

# Chapter 1

## THE PRACTICE OF HEARING THE CALL AND RESPONDING

*And it was then that in the depths of sleep  
Someone breathed to me: “You alone can do it,  
Come immediately.”*

—Jules Supervielle, “The Call”

### HEARING THE CALL AND SAYING YES

This is the beauty of the pilgrim journey. All of us are called. When you read the description of this book you felt it: a sense of calling that stirred a longing in you and compelled you to make a commitment.

We are brought into the world with what many indigenous cultures call “original medicine.” This means that we are unique creations. We’ve never been in the past and won’t be in the future. No one carries the same combination of gifts, talents, resources, opportunities, and challenges. This unique alchemy is our “original medicine.” St. Ignatius of Loyola, a sixteenth-century mystic, said that the deepest desires of our heart are planted by God.

“Medicine” is not just referring to a healing balm or potion. Our unique abilities contain our power to act in the world. They enable us to explore, discover, express, and heal. Our original medicine emerges from our “true self.” Thomas Merton, in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, describes this concept as our deepest selves when we have stripped away self-deception, self-criticism, self-inflation, masks, expectations, and judgments:

For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self. God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please. We are at liberty to be real, or to be unreal. We may be true or false, the choice is ours. We may wear now one mask and now another, and never, if we so desire, appear with our own true face. <sup>1</sup>

There is a mystery here because you can't arrive at this discovery overnight. We must journey for a lifetime to discover our deepest and most mysterious talents. However, there is a paradox that comes with these realizations. While we must venture far to find our "true self," it is also always with us. We must continue to learn how to let go of what is false in our lives. We must throw out what keeps us from offering our own healing balm to the world. The more we live from this awareness the more our gifts can bring peace and joy to others.

This call to embark on a rigorous journey of reclaiming ourselves and our relationship to the divine often comes without our bidding. There are many reasons we might begin an inner pilgrimage. Perhaps we've experienced a great loss: a job, our health, a dear friend, a sense of identity, financial security, or a marriage. We know we can't return to life as usual. That way is now closed. This is the call to which we must respond. If we say no, it means numbing ourselves and living in denial of this great shifting we've experienced. When we say yes, it means to acknowledge that even our moments of profound sorrow can lead us to renewed vision and life.

## OUR OWN ANNUNCIATIONS

The feast of the Annunciation remembers Mary's own pilgrim journey of saying "yes." She walked into the unknown with only her trust in God to carry her. Anyone can identify with Mary and her questions. She shows perfect humanness when she asks Gabriel, "How can this be?" when he tells her she will be with child.

The angel explains and she answers, "Here I am." What we are not told in the story is the long interior journey of the heart Mary went through before she said yes. This is where our imagination must enter the story and make it our own.

I like to imagine that during the months before the angel appeared, Mary felt restless, unsettled and a sense that something was ripening within her. This is how a sense of calling often emerges. We ponder for a long time the possibilities, and weigh the options. We calculate the pros and cons. We consider the contingencies.

If we pay attention to our inner life, when the angel finally arrives (and she may be wearing a multitude of disguises as angels can be tricky that way) we might suddenly recognize that the invitation they are offering meets us exactly where we are. The “yes” we’ve been resisting for so long suddenly slides off the tongue with ease, grace, and astonishment. Sometimes the “yes” is still a struggle as we might still feel uncertain and tentative. Yet, somehow, the drive to act compels us forward because we can’t help it.

We don’t often think about what Mary went through after she said yes. I imagine that in the days following her profound answer, she still struggled as she faced the ramifications of her decisions. I’m sure she felt the sheer excitement at being full of new life and some genuine anxiety over what this new birth would cost her, what possible drawbacks would enter her life.

There are so many beautiful depictions in art of this moment from scripture. Masters of artistic expression show us the angel and Mary facing one another. If the artist has done their job, you can feel the anticipation and trembling. We see the majesty and the intimacy of the moment. They are talking like two created beings. He is asking and she is consenting. There are no demands.

