

INTRODUCTION

WAKE UP, YOUR TEACHER HAS ARRIVED

“No longer will your Teacher hide.”

There is an old proverb that says, “When the student is ready the teacher will arrive.” I think I have been ready for a long time, yet perhaps I have spent too much time *looking* for the perfect teacher rather than *seeing* the teachers that arrive in unexpected ways. Looking and seeing are not the same. To see requires a deeply contemplative spirit and an open heart. To see requires learning to live awake. When we realize this hallowed way of being in the world, our teacher will no longer hide. When we begin to live awake, we will see teachers everywhere. Somewhere in his vast array of writings, Thomas Merton

has suggested that the most dangerous person in the world is the one who is guided by no one. Merton's wise observation has invited questions into my life: Am I open to guidance? How open? How willing am I to be taught? Do I have a heart eager for learning? Life is a wisdom school. Have I enrolled in its classes?

The ways to grow in wisdom and knowledge are endless. At this time in my life, one of my favorite ways to learn is to sit at the feet of the flowing grace of *now*. There was a time when I was apprehensive about *now*. It seemed too fleeting to learn from. It was gone before I could touch it. Countless teachers have encouraged me to make my home in the present moment. I am finally beginning to understand that to live in the moment is to live in the flowing grace of *now*. Now is not motionless and fixed; it is gracefully flowing into the next moment, the next *now*.

That's the way I learn. I lean into the moment. I lean into life. I sit at the feet of experience. I sit at the feet of life. I sit at the feet of my sins and virtues. I sit at the feet of sufferings and joys. I sit at the

feet of poets, saints, and friends. I sit at the feet of beauty and brokenness—of doubt and hope. I sit at the feet of Mother Earth. I sit at the feet of the Word of God. And I listen. And I wait. And I learn.

Some of my teachers are writers and prophets whom I have never met, yet I am spiritually fed because of the insights I have gleaned from their wisdom. Thomas Merton has taught me that it is possible to be deeply immersed in the contemplative way and yet be able to speak out boldly about our need to work for peace and justice. Etty Hillesum, who died in Auschwitz in 1943, reveals by her life that it is possible to embrace love rather than bitterness. The poet William Stafford teaches me to see afresh through his ability to cause the *mundane* to blossom into something exquisite. Poet Jessica Powers mesmerizes me in her ability to find just the right words to describe my ongoing relationship with God. My own spiritual guide continues to ground me in humility as I watch him embrace the challenge of spiritual growth even in the midst of the fragility of aging.

It is difficult for me to fathom my days without the guidance of these ordinary yet extraordinary people in my life. They minister to my desire for authenticity and wisdom. They have been mentors for me, nurturing and inspiring me through the years.

Yet even in the company of these superb teachers, a kind of existential ache for God lingers in my soul. In some of my more pensive moments, I recall sitting in angst, longing for a sage or shaman to visit me from some sacred cave or aboriginal forest and feed my inquisitive mind. Such a wisdom figure, I thought, would offer answers to my eternal questions, end my unfocused living, and stir up my lethargic spirit by giving me an immeasurable supply of wisdom. That shaman or guru has never arrived in the form I was expecting, yet one morning while praying with scripture I had an overpowering realization that teachers are everywhere. This insight was as consoling as the shaman arriving on my doorstep. The scripture I was using for my prayer that day was the Mary and Martha story from the Gospel of Luke (10:38–42). I found the stirring image of

Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus therapeutic. As I visualized this uplifting image, I wondered if Jesus was also sitting at her feet—a reciprocal exchange. Were they listening to one another? Why not? That's what mature friends do.

Mary's listening annoys Martha, who is busy serving. Yet if the full truth be known, Martha was also sitting at the feet of a teacher. She was sitting at the feet of service. Later, after dinner was served, with Jesus gone and Mary retired for the evening, I envision Martha finally sitting down by herself and listening to the experience of the evening. As she reviewed the evening and her lament in the midst of her service, perhaps she began to realize that all of this was part of the wisdom offered by the school of life. We learn by contemplating our daily struggles.

