune with the creative Love who enables the flow and shines in it. There in our open-hearted attentiveness we can listen not so much to my and others' words as to what is sparked in us *through* the words. In our heart we are listening from a place of pregnant spaciousness, waiting for something to be shaped in us that is deeper than our ego's

shaping. In doing so, some astrophysicists might say that we are joining the way all forms in the universe open to the new: by resting in a fertile emptiness. From there, all being arises.

I'm going to share a little of my own sense of contemplative frontiers now, then we'll see what that clicks off in you. My full talk will be on the Society website. In the time constraints we have here, I'll give only a synopsis of what you'll find there. If I'm moved to some spontaneous comments, you may hear some things this morning that you won't find in the printed version.

What frontiers are being created in us by our contemplative awareness? What is our contemplative awareness doing to the way we see God, self, and world? What is it doing to the way we act as spiritual leaders?

Before mentioning a few specific frontiers, let me remind you of what I mean when I use the phrase, "contemplative awareness." I'm talking about the way we are directly present to deep reality in the moment, the way we are immediately present in our intuitive spiritual heart before our interpretive mind clicks in. This way, in its graced fullness, is empty of ego conditioning and grasping, and of everything else that might be a barrier to the larger gracious Presence. Enabled contemplative awareness frees us for intimate, innocent presence to what is, just as it is. We can bring an underlying trust of divine presence into this awareness, and we can let the showings of that gracious Presence affect our daily lives. In other words, I'm talking about all we can do to set the table, sit with empty stomachs, and eat whatever energizing divine food is set before us. Then we let that personally digested fresh Spirit-energy shape the way we live our lives in the world.

You and I could say so much more about contemplative awareness and the orientation it gives us in life, but hopefully something of what I've said resonates with you enough that you can recognize yourself to be within the same ball park of understanding.

We're walking together on a contemplative journey that never ceases to reveal fresh sights around every bend, however hazy they may be to our consciousness. How else could it be for living beings interacting with a living world and divine creative Spirit? Each fresh sight puts us on a frontier, and challenges us to settle that frontier in a discerning way. Hopefully we can approach the frontiers less from a stance of trepidation than from a stance that's full of anticipation for the adventure of collaboration with Spirit's mysterious loving movements.

## THE EARTH FRONTIER

Now let me briefly sketch three interrelated frontiers of contemplative awareness that I think we share. The way we "settle" these frontiers has enormous implications for human well-being and spiritual leadership. Since they are frontiers and not settled areas

of understanding, I can't tell you how to settle them. I can only point out their reality and give a few beginning hunches about their settlement.

The first I will call the *Earth frontier* (I will be capitalizing "Earth" as a way of respecting its living, Spirit-filled nature as opposed to being just "dirt", "earth"). In a new book I'm writing on contemplative deepening I'm including a little section on our community with the Earth and our larger home in the cosmos (I'm keeping a small "c" for "cosmos" just to give weight to what we know best: the Earth, but it could just as well be capitalized, too). As part of my own background for writing that section I've read some theologically and scientifically informed writings about the largest family story we share as human beings, the story of the cosmos, the Earth, and their evolution.<sup>1</sup> As I was doing that reading I was struck by its connection with what I think is shown across traditions in deep mystical awareness, i.e., a sense of the inclusive intimacy and dynamism of creation. For those mystics I know the cosmos and Earth appear not as an accidental, mechanistic physical world, but as a mysteriously living and purposeful one.

We can feel the physical universe as the "body," if you will, of the mysteriously guiding Spirit. That divine Spirit-energy is experienced as creative loving, even as part of us resists the way that love unfolds. We don't like the universal process of dying as necessary to new life. Part of us would much prefer a seamless immortality. We would prefer to be an exception to what the rest of the universe goes through. Yet we see the growing evidence that we are part of an evolving symbiotic universe. We're a distinctive part of an interdependent cosmic community, which includes a mutually sacrificial process of giving and receiving life. Great mystics from the Psalmists on call us to see God's glory in this living universe and to trust its way of evolving, however mysterious it may be to us.