Consider the angels of annunciation in your own lifetime. When have they arrived? What form did they take? Are they human, animal, tree, ocean wave, crow, spirit voice? Allow some space to honor all the ways you’ve been asked to give your consent to being filled with possibility. Hold to the times you’ve said yes and no. Be gentle with both, and trust each response contains its own kind of grace.

## PILGRIMAGE OF THE ART-MAKING PROCESS

*People travel to wonder at the height of mountains, at huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of rivers, at the vast*

*compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars . . .  
and they pass by themselves without wondering.*

—St. Augustine, *Confessions*

*I long for You so much  
I have even begun to travel  
Where I have never been before.*

—Hafiz, *The Subject Tonight Is Love*

Pilgrimage calls us to go where, as Hafiz says, we've never been before. We might discover this truth in our inner and outer journeys.

The daily practice of making art is one way of growing more intimate with our inner life. We become more curious about what is stirring inside our heart. Creative practice can raise our resistance, our blocks, and our inner demons. We should see this as a part of the process as we get to know ourselves on a deeper level.

Consider your art-making time as a meditation practice where the only “goal” is to be aware of the voices inside you, especially the critical ones. Notice what they have to say and then gently return to your practice. Over time you will discover that these voices of judgment and insecurity are the same ones that rise up and undermine you in everyday life. Art becomes a place where we can grow familiar with them and dive into our inner life despite their distraction. It also becomes a place to welcome in the voices of joy and ease and recognize the things that make our hearts delight.

As we work in the expressive arts, we're invited to place emphasis on the *creative process* over the artistic *product*. We live in a very product-oriented culture. The way we spend our time may only seem valuable if we have something to show for it. That is, if we are productive and “busy.” We often measure our own worth by how much we accomplish in a given time and how many goals we reach.

In the expressive arts however, as in prayer, the focus is on the *process* of creativity itself rather than creating a beautiful product. If we do so, the art created will be beautiful through an authentic expression of the soul. The heart of the work is to free ourselves from the expectations

and goals. They can keep us from entering deeply into our own creative longings and expression.

One of the metaphors I use in teaching the expressive arts is *pilgrimage*. On a pilgrimage, as in art-making, we take a journey to encounter the sacred within ourselves in a more intimate way. We prepare for the art-making time with prayer and take only the essential tools. Pilgrims bring an intention for the journey. This intention is an essential element for making the time of creating art an act of prayer. In the process we are invited to be fully present to each moment as it unfolds.

On pilgrimage, as in the art-making process, we risk entering the unknown with the hope of being transformed. We leave our familiar world behind. We are also connected to a whole community of people who have taken this journey before us, those who travel alongside of us, and those who will in the future. The journey transforms us so we may be ready for our destination. We are transformed in the process of the creative act and are allowing ourselves to be led through the experience by the divine impulse. This changes us on the inside and the outside.

Art-making as pilgrimage helps us to understand the arts as a *process of discovery* about ourselves and about God. When we enter the creative process with the intention of listening for the movements of the Spirit, we discover new insights about ourselves and God.

We will be working with two art mediums primarily on this journey: photography as a contemplative practice and Midrash as a creative engagement with scripture texts. More details about these a little further on in the chapter.

## SPIRITUAL PRACTICE AS DAILY PILGRIMAGE

*What nine months of attention does for an embryo  
forty early mornings will do  
for your gradually growing wholeness.*

—Rumi, *The Illuminated Rumi*

The poet Rumi reminds us that the continual attention to practice can bring about a holy birthing. Jesus went out into the desert for forty days, called to wrestle with temptation and go deeper into his calling. We are

called to this as well. Over the next season we will encounter the temptation to abandon our practice, to leave behind what we experience as life-giving. Be prepared for it to happen often. When this happens make a commitment to return.

