

“Make Yourself a Light”

Reflection offered by Patience Robbins before the retreat time, at the 2007 Shalem Society Gathering.

During the past year I came across a Mary Oliver poem, “The Buddha’s Last Instruction,” that has stayed with me in my prayer. I want to begin my reflections with the first line from it: “Make of yourself a light.”

These words about being the light of the world are also in Christian scriptures in both the Gospel of John, “I am the light of the world,” and in the Gospel of Matthew, “You are the light of the world,” but I was deeply touched by the imagery in this poem which I read first while at the beach and then, again, in the high desert. I was intrigued and awed by the light.

What is it to be light? Words that come to me are glowing, luminous, bright, shining, flowing, and transparent. Imagine—this is who we are called to BE for the world, utterly glowing, radiant, luminous with and in God. Wow!

Recently, I came across this line from Teilhard de Chardin’s *Hymn of the Universe* which seemed to express this another way: “Seeing the mystic immobile, crucified or rapt in prayer, some may perhaps think that activity is in abeyance or has left the earth: they are mistaken. Nothing in the world is more intensely alive and active than purity and prayer, which hang like an unmoving light between the universe and God. Through their serene transparency flow the waves of creative power.” Waves of creative power speak of possibility—all is possible and this flows through us. We, each of us, are the unique manifestation of God in the world. Call it what you like—whether it be a vessel, instrument, vehicle, channel—that is what each of us is for this light, this love, and this goodness of God.

Occasionally, I get glimpses of this, when I give myself over to this flow which is way beyond what I would have imagined and usually beyond my comfort zone. What I have noticed is that it takes both openness and courage to live out of that deep place in God. Sometimes I feel invited but hold back because of fear—fear of looking foolish, incompetent, different or inadequate. I ask: who am I, and I am tempted to shrink and become small. But one of my favorite lines at this time in my journey is: this is all God has—me, you, and us. God needs us just as we are.

Look around or consider the saints, mystics, holy people who inspire you. No two of them are alike; no two of them looked alike or acted the same way. They offered their particular contribution that they could make to the world and it looked the way they were. The love, the light, flowed through each of them the unique way they lived.

Today I would like to share the story of Dorothy Stang who touched me deeply from the moment I heard about her. Dorothy, from Dayton, Ohio, entered the Sisters of Notre Dame when she was eighteen. In 1966, she was commissioned by her community to

Brazil to work among the people there. Every few years she moved further into the interior as the Brazilian government opened new tracts of land for the peasants to settle. Throughout these years, as she began to see the destruction of the rain forest and the injustice to the people, she began to speak about this. She spoke and advocated for the rights of the people and for protection of the rainforest. Because of this, she became a threat to the illegal loggers, ranchers and wealthy landowners. Quite a few times, she was encouraged to return to the United States in order to be safe, but she loved the people and the land and felt called to be there. On February, 12, 2005, Dorothy was on her way to meet with a group of farmers whose homes had been burned down. While she walked toward Boa Esperanca, she heard taunts from men who had stopped alongside her. She stopped and opened her Bible. She read to the men. They listened to two verses, stepped back and aimed their guns. They fired six shots, she fell to the ground. As she died, she was reading: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."

As I hear about Dorothy, I sense courage, light, transparency. Her courage inspires me and her light is still flowing. After her death, her family members and religious community started an organization to continue her work. Her light continues to shine.

What do she and all these other holy people remind us over and over? We are ordinary but rooted and grounded in God. Somewhere in our lives, we say "yes" to this God who lives within us. This is not once and for all; it is a continual movement, a continual surrender, a day by day living out of who we are in God. Little by little, it unfolds and ripples out to the entire world. It may not be dramatic like Dorothy's path, but in many small and continual ways we are invited to be a light: Sometimes speaking when we might look foolish or be misunderstood, sometimes listening when we would rather react, sometimes taking a step and not knowing where it will lead, sometimes being willing to hold the suffering of the world and feeling powerless to do anything about it.

I end with three Scriptures to assist your deepening opening to God, to light, to your particular manifestation of light and goodness in the world:

"Courage, it is I, do not be afraid." Mark 6:50

"For nothing is impossible with God." Luke 1:37

"O send out your light and your truth, let them guide me." Psalm 43

The full text of the Mary Oliver poem appears in Mary Oliver, New and Selected Poems. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992; ISBN 0-8070-6819-5.