

INTRODUCTION

*Open the door of your treasure today,
for tomorrow the key will not be in your hands.*

—SA'DI

DO YOU REMEMBER the last time you opened a door? Probably not. Doors are a natural part of daily life. We rarely notice the movement of passing through the space they allow for our comings and goings. There are exceptions, of course, when our arms are full of groceries or we've forgotten our keys, but normally we breeze through these helpful openings oblivious to what we're doing. Yet, doors are an integral part of life. If we are mobile and active, never a day goes by without moving through numerous doorways. Think of the physical doors that are a part of your day, particularly the ones since you awoke this morning. Undoubtedly there are many.

How essential and beneficial doors are. They open and close, provide accommodating passageways to where we want to go, offer protection from unwanted elements, and ensure a certain amount of safety and privacy. Doors are even useful for helping define where we are physically: indoors, outdoors, next door, at the front door or back door. There is a potential power to doors. We can use them as barriers of control with the ability to shut out, or allow them to be welcoming hosts with the freedom to come and go.

By simply looking at a door, it can connect us to the events that mapped our developing lives. My friend Mary bought an old barn gate from the farm of her childhood to place in her urban garden. "The gate

summons nostalgia for the farm,” Mary tells me. The odors of the cattle yard, along with the animals and farm activities, quickly return to her when she looks at the gate. Similarly, in an article sent to me by Sr. Concepta Tobin, Helen O’Connell writes about a half-century-old door she arranged to have sent from Ireland to England. This traveling door now resides in her current home with the original key still in the lock. Why did O’Connell do this? The door carries her childhood memories. “Just to touch it, I can see the little girl who felt so big when she could reach the knocker,” writes O’Connell. “I can see my mother, going to turn the key when a neighbor would call to her and still with her hand on the key she could talk for ages. I can see myself running out that door to my First Communion, my first job, a date, my wedding and my heart doing a summersault when I’d return home from England and see the door.”

Doors give us an opportunity to make connections and find meaning in life. No wonder this image slips easily into our metaphorical language, providing ways to describe changes of attitude and activity. We “get a foot in the door,” find “the door of opportunity,” wonder what’s happening “behind closed doors,” and speak of “coming in the back door.” Only yesterday I heard someone remark, “When I closed the door on my last job, a whole new world opened up for me.”

HOW I DISCOVERED THE IMAGE OF THE DOOR

The image of a door first intrigued me when I was praying the “O Antiphons” during the season of Advent. This mosaic of hope-filled verses, one for each of the seven days prior to Christmas, refers symbolically to Christ’s incarnation. The antiphon for December 20 awakened me to the door’s symbolism:

O Key of David and Scepter of the House of Israel
who opens and no one shuts, who shuts and no one opens:
Come break down the prison walls of death
for those who dwell in darkness and
the shadow of death; deliver your captive people into freedom.

As I prayed this antiphon, certain words leapt out: key, open, shut, walls of death, dwell in darkness, deliver into freedom. These words bid me deeper, to look again at who I thought I was and how I lived my life. They summoned me to ponder my inner prison, the places of unfreedom, the walls of resistance, and the doors of my heart that pleaded for a key to open them. The antiphon also reminded me of Christ, a central key to the door of my becoming spiritually free.

The image of the key opening a door to freedom led me to view the door as a potent symbol for spiritual growth. I was filled with questions: What needed to be unlocked in me? How could I increasingly release the strongholds of my mind and heart to discover more of my potential to be my best self? What doors had I opened in the past? Which ones had I shut? What closed doors were helpful, which ones held me back? On and on the questions went as I compared the movement of opening a door to my desire of being my authentic self in more complete union with the Holy One.

The questions that arose allowed me to see each opening to my deeper self as an occasion to learn and accept what is truest about who I am. There is great freedom in this process. It enables me to recognize my genuine self, the one God created me to be. This, in turn, leads to self-acceptance and inner harmony. At the same time, this freedom intensifies my longing to incorporate and live the wisdom teachings of Christ so my life can resonate with generous love.