Practically speaking the Earth is as much of the cosmos as most of us intimately identify with day by day. I say that even though we still see in the world many carry-overs of ancient cosmological stories and practices from times when human societies did have a strong, personal, daily sense of interaction with the cosmos. Even our identification with the Earth isn't easy to the extent that we've been conditioned to see humans as independent of the rest of earthly nature, with the right to treat nature solely as a human resource, a commodity to control, buy, sell and consume as we like. We've had little help with fully realizing the living integrity and kinship of life on earth, nor have we had much help until recently with seeing the major consequences of our destruction of the balance of nature that sustains us. The Genesis story that says humans are given dominion over other creatures has been warped from the sense of our being interdependent with and responsible for them to our freedom to use them with no respect for the Spirit's life in them. Perhaps some children's stories have helped us with that sense of identification when they bring nature to life through personifying animals and trees, but then we often

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Evolutionary Faith: Rediscovering God in our Great Story* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), which includes a large bibliography, and Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story* ((San Francisco, Harper, 1992).

leave that behind as we are exposed to the impersonal, analytical way that science usually deals with the Earth.

The Earth as a living subset of the cosmos becomes a vital *contemplative frontier* as we become more vividly aware in our time of the price we are paying for the way our dominant culture is relating to the Earth. Every time we deeply lean back into direct contemplative awareness, we can find a different kind of relationship. We find ourselves inside the Earth's living radiance. There we are touched by beauty, mystery, mutual belonging, mutual gifting, and a Spirit-radiance delicately animating the whole. Such contemplative awareness evokes love for the Earth as family, even as we may like or understand some family members more than others. Christians could extend Jesus' exhortation to see him in needy people by seeing his Spirit calling us also to see and respond to him in ravaged forests, hills, seas, skies, and animal species. The Earth is sick, and we are the stewards and doctors of the Earth needing to care for this relative. Indeed it's such a close relative that if it dies, we die.

In contemplative awareness we find ourselves at home beyond the alienating dualisms that both culture and religion shape in our minds, dualisms such as God, self, other, and nature that over-separate and alienate these dimensions of reality from one another. Contemplative awareness, for example, can show us divine presence not as a distant, all-powerful, demanding monarch in the sky, but as a presence more like a refreshing breath that opens us to the radiant home of Love, a home that includes all that is. In that home we find ourselves free to shed our protective and deceptive clothing and reveal our shared blessed nature.

Such delicate contemplative awareness seeps into our lives and leadership, bringing a first-hand sense of our intimate kinship with nature and its divine Breath into the world we touch. That kinship leads us to want to care for the Earth as it cares for us, and to appreciate the ways it reveals Spirit's presence. Our contemplative awareness can draw us away from a narrow anthropocentric sense of God and creation that has been so strong in most of our Biblical and technological traditions. Contemplative awareness can draw us toward the mutual belonging that *is*, toward the dynamic wholeness of life in God, in which we have a special but not central place. In its ecstatic dimension it can also help us sense the earth (and indeed the cosmos) as a community of exaltation and joy in being, as Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry put it. They use the wonderful example of a flock of larks, which in old English is called an "exhaltation" of larks, an exhaltation of their soaring flight and songs.

Such gifts of contemplative awareness that show us first-hand something of the Spirit-soaked Earth and cosmos are desperately needed in the world today, especially as the Earth has become so threatened by its human mis-use. How each of us is called to share these gifts in the concrete situations of our lives and leadership is our personal contemplative Earth frontier. Maybe we can be helpful to one another in bringing forward that calling.

(Show painting by Shalem Spiritual Guidance Program graduate Monica Armstrong: here is a powerful expression of the intimate relationship of human beings and the rest of the Earth. Her website of paintings is [www.MonicaArmstrong.com](http://www.MonicaArmstrong.com)).

Let me pause a minute before moving to another frontier, and give you an opportunity to notice how your own contemplative awareness has affected your relation and calling to the Earth.

## THE MIND FRONTIER

The second contemplative frontier I'll simply call *the mind*. Our mind is a universe in itself, or we could say a hologram of the universe and its creative divine Spirit. Its physical carrier, the brain, like the rest of the body, is made from stardust, as is everything in the Earth. Just as some scientists have sensed a mysterious creative guiding energy of the universe that mystics have touched more personally in their intuitive hearts, so have some scientists begun to find evidence for what we might call the spiritual dimensions of the brain, the dimensions which we all know in mystical and more general spiritual experience.

