

Introduction

Come to the root of the root of your Self.

~ **Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī**

If you pull up a plant in the garden, dig out a dandelion in the lawn, or find a shrub uprooted by a fierce wind, you will notice that each has a central support system called a taproot from which other smaller roots develop. Trees also start life with this kind of anchoring. Taproots provide stability, nourishment, and growth. When the poet Rumi encourages returning “to the root of the root of your Self,” he refers to our spiritual Taproot, the core of our very being, the dwelling place of divinity, the central source of goodness that grounds our existence.

I first came across Rumi’s poem in *Living Presence* where the Sufi teacher Kabir Helminski writes about “the essential Self” as an image of wholeness. This includes “divinity, Christ, and the Tao.” According to Helminski, this essential Self “is infinite and can never be fully comprehended by consciousness alone—but it is only a partial truth, because at the same time, we can see with the eyes of the essential Self, hear with its ears, act with its will, and forgive with its forgiveness, and love with its love.” From my perspective, this essential Self that Rumi encourages us to join consists of the abiding love reflected in the heart of Christ, a divine wisdom residing at the core of every being. I mostly come to know this essential Self through the many forms of goodness that inform my life and shape its identity.

For a long time now I have attended to this presence, this rootedness that sustains my reason for being. Endless work-oriented activity, unwanted disturbances, and a zillion attractive distractions cause me to disregard or forget about this source of love existing at the

center of my creatureliness. Even so, time and again I am drawn back to this divine Taproot. This return comes mostly through ordinary events and experiences. Sometimes I am deliberate about awakening and returning to this core of love. At other times I bump into a restored connection without any effort at all.

This book comes from the monthly e-newsletters I've written and shared with readers for a dozen years and have expanded here. The topics surfaced through my experience of daily life. This territory serves repeatedly as a source that moves me to the deeper place inside where the divine Taproot lives, supports, and nurtures my life.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul encourages the early Christians to be strengthened in their "inner being" through Christ's Spirit, that they may be "rooted and grounded in love" (Eph 3:16–17). This *inner being, grounded in love*, can be likened to Rumi's imagery of the self held fast by the divine Root. Benedictine monk John Main echoes this thought in *The Way of Unknowing* when he writes about meditation: "We are made free to love *by* Love. . . . We begin to find a wholly new ground to stand on. We discover a rootedness of being which is not just in ourselves, because we find ourselves rooted in God. Rooted in God who is Love. All this happens because we learn the courage to take the attention off of ourselves. We learn to stop thinking about ourselves and to allow ourselves to be. To be still, to be silent, is the lesson and in that stillness and silence we find ourselves in God, in love."

Rootedness and stillness. These twins provide a worthy foundation for spiritual well-being. The content of this book aims to strengthen your inner rootedness, to draw forth that loving nourishment contained in the Taproot of your deepest self. If you allow yourself to be reflective, you can absorb what you read and relate it to your own life experience. In doing this, I am confident you will find yourself returning to the *Root of your root*.

This affinity to one's life is necessary if this book is to make a difference in your life. The wise English mystic Evelyn Underhill recognized and encouraged this relatedness: "We know a thing only by uniting with it; by assimilating it; by an interpenetration of it and ourselves. It gives itself to us, just in so far as we give ourselves to it."

This has been my intent with almost every book I've written. I long for the insights not only to reach into the mind and heart of readers but also to make a difference in how they express their day-to-day life.

I invite you to enter *Return to the Root* with how I concluded my first online newsletter in June 2011. Here is a blessing to wrap around you like the wings of a mother swan enfolding her beloved cygnets within the warmth and shelter of her welcome.

May you be rooted and grounded in enduring love.

May you trust this essential core of goodness within you.

May you choose to be nurtured through times of stillness.

May this root of divinity strengthen and support you.

May you discover inner peace to carry you through travails.

May you return time and again to the Taproot of your life.

Discussion Guide for Small Groups available at www.avemariapress.com/products/return-to-the-root-discussion-guide.

January

A new year arrives, bringing with it an invitation to cherish life with renewed eagerness. In the northern hemisphere winter reigns, providing an opportunity for interior restoration. This season lures us into the cave of solitude where our relationship to the divine Root is strengthened. Our spiritual growth stretches further in the depths of extended darkness.

Stay, My Heart, Stay

Everything inside of me
longs to flee to where the sun
rinses the winter sky,
filling the day with invitation,

to run where the brilliant light
shines into blushing sunset,
avoiding the space where night
whispers to oncoming darkness.

Do not give in. Stay. Sit inside
the grayness, the airless heart,
day after day after day after day.
Stay and enter the dark void.

Yin space. Lots of it. Cave time.
Pull back a desire for Yang.
Be with the persistent dullness.
Listen intently for the smallest
murmuring of life.

It is there, quiet as an enclosed root
in the seeming dead of winter
secretly sipping from the soil,
waiting for a turn toward warmth,
not giving its strength to worry
or yearning for what is yet to be.

Stay, my heart, stay.
Stay. Stay. Stay where you are.

~ **Joyce Rupp**

Come to the Root

Just as the plant that is rooted and that we cultivate is in a constant state of self-transcendence, leaving behind its former state and being what it is now, so are we on this journey of spiritual growth.