In *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, Jon Kabat-Zinn writes that doing yoga and not doing yoga are the same. What he means is that when we return to our practice after having left it for several days (or weeks, months, years) we often have a deeper appreciation for what we neglected. We can come back to our practice with a perspective born of wisdom.

Beginning again is essential. We fall away; we lose our will to persevere for so many reasons. The problem is not with the waning of our inner fire and perseverance. We are human beings and go through times of dryness.

What becomes soul killing is not returning at all. When we realize we have not meditated or created art in days or weeks (or months), our minds have become hard with judgment and self-criticism. We find ourselves even further from the peace than if we just simply return to the practice without anxiety.

Kabat-Zinn also asks, “Can you see that not practicing is an arduous practice?” I believe this means that we each have a life practice, even if it is no practice at all.

These practices can often change us in positive and negative ways. When we have no intentional practice, we might find it difficult to deal with the grief and struggles of life. When pain comes, it might be magnified if we can't center ourselves through intentional practice. Life can become difficult and chaotic, and steal our peace.

Yet, when we cultivate peace in ourselves through art-making, meditation, chanting, yoga, or any number of possible practices, it spills over into the rest of our lives. Intentional practice can anchor us when we are in the middle of the ocean during a hurricane. We can pray with the old Irish fishermen who said, “Oh Lord, your ocean is so big and my boat is so small.”

We need practices to act as touchstones so they can sustain us during the journey. They help remind us that the journey will take us beyond our narrow visions and connect with the sacred ground of

being. We open our hearts and minds to a more intimate connection to the One who created us and in the process we start to discover our created purpose.

Practices are an essential part of the pilgrim's journey. What practices would support you the most in the season ahead?

What is it that is calling you to this time of pilgrimage? Consider the grace that you seek for the inner journey. Listen for the deep desires of your heart compelling you. When pilgrims left on their journeys they often made a vow of commitment as a way of saying yes. Consider your own vows for this time ahead. What are the practices to which you want to commit?

## THE MONK AND PILGRIM DANCE TOGETHER

*Isn't it time that your drifting was consecrated into pilgrimage? You have a mission. You are needed. The road that leads to nowhere has to be abandoned. . . . It is a road for joyful pilgrim's intent on the recovery of passion.*

—Alan Jones, *Passion for Pilgrimage*

This chapter we've listened for our call and prepared ourselves to respond. The story of Adam and Eve opens up possibilities for great pilgrimages that arise from circumstances we would not choose for ourselves. At the same time, we make the choice for the journey to become meaningful and soulful. This second story of creation is about the ways we find ourselves exiled from our heart's home. We all have experiences which leave us feeling far away from ourselves and what is meaningful. Yet the pilgrimage begins when we take responsibility for how we live with this exile, this loss, this rejection. We can continue on in bitterness and longing, or we can choose to live with deepened awareness and commitment to making our way home once again.

We all have an inner pilgrim, and in different seasons this archetype will speak more strongly than others. It calls us out of our comfortable lives into something holy and true. We have an inner monk as well, a part of ourselves that is rooted in ancient practices of listening for another voice to be heard.

The pilgrim in me feels the call of moving outward. My inner pilgrim feels a longing to travel. She wants to walk across new landscapes and find herself a stranger. This helps me release what I know and enter into a deeper truth I can only find when I wander.

Every year, salmon make a long journey from the ocean to the place of their birth. They travel incredible distances as they move upstream. Their inner biological map drive them to the place where they were born.

I know this power. Our inner voice tells us we must leave everything behind and travel to a place we call home. I know the miles of ease and flow. I know the miles of mighty rivers that test my strength and resolve. I know that to refuse this inner longing is to refuse life-giving radiance. Finally, I know that death, the release of things I hold dear, is an essential part of the new birth.

The monk in me feels the call of moving inward. My inner monk knows the deep wisdom to be found in rest, slowness, and spaciousness. I'm tempted to let the productivity of the world make me run faster. The only person who can say "no" and "stop" is me.