For example, George Valliant, a neurobiologist at Harvard Medical School\*<sup>2</sup> has identified positive qualities (what he calls “emotions”) such as hope, love, joy, awe, gratitude, forgiveness and faith as *hard-wired* in the limbic system of our brain. However, the *religious thinking* dimension, our rational interpretations of faith, he sees as found in the analytic neocortex; this dimension is *not* hard-wired in our genes; it must be learned; particular religious observance and belief arise from there. In an evolutionary context, he sees the hard-wired innate spiritual qualities above as the result of a pressure for connection and community building. You and I could go further and say that such “pressure” is Spirit’s way of inviting us further into our full nature in the divine image.

One frontier for us is to see how we are called to awaken and deepen these innate spiritual qualities of hope, love, joy, awe, gratitude, forgiveness and faith. If they are hard-wired in our brains, then in our capacities as spiritual leaders we can assume that they are present, however dormant, in every person we encounter. That knowledge might make us bolder in encouraging others to appreciate and embrace these qualities as they show themselves. They appear to be part of our innate being as well as scriptural calling.

Neuro-scientists also make clear that our *mental habits* over time set up new neural pathways in our brains; they re-shape our minds. To me that fact means that our *contemplative practices* are a vital mental frontier. I think they open up ways for us to see and receive deep reality. They regularly sensitize us to the deep spiritual ground and guidance of life, in a culture that often cultivates shallow ground and ego-guidance. Practices are intentional “habits” that over graced time come to replace or re-mold many

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<sup>2</sup> This view of George Valliant is taken from a description of his lectures at the University of Pennsylvania in December 2005, as distributed by METANEXUS.NET. I’m not aware of whether his views have been printed in article or book form since then, although I understand a new book is going to press this year, entitled: *Faith, Hope and Joy: The Neurobiology of Spirituality*.

of those daily mental and behavioral habits that numb us to the living Presence. We need to stay alert in our prayer to see which practices are called for at this time in our life, and where appropriate in the lives of others we lead. Which ones can best keep open the windows through which we can be shown the depths of life in God day by day?

In our frenetic culture contemplative practices especially hold up spacious, vulnerable-to-the-deep-real *silence* as a great pregnant seedbed for Spirit-listening. Other practices also can draw us to the ever-present Love, including ecstatic ones, but I think all of us here know the incredible potential of an open silence to enlarge our sense of deep reality. Indeed, John of the Cross said that “silence is God’s first language.” Another great mystic, Meister Eckhart, said that “there is nothing so like God as silence.” Silence then isn’t just a means. In its fullness it is *participation in God’s being*, which is the depth of our own being. Such intimate participation is available to everyone, across every linguistic and cultural divide, since silence is a language that everyone knows from birth.

Through and beyond our cultivation of the mind’s spiritual qualities and our contemplative practices, I think we need to carry the mind of a pioneer who has just begun to realize the mind’s potential in-touchness with deep reality as it is, including the wondrous movements of creative Love flowing through what is. As Jesus in effect said, you will do greater things than me in the Spirit’s creative leading. As Rumi said, we have the energy of the sun in us, but we keep knotting it up at the base of our spine. As Buddhist practices of consciousness show, our minds can be directly in touch with dimensions of reality that are beyond the thinking mind’s comprehension, and this realization can contribute to the relief of human suffering.

Our minds carry the image of God--God’s mind reflected in us, if you will; Christians would extend this to the mind of Christ. That’s an awesome DNA. That mind is not static. We could say that our minds are the current carrier of the evolutionary unfolding of Spirit-energy, of the ongoing revelation of the divine Mind.

In what we can scientifically detect in the ways of the universe we might say that Holy Spirit energy delights in temporarily stable patterns of life that evolve unpredictably into explosively creative new forms. Don’t we see that very rhythm of called-for stability, its demise and new creation, underlain by a mysteriously faithful Loving Spirit, both in spiritual tradition and in our own lives? I’ve symbolized this Spirit-way with this fireworks display on the screen: out of the fertile steady darkness, a beautiful burst of form explodes into being.

Spirit yearns to shape and re-shape larger radiant life in, with, and around us. I think we touch that wondrous divine Shaper most directly through the dimension of mind that is the *spiritual heart*, the place of contemplative awareness. In the heart distances collapse and leave us with an intuitive presence within what is. There we share the Shaper’s secret whisperings and soak in its awakening energy. There we sit on the permanent frontier of the Spirit’s living presence.