~ **John Main**

Come

Every moment of every day the Holy One extends an open invitation to come closer, to connect with the hidden root and imbibe from this lasting relationship. Now is the time to shake off what prevents this visitation. Release what causes stumbling on the path of love and thwarts your ability to reach your truest self. Now is the moment to accept the invitation to be nurtured and transformed by this foundational presence.

to the root

Sink into a quiet space for a restorative time each day. Encourage your roots of love to be strengthened by the divine Taproot. Assimilate the grace-filled nutrients found in the soil of prayer. Breathe deeply and be empowered by this life-giving sustenance so that your fidelity does not topple over in weakness like a tree with a failing root system. As an African proverb wisely states; “When the root is deep, there is no reason to fear the wind.”

of the root

Go even deeper in rootedness with the Beloved. Absorb the boundless storehouse of wholeness originating in the divine Taproot. Open all the pores of your spirit. Assimilate these invigorating qualities

until their dynamism flows smoothly through your entire being. Become a flourishing plant with an extended root system, a conduit carrying love and goodwill wherever you go. Exhale this effective energy like a healthily-rooted tree breathing oxygen into the lungs of creation.

of your Self

There, at the core of your being—the true Self where the divine and the human meet in undivided kinship—allow yourself to rest in a love too large and unconditional to fully comprehend with the human mind. Set aside egoic demands, nursed grudges, repetitive discouragement, leftover regrets, and stale excuses. Receive this love with the intuitive heart. Become one with the divine Root, a source of restoration for the neglected and famished parts of the soul. Grow ever more fully united with the Root of all love.

Live Life Fully

You are forgetting how to move
to the music of your soul.
You can hardly even hear that inner music
over the clamor of all your obligations.

~ **Mirabai Starr**

As a gate opens to the new year, three words beckon: *Live life fully*. My aging self urges, “Don’t waste a year on the foolishness of needless concern or any attempt to control the uncontrollable. Be attentive to every fragment of joy, each revelation of nature’s splendor however small, and to the integrity residing in people who touch your life.”

An expression of St. Irenaeus of Lyons has been passed down through the ages: “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” I have cherished that notion of engaging life with enthusiasm. Unfortunately, I have often set this conviction aside, becoming lost in too much work or in absorbing situations requiring acceptance rather than useless worry.

That is why I recommit myself this year to engage as totally as I can with the life I have been given, to use my physical senses—these guests of my body—to welcome and explore what comes my way. When I am in tune with what I see, hear, taste, touch, and smell, an amazing amount of joy comes into view. This is when I can honestly say, “I love life.”

I also recommit to relishing my mind and cherishing my spirit, to pause instead of push, to draw back and take a second look instead of crashing automatically into the jungle of activity. When I allow myself to be deliberately alert to what is in the present, I establish

an awakened receptivity, an increased ability to stay grounded in my core integrity.

Recommitment to living fully fires up the rusty spark plugs of my attitude. It changes the let's-just-get-it-done approach into one of there's-so-much-to-discover-and-enjoy. Then I am able to start the engines of my work with eager enthusiasm instead of poky resignation.

After thirty-seven-year-old brain scientist Jill Bolte Taylor recovered from an initially debilitating stroke, she reflected on her experience in *My Stroke of Insight*: “I view the garden in my mind as a sacred patch of cosmic real estate that the universe has entrusted to me to tend over the years of my lifetime.” After I read Taylor’s book, I pondered what I had done with the brain entrusted to me for a lifetime. This led me to gratitude for what this part of my physical self is able to do. Before this reflection, I took for granted that my brain worked. Now, I marvel at being able to think, make choices and decisions, investigate and be intrigued with fresh information, and make connections that come together in a way that brings purpose and meaning. And how wonderful it is that my brain automatically knows what to do with the 86 billion neurons stored in my body, how it keeps everything functioning as intended.

The Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore believed that “a stream of life” ran through his veins and that this flow of life resonated throughout all of creation. Whenever I read Tagore’s poems and essays I marvel at how he fully engaged with life. In a letter to a friend at year’s end, Tagore wrote:

The year ‘99 would never come twice in my life. . . . I often think how each day a new day dawns—some steeped in hues of the rising or setting sun . . . the shimmering blue of reflecting clouds; some cheerful-like white flowers in the light of the full moon—how very fortunate I am! . . . When I ponder over this possibility, a desire grows in me to look closely at the world again: to consciously greet each sunrise in my life and say goodbye to each sunset like I would to a good friend. . . . Why can’t I gather all those enchanting days and nights that are vanishing from my life . . . this

peace and grace filling up the empty spaces between heaven and earth . . . ?

Sometimes we only awaken to the fullness of our life when we experience a severe loss—a part of our physical self, such as eyesight; the devastation of a basic material necessity; some part of the natural environment we've treasured; or the havoc wreaked in a human relationship. One year I was rendered speechless. Literally. A week before a conference where I was scheduled to speak all day, I could not utter a word. A sinus infection had led to a severe case of laryngitis. My physician warned, "Don't use your voice. Save it for the conference. Do not even whisper." All week long I kept still. It was only when I lost my ability to speak that I recognized the preciousness of having a voice. On each day of my body's imposed silence I thought of how I had never given a second thought to possessing that precious gift of being able to speak.

On the other hand, when we have learned to live with zest, to experience life with a wide-open attentiveness, we can continue to live this way even during our final days of life. I often marveled at my friend Jeanne's vibrant spirit. She radiated an eagerness to be involved and learn from whatever she could. When Jeanne was nearing her death, she smiled at me and whispered how much joy she found in listening to the first birdsong at dawn. I thought, *Even now she is greeting what enlivens her spirit.*

But why wait for loss or misfortune to rouse us from our lethargy? Let's not lose something in order for us to appreciate it. We can start to live more fully by listening, *really listening*, to both our interior and exterior world. As philosopher and nature writer Kathleen Dean Moore states in *Holdfast*, "*We must love life before loving its meaning, as Dostoyevsky told us. We must love life, and some meaning may grow from that love. But if love of life disappears, no meaning can console us.*"

This new year beckons us to be persons fully alive with the glory of divinity. Are we ready to love life and step wholeheartedly into what awaits us?