I know the power to be gained from following my natural rhythms instead of the rhythms demanded by the world around me. When I'm replenished, my work is sustainable and it gives me joy. When I have joy, I demonstrate to the world how powerful it is to live in this intentional way.

The ancient wisdom of monks has much to offer us on the pilgrim path.

The monk demands obedience to a call. It acts like an invisible thread drawing us forward. Conversion calls for commitment to always being surprised by God. The mysterious thing is that even the monastic call to stability, which usually refers to staying in one place for a lifetime, is an invitation to contemplate life-changing mysteries. When we stay put, we experience all of our own doubts, uncertainties, questions, and judgments. We aren't allowed to run away from the inner challenges of being alive.

We must embrace a radical kind of monastic inner hospitality as we welcome in all of the strangeness that we feel in journeying to foreign places within us, exploring new dreams and possibilities. St. Benedict described hospitality as welcoming the stranger at the door as the face

of Christ. The most strange, uncomfortable, unfamiliar, is the very place where we encounter God. On pilgrimage, we meet not just strangers in the outer world, but strangeness in ourselves. Navigating new worlds, learning new customs, and deepening into a foreign language are all ways of extending welcome to the stranger we meet within.

A profound kind of humility is also demanded of us. We recognize that *we* don't know what will happen on our journey. We don't understand how we will be changed by this experience. We will surely stumble and fall. When you're walking a path without a map, it is impossible to plan ahead.

Simplicity calls to us. We are invited to let go and release. This means we get to decide what we no longer want to carry with us. When we let these things go, we may feel our burdens lightened. We will focus on this invitation more deeply in the next chapter.

What will ground us is a commitment to return to the center even as we travel life's edges. We must find spaces for silence and solitude so we can listen. The monk in the world knows that holy pauses are essential for discovering the meaning of our experiences. There is no map. We can only drop deep into our hearts to guide us through our next steps.

Nature is a wise teacher. It calls us to explore what it means to live a wild life. A wild life is one that is not domesticated into boxes of safety. It is a risky way of being because in the wild there is always an encounter with fierce forces.

The alternative is to suffocate over time on dreams that dissolve by never allowing the opening of our souls. Monks are not concerned with maintaining the status quo. The first monks went out into the untamed desert looking for the edges of life. They believed that such places could be fertile and rich. When we live with the same wild heart, we remember that God can see beyond every horizon. All we need to do is trust God to lead us to more edges.

*Reflection by John Valters Painter*

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THE STORY OF ADAM AND EVE  
LEAVING THE GARDEN (GN 3:14–24)

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The authors of the Hebrew scriptures believe in a good and loving Creator who made all of creation good. This foundational belief, standing in direct contrast to the prevailing beliefs of the pagan religions of their day, is sorely tested by the Babylonian exile.

Not only do the Chosen People lose the kingdom and the Temple (promised to David and Solomon) but the very Promised Land (first promised to Abraham and Sarah). Those not killed in the Babylonian invasion are either scattered across their conqueror's empire or left behind in squalor. Such a situation would test anyone's faith in a good and loving God.

The two contradictory but complementary creation stories at the start of the book of Genesis are written with the purpose of answering the great questions of suffering and evil in the world.

The first chapter of Genesis begins with a description of how God created order and abundance out of the chaotic void. For six days, God speaks into creation a world filled with every good thing. At the culmination of God's work, man and woman are created in the divine image, and it is all very good. The main actor is a divine character who is pragmatic and caring. Everything is done in an orderly fashion in preparation for the culmination of God's work: humanity.

Beginning with the second chapter of Genesis, we are told a slightly different story. A good and loving God is still the main protagonist but is now joined by a few more characters. First, the man (Adam) is created and placed in the Garden of Eden which God builds up for him. God had filled it with other animals, all of whom prove to be unsatisfying companions. This prompts God to create the woman (Eve). The man and woman have everything they need and very little in the way of restrictions.

The man and woman are tempted into disobeying God's command. They eat the forbidden fruit. When God confronts them, the woman