Over time our very *identity* can be put on the block as we deepen further into the real. We find that the center of who we are slips out of the confines of this body. Who we most deeply are bursts that boundary and finds itself everywhere that Spirit is. Great contemplatives experience that we don't belong to an ultimately separate self. Rather, we have a separate and gifted embodied ego self that is a vessel of our true soul being within the divine creative Love. Such an identity shift in turn creates a frontier in terms of how we then come to understand God, self, creation, scripture, community, and spiritual leadership. My guess is that one *shared* fruit of our larger sense of identity is a sense of the incredible intimacy and mysterious depth revealed in all these dimensions of life. We're given a humbling and yet empowering sense of being part of an ever-re-creative and mysteriously loving divine reality.

Let me pause a moment once again before moving to the third frontier and give you a chance to reflect on how your contemplative awareness has shown your mind itself to be a contemplative frontier....

### THE SOCIAL FRONTIER

Intimacy with the deep real, with creative loving Spirit, re-shapes the way we see the human world. It creates another contemplative frontier, the *social frontier*. As I've already lifted up, that intimacy leaves us with a sense of profound interior mutual belonging related to the earth and to our larger cosmic evolution. Relating to the human community is a sub-set of this larger intimacy. Thich Nhat Hanh speaks of our "inter-being." Paul speaks of the Body of Christ. Jesus and Hebrew prophets speak of the children of God. As this understanding moves beyond the conceptual level to the level of our first-hand awareness of that shared belonging, we find ourselves moving beyond the hard subject-object relationships into which we are culturally conditioned. We move beyond divisive boundaries, of in and out groups, of people we like and don't like. All of this conditioning remains in us, but it is subverted by a sense of our interior connectedness deeper than the external boundaries.

Our souls know one another beneath the conditioned and divisive personality level. Our souls realize that we share the same divine DNA. The reign of God comes in those times when we recognize this truth together, and live out of it. None of us recognize it all the time, given the brokenness of our human condition. Part of our needed spiritual practice on this frontier is to cultivate an awareness of our kinship with everyone by leaving room in our open prayer for anyone to appear. As people show up in our prayer, we can be willing to touch their shared humanity soul to soul and caringly offer them to God's transforming light.

Part of our spiritual practice also can include listening for our place in the healing of human brokenness and need at any level that calls to us. The call may relate to someone's or some group's need to directly connect with their true being in God and how we might help them be open for that grace. Or we might hear a call related to some needed basic human resource for living, like food, shelter, and work. Or we might be moved to concrete advocacy related to some particular oppressive political, cultural, or

religious situation, where there is a hunger for personal freedom, social peace and justice, and mutual respect. We live on this social frontier of discernment daily, every time we're confronted with decisions about the needs we see.

We also live on this frontier every time we're invited to *celebrate* wonderful breakthroughs into shared community. We often see such breakthroughs in everything from birthdays, weddings, funerals, and weekly worship services to community parades and demonstrations for some shared social cause that include people from a broad spectrum of backgrounds (in-person or internet gatherings), to the honoring of a community leader who has brought people together across many lines.

Contemplative tradition and practice have a way of showing us not only an inclusive humanity but also an inclusive *God*--a divine reality that is infinitely beyond a tribal or sectarian god. That in turn leaves us with an ongoing calling to challenge the contrived boundaries set up by others and the fears that sustain them. We do have particular families and communities to which we are rightly committed. Contemplative awareness, though, draws us to a larger frontier, the one shown by Jesus when he challenged those who would restrict their identity to blood family and to an interpretation of religious tradition that misses the deeper, wider ground of the living gracious Presence.

Once Jesus discovered that he most deeply belonged to the intimate divine Presence he called Abba, he lived with an interior authority and independence that led him to follow the loving, creative Spirit in him. That loving Spirit draws out a larger sense of belonging and spiritual awareness, our larger contemplative identity that I earlier alluded to. We find that largeness of identity in other deep mystics within contemplative tradition. We find it in ourselves also, as we touch that same inclusive ground of identity and caring that they have touched.

As we all know, that isn't our only ground of identity. We also have our confused ground of protective and socially conditioned ego identity that drives us. I find it very important during the day to notice which identity is ascendant at any given time. If it is my ego identity then I immediately seek to drop behind it to my larger identity in God, or at least to remember that I *have* such an identity even if there isn't the grace or will to fully make the shift. The influence of my ego identity isn't eliminated then, but the remembrance of my deeper self often can lighten its power and help it to keep its place as the servant of my soul-self.