Eventually this awareness of the door as a metaphor moved me to shape a retreat around it. To my surprise, this image kept expanding, taking on a life of its own. There seemed to be no end to the insights “a door” could reveal about spiritual growth. Such is the layered texture of imagery. Esther de Waal refers to its boundless capacity for finding meaning:

The longer we stay with an image and dialogue with it, the more it will yield up. “A symbol should go on deepening,” as Flannery O’Connor says. We have to wait for the image to find us. Sometimes it may come unbidden but more often we must expect to stay with it, and to be ready to go deeper, layer upon layer upon layer, always waiting expectantly.

This “layering” became apparent to me as the themes of this book evolved. Each week took me a little further and deeper in search of the authentic self.

OUR OWN SACRED DOOR

The Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi describes our soul-space as a magnificent cathedral where we are “sweet beyond telling.” Saint Teresa of Avila views it as a castle. She notes, “I can find nothing with which to compare the great beauty of a soul . . . we can hardly form any conception of the soul’s great dignity and beauty.” Another way to speak about this inner sphere where our truest self and God dwell is with the words of scripture. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul asks, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Cor 3:16).

The body is often referred to as a temple of God but our soul is also a wondrous residence. This hidden part of us, in union with divinity, is where our abundant goodness (our God-ness) exists. Jesuit paleontologist, Teilhard de Chardin, understood the necessity of opening the door inward to find and claim this goodness. Reflecting on his spiritual growth, Chardin observed this truth: “The deeper I descend into myself, the more I find God at the heart of my being.” Thomas Merton worded it differently but noted the same thing: “To find love I must enter into the sanctuary where it is hidden, which is the mystery of God.”

Cathedrals. Castles. Temples. However we describe our inner terrain, one thing is certain: we tend to live in just a few rooms of our inner landscape. The full person God created us to be contains more than we can imagine, but most of us dwell within only a small portion of the superb castle of ourselves. Opening the door of our heart allows us entrance to the vast treasure of who we are and to the divine presence within us. We have an immeasurable amount of love and tenderness in us if only we open the door to discover it. The same is true with the multitude of our other qualities and virtues. Each door we open helps us grow into the fullness of who we are. Each discovery moves us to contribute love in our world.

Our authentic self, which is in union with God, may seem out of reach. It never is. “Deep in ourselves is the true Self,” writes Beatrice Bru-teau, “and that true Self is not separate from, or even different from, the Source of Being.” Always our truest self cries out to be known, loved, embraced, welcomed without judgment, and integrated into the way we live. When we open the door and go inside, God is there in the temple of our soul, in the ashram of our heart, in the cathedral of our being. Which is not to dismiss the reality of this same loving presence being fully alive in our external world. The Holy One is with us in *all* of life. Our purpose for opening the door inward is to help us know and claim who we are so we can more completely join with God in expressing this love in every part of our external world.

In Warner Sallman’s artistic portrayal of Revelation 3:20, Jesus stands at a door and knocks, awaiting an invitation to enter. The door symbolizes the human heart or the deeper self, to which Jesus comes. In his painting, Sallman knowingly omitted the doorknob on the outside, indicating his belief that the door to the heart is only opened from within. According to the artist’s portrayal, we hold the power of welcome or refusal. It is our choice.

While this ability of having a choice in opening the door is accurate, it is equally valid to note that sometimes uninvited and unwanted life circumstances push the door open to our inner self and propel us inside. This movement happens in those situations when we find ourselves unwillingly drawn to growth, pulled inward when we least expect by undesired experiences like a serious car accident, severe illness, betrayal in a committed relationship, or the death of a dear one. Whether we open the door freely or are shoved through it, opportunities arise for us to take God’s hand and visit our inner territory. We learn and grow from every situation if we are open to it.

For Rabindranath Tagore the melody of his life directed him toward the divine. In one of his poems in the *Gitanjali*, he wrote:

Ever in my life have I sought thee with my songs. It was they
who led me from door to door, and with them I have felt about
me, searching and touching my world.
It was my songs that taught me all the lessons I ever learnt;

they showed me secret paths, they brought before my sight
many a star on the horizon of my heart.

Like Tagore with his songs, each part of life provides a door to our heart, revealing the path to spiritual growth. Countless doors open for us through myriad possibilities such as a profession of love, a meaningful prayer, a startling thought, a comforting emotion, a challenging dream, a pressing intuition, a peace-filled stillness, a provocative book, a glimpse of nature's beauty, or the voice of someone we encounter. These sources and others are doors leading to keener perception of ourselves and the One who dwells within. The Holy One is forever startling us with the prospect of further growth. Every moment invites us to discovery.