Both Mary and Martha have become teachers for me. In their own way each was choosing the *better part* (see Luke 10:41). Martha inserted a bit of murmuring into her service. Her murmuring I can understand because I, too, have had to sit at the feet of my own murmuring at times. What I have learned is that when I give my authentic presence

to those moments of complaining, in the form of deep listening, all becomes prayer. Life's experiences become remarkable teachers when we spend time contemplating them.

Creation is a superb teacher. Consider how parched wasteland can become a blossoming meadow after a good rain. Anticipate how you might be a rain of grace in someone's life even though there are perplexities and ambiguities in your own. You can learn from nature by listening to and reading from the pages of her landscape.

If we are attentive to the natural world around us, we may notice what an excellent teacher we have in each of the four seasons. The challenge, of course, is to live mindfully so that we do not miss the lessons hidden in the seasons. Hold each season up against your life, and look into its pages as you would look into a mirror. How can you see your face in the pages offered to you by nature's grace? Consider the little flowers growing up through deadwood. The deadwood is a source of life for them. It is their mulch. What can this teach you about the apparent deadwood of your own life? What is your

mulch? What helps you grow? What can the seasons teach you?

As each new season arrives, fragments of the other seasons linger in the folds of its robes. Winter, spring, summer, and fall are mulch for each other. The seasons of our lives are like that also. We learn from the layers of life. Our joys, sorrows, regrets, hopes, miseries, and enthusiasms are mulch for each other. They nourish the future seasons of our lives. Every piece of life, every stage of growth enjoys the flowing grace of *now*—the moment when it needs to be nothing but the way it is, even as it flows into a new now.

The people with whom I live and work often serve as teachers for me. I have learned so much from watching people live. The ways they cope with their sorrows, limitations, and fears assist me as I struggle with my own weakness and flaws. I have watched people rejoice and give of themselves even in times of great drought of spirit, and I say to myself, *That's the way I want to live*. I want to learn from my pain, from my questions and unrest, from my foibles and blunders. I want to sit at the feet of

those who know how to live awake. I want all of life to be a teacher.

As a Christian I claim Jesus, the Christ, as my great teacher. The scriptures offer me many insights, many teachers. When I am attentive to the Word of God speaking to me from the pages of scripture, teachers rise up and anoint me. They lead me to the hidden God within my own being. That which has been written in the prophets has proven true for me: “They shall all be taught by God” (Jn 6:45).

SUGGESTIONS FOR PRAYING WITH *THE FLOWING GRACE OF NOW*

This book is designed to be used following the fifty-two weeks of the year: one teacher a week. Each week you are to open the pages of scripture and pray with the text chosen for you. A teacher will be suggested for you. At times you may be assigned a teacher that sounds nebulous and even confusing. You may find yourself asking, “How exactly can this be my teacher?” In a sense, the entire scripture text that you are praying with is your teacher, but from

the heart of that text we will single out one piece of truth for you to ponder. You are asked to prayerfully discern how that truth can be found in your life and what you can learn from it.

In your prayer, use the way of *lectio divina*, which is the slow, reflective reading of the scripture followed by a period of keeping vigil with the message of the text. Read the written reflection on the text, and then consider the teacher chosen for you. Is this teacher a good fit? If not, after prayerful consideration a different teacher may reveal itself to you. Ask for a teacher; then listen and wait.

You may wish to keep a journal during this year of prayer. Use it as a record of the wisdom gathered from your teachers each week. Journaling is a marvelous way to assist you in being faithful to the practice you have begun. I encourage you to be frugal in your journal entries. Sometimes less is best. Too many words get in the way, and you can't see what you're trying to say.

Pray for the grace to remain loyal to your week's theme. It is amazing how when we faithfully keep company with the Word of God, day in and day

out, new insights and blessings are given us. Repetition can sometimes be a staff for our limping spirits. Thus when you are praying the daily scripture offered to you, open your heart in anticipation of a teacher with a willingness to wait for revelation.