That larger identity can separate us from some other social activists in ways. For example, as contemplatives I think we find ourselves acting on the social frontier in ways that do not demonize the enemies of our values, even as we firmly resist them. Jesus' call to love our enemies and forgive our tormentors was a revolutionary call. We're challenged to maintain a sense of inclusive human belonging, while at the same time following any call of Spirit given us to passionately act in the social arena in ways that counter oppressive powers and principalities. I'm sure you have your own particular examples of how we can live out of our contemplative awareness in the social arena today, which so desperately calls for deep spiritual leadership.

Recently I've been reminded that we have a physical/psychic resource in us that can aid the special courage and energy that we need sometimes to respond to what our contemplative heart shows us is called for. It's what Japanese Zen tradition calls "*hara*." I think this is related to what we might more crudely call our "guts," in the symbolic sense of bold courage. It's positioned in the nerve plexus or chakra center below our navel. In Zen tradition I think *hara* refers more precisely to a view of the unitive center of the body and psyche that realizes life whole, beyond dualisms. Its fullness involves posture, breathing and mental practices essential to Zen tradition, but I am only looking at it here related to a quality of strength in us.<sup>3</sup> I'm also going to relate it to our spiritual heart.

Let me ask all of you now to bring your attention to your receptive spiritual heart. Open your spiritual heart, however you best do that....Place your hands over your physical heart as you do....

See if some social calling appears, either in which you're already involved or to which you're sensing a call....

As some such call may show itself, see if it is accompanied by some kind of resistance: e.g., a sense of doubt, or fear of getting involved, or wobbly willingness, or lack of energy. As any such weakening reaction shows up, bring your hands back down to your *hara*; push out your abdomen as you deeply, strongly, confidently breathe into it; do that concentrated breathing a few times until you feel

the strength of your *hara* lighten your wobbly reaction, hopefully leaving you more ready, willing and energized to move in any direction called for.

We put a great deal of attention on the receptive open heart center in contemplative presence, and rightfully so. However, when we need to move beyond our resistances and gather the strength to spontaneously respond to situations that our open hearts show us, it might help if we move to our *hara*.

This might be particularly encouraging to *men*, some of whom can have such difficulty with the constant focus on receptivity in contemplative awareness. The *hara* brings to bear another center of our being, one that draws out what many men are conditioned to find especially important in being men (admittedly sometimes *too* important and destructive to others). Many women find intimate receptivity better conditioned or even perhaps more biologically available to them than do many men. The *hara* is just as important for women, indeed more important where they find themselves in oppressive cultural situations. However, it seems to have a special place in many men's psyches. Holding it up in spiritual practice may allow more men to find a place in the contemplative circle than we now see.

The *hara* is a center that supports risk-taking initiative, courage, fearless response, endurance, sacrifice, hard strength. It's the response to that piercing eye of Jesus in the

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<sup>3</sup> The only extensive reference I know about the *hara* is a book about which I have only read an overview and excerpt, so I cannot recommend it personally. It is Karlfried Graf Durckheim, *Hara*, translated from the German (you can "Google" it for details).

Sinai Christ icon that says, “You can do it. Trust the Spirit-energy in you.” That eye complements his other eye, which is receptively supportive of you even when you *can't* do it.

Attention to the *hara* also can be important to all of us as *spiritual leaders*. It's one thing to be contemplatively aware of the leadership called for; it's another thing to gather the resources in us to respond to that call, be that the call to say something difficult to a directee or the call to join a controversial and demanding social action. Centeredness on the *hara* in such times can encourage the liberation of a response that is simple, direct, spontaneous, self-less, and trustingly fearless.

We might see the *hara* as the God-given place in us for cutting through our resistance and taking needed action, needed leadership. It can energize the moving feet of the spiritual heart's call, helping us to walk the talk, walk the calling.

So there are three broad contemplative frontiers that I see at this point: the frontiers of the Earth, the mind, and the human family. I'll be raising up many other ones in my new book, and I'm sure you will raise up further ones this morning. Before I move you to a little reflection, let's pause a minute and take a clearing slow breath, and check our open presence in the larger gracious Presence....