While we are urged repeatedly to swing open the doors to growth, it takes both intention and awareness to do so. We develop and hone this alertness through brief or extended pauses of silence, focused prayer, meaningful worship, deliberate reflection, and trust-filled dialogue with spiritual companions. Anytime we slow down, decrease our hurrying, or deliberately choose to stop and consider what is happening (or not happening) in our life, we are preparing ourselves to open the door of our heart. The divine visitor is waiting at the door. We need only to open it wide with our welcome.

WHAT IS THE HEART?

Heart implies emotion. Think of those hearts embossed on valentines. Yet, heart in the scriptural tradition connotes our entire internal, non-physical being—the core of who we are. This includes mind, emotions, spirit, will, intuition, memory, and the unconscious. The heart encompasses these intangible aspects and is the bodily organ most frequently referred to in the Bible. In both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, the heart is the place of divine movement where spiritual transformation occurs. God's Spirit is sent into the heart (Gal 4:6). The psalmist prays, "Teach me wisdom in my secret heart" (Ps 51:6). In Jeremiah, the Holy One proclaims, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts" (Jer 31:33). Love is poured into the heart through the Holy Spirit

(2 Cor 1:22; Rom 5:5). Christ dwells in the heart and will enlighten the eyes of the heart (Eph 3:1–17).

Throughout this book I refer to the heart as *the authentic* or *true self*, *deeper self*, *sanctuary of the soul*, *secret chamber*, *the unconscious*, and the *hidden* or *interior realm*. The *unconscious* is the psychological way of speaking about our inner world because it is the area of the unknown. While we do not know or are unaware of what the unconscious contains, this does not lessen its reality. More life and vitality is actually contained in the unconscious than in the conscious or external world. Mystery and wonder inhabit our nonphysical being. Our deepest self lives in this invisible region where hunger for the Beloved resides.

THE PATTERN OF SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

When I open the door of my heart to God, I do more than simply extend a smile of recognition or a nod of welcome. I open myself to grow and change in ways I may never dream likely. I risk being spiritually transformed into a person whose life continually manifests goodness. The pattern of this transformational process parallels the physical movement of going through a doorway. First, I approach the door in order to move beyond where I am now. If the door is closed when I get to it, I open it. Sometimes the door is locked and a key is needed to allow access to the space that lies beyond. As I open the door and prepare to step forward, I move across the threshold, the middle of the doorway. I make a decision about the direction I want to go, either forward or backward across the threshold. With either direction I eventually close the door behind me and move on.

This same type of movement happens on an inner level of myself when life situations and graced moments invite me to become more fully who I am. The choices and decisions I make determine whether I'll go through the door and enter the unknown territory of growth, or turn back and cling to the safety of who I presently am. If I am alert and willing to be transformed, I open the inner door of my self and greet fresh

ideas, along with possible changes in attitude and emotional responses. Whenever I choose to open the door and step across the threshold of possibility, I become more conscious of myself as a person with unlimited potential for goodness and ever fuller unity with the divine.

As I reflect upon this pattern of my spiritual journey, I recognize innumerable times when I miss the opportunities that opening a door offers to my spiritual growth. I can be too preoccupied to even notice that the door to growth is there. Sometimes I stop at the door, full of apprehension about continuing onward. Once in a while I keep a door shut that beckons my entrance by refusing to dialogue about a collapsing relationship. Occasionally I linger a long time on the threshold, filled with difficult emotions and wondering about how to take the next step. Often I am nudged across the open doorway by a courageous friend or a wise mentor. Every now and then, life experiences toss me across with such force that I find myself dumped on the other side of the door without having time to make a yes-or-no decision.

What I especially value about the process of spiritual growth is the way the Holy One guides me to explore the inner terrain of my being. Whenever I open the door of my heart and take the passage beyond where I am now, the wonder and richness of divine presence and the resilient beauty of my soul amaze me. As I age, I think I am getting better at deliberately opening the door and leaving the known, safe realms behind. With each threshold crossing, I gain greater freedom to be my most authentic self.