Although you will have already read many of the scripture texts assigned in these pages, make a decision to approach the text as though hearing it for the first time. There is wisdom in standing before each scripture as though it is entirely new. Since you last read this text, most likely, many events have taken place in your life. In some small way you are not the same person.

It is always wise to take the thoughts that come to you and let them simmer in you for a while. Go deeper than what first surfaces. Let the words sink into your soul like a slow summer rain. The insight you are given on the seventh day may be substantially richer than that which you perceived on your first day. You will often notice this as you reread your journal.

Yet just as from the heavens
the rain and snow come down

And do not return there
till they have watered the earth,
making it fertile and fruitful,
Giving seed to the one who sows
and bread to the one who eats,
So shall my word be
that goes forth from my mouth;
It shall not return to me empty,
but shall do what pleases me,
achieving the end for which I sent it.
(Is 55:10–11)

When the Word of God falls into the ground of your being, you are to receive it with joy. Trust that it will do its good work in you, and it will. Let these words of encouragement from the prophet Isaiah serve as a blessing as you begin your pilgrimage through the fifty-two weeks of the year.

FIFTY-TWO TEACHERS

These are the teachers, gleaned
from scripture,
that you will be praying with in this book.
Reference will be made to other teachers
you may encounter in the pages of your life.

The key message of this book
is that you always be open to guidance.

WEEK ONE

Read Psalm 16 with a heart willing to be taught.

Protect me, O God, for in you I take
refuge.
I say to the LORD, “You are my Lord;
I have no good apart from you.”
As for the holy ones in the land, they are
the noble,
in whom is all my delight.
Those who choose another god multiply
their sorrows;
their drink offerings of blood I will
not pour out
or take their names upon my lips.
The LORD is my chosen portion and my
cup;
you hold my lot.
The boundary lines have fallen for me in
pleasant places;
I have a goodly heritage.

I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs
me.

I keep the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall
not be moved.

Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul
rejoices;
my body also rests secure.

For you do not give me up to Sheol,
or let your faithful one see the Pit.

You show me the path of life.

In your presence there is fullness of
joy;

in your right hand are pleasures forever-
more. (NRSV)

Psalm 16 offers us the image of a disciple who is entirely open to divine guidance. It is a prayer of candid trust—a prayer in which the psalmist claims God as protector and refuge. It is a proclamation of one who is totally surrendered to walking the path of life in God's presence. Read this psalm each day during this week. Pray it with a disciple's heart. Enter into the psalmist's words. Imagine what it

would be like to allow yourself to belong to God so unreservedly that trust becomes a natural outflow of that belonging. Witness yourself taking refuge in *God* and in *good* this week. Experience the joy and comfort of trusting someone. With God as the center of your life, you will know which way to lean when the difficult times arrive. Trust even the difficult times to serve as a teacher. God will reveal the path of life for you.

As you become aware of your desire to make God your home, consider also the little gods you dally with. It happens to us all; yet those lesser gods eventually bring us unrest. Place yourself in the divine hands, and remember that your God is counselor, instructor, and teacher for you. In myriad ways you are taught by God. God's revealed presence is all around you. Don't miss it. Listen intently. Trust wholeheartedly. Rejoice always.

O God, my refuge,

The false gods of my life are not idols carved from silver and gold. They are obsessions that have been drawn from my own will. They add

nothing of value to my days. They stifle the good in me. There is a path of life I must discover, a path that leads to you, my best teacher. Reveal to me the path of life that I must walk each day. Be ever with me!

Your teacher for this week is *the revealed face of God in all things*. This is a week for opening your eyes to all the wisdom that waits for you on the path of life. See teachers everywhere.

Ask the animals, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.
Who among all these does not know
that the hand of the LORD has done this?
In his hand is the life of every living thing
and the breath of every human being.

–Job 12:7–10 (NRSV)