



## The Wilderness Within

Ruth Haley Barton

*“The spiritual journey is not a career or a success story. It is a series of humiliations of the false self that become more and more profound.”* Fr. Thomas Keating

I agree with this statement. I don't like it... but I know it is true. And it makes me wonder if any of us are ready for the journey of transformation—really. We long for more in our spiritual lives, that's for sure, but I'm not sure we're ready for the harrowing journey of death to the false self that any true spiritual journey entails.

We want God as long as we can still have our successes. We like the idea of being on a journey of faith as long as it doesn't require too much...well, faith. We long for the Promised Land as long as we don't have to leave anything behind. We want space for God as long as it doesn't intrude too radically on our packed schedules and conflicting priorities. We want self-knowledge as long as it doesn't cut too close to the ego bone. We want God's will as long as it doesn't make us look too foolish. We want love as long as it's not too inconvenient. We'd like to buy the pearl of great price as long as we don't have to sell everything we have. We're willing to wax eloquent about the Paschal Mystery one weekend a year as long as we're not the one doing the dying!

What are we to do with the fact that the true spiritual journey *must* and *always will* involve very real humiliations of the false self—we who believe that bigger is better and more is...well, more? We who have learned to measure everything by numbers and new innovations, bigger buildings and “church

growth plans,” slick marketing campaigns and taking everything “to scale”? How do we—who don’t even know the difference between the true self and the false self and who have (in some cases) gotten quite proficient at harnessing the things of God to our false-self programs—learn to surrender to the *humiliations* of the false self so that something truer can emerge?

### **The Heart of the Lenten Journey**

One of the most sobering truths about the human situation is that we can take even the most spiritual ideas, practices, and plans and place them in service of “the old man” or the false self. We are much better at taking surveys, gathering information, and making strategic plans than we are at dying to that which is false within us so that what is truest in us can live. As Richard Rohr commented in a talk I heard recently, “Just because you’ve read a few good books doesn’t mean you’ve surrendered the ego and fallen in love with God.”<sup>i</sup>

Lent is a season when we face the wilderness within. Just as Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness as a precursor to his earthly ministry, we too, must face the subtle temptations to the false self so that we can be “cleared out” for real ministry. Here we face our own demons and they are rarely what we think! It is not just the temptation to drink pop or eat sweets or enjoy a glass of wine—as real as those temptations become after we have given them up for Lent! In the emptiness created by whatever it is we are fasting from, we become more aware of the compulsions of the false self and it is pretty beastly stuff.

We experience the evil one’s proficiency at crafting very subtle and dangerous appeals to the instinctual patterns we rely on for safety and survival, significance and success, power and control. We see how far we have to go on the journey of learning to trust God and God alone in the wilderness of

our most primal impulses and needs. We are appalled to learn that the false self can and will co-opt *anything*—including God and the things of God—to secure own survival, to prove ourselves to others, and to appear successful by whatever standards the group we identify with measures such things.

A true Lenten journey demands that we look clear-eyed at our lives and wonder, Where am I tempted to put even the things of God in service of my instinctual responses to the human situation? In what ways am I tempted to “turn these stones into bread” –using whatever gifts and powers God has given me in order to secure my own survival? Where am I putting God to the test—continually “throwing myself down” in a display of ministry heroics in order to prove something to myself and others—expecting God to come to my rescue time and time again? When, where and how am I tempted to worship “all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor” – i.e. the outward trappings of success—rather than seeking the inner authority that comes from worshipping God and serving him only?

### **With Jesus in the Wilderness**

In my experience, the “series of humiliations” Keating refers to in the opening quote has a lot to do with becoming more and more aware of how omnipresent our false- self patterns are and how regularly we are caught in their grip. This can get pretty uncomfortable. But the good news is that “every movement toward the humiliation of the false self, if we accept it, is a step toward interior freedom and inner resurrection.”<sup>ii</sup> And just in case we don’t know what to do with the temptations we encounter in this inner wilderness, we can be assured that we are in the wilderness with Jesus, the one who knows how to deal with the wild beasts of our false-self stuff.

As we read in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus was able to perceive exactly *what each temptation was really about* so he could deal with it at that level. He knew that Satan’s strategy for derailing what God is

trying to do in our lives is to seduce us to apply false-self strategies to our very human impulses to survive and stay safe, to prove ourselves to others, to be seen as successful, powerful, and in control. Being able to discern what each temptation was really about enabled Jesus to decisively reject false-self solutions in favor of the spiritual opportunities to trust himself to God. With each response, Jesus abandoned himself more profoundly to the reality of God’s providence and provision in the face of his most primal human needs and impulses—which is what the spiritual journey is really all about.

Such decisive response cleared the way for the angels to come and minister to him and it prepared him for ministry that had been purged of the false-self agenda. “These three temptations are the primal and universal temptations that all humans must face before they dare to take on any kind of power—as Jesus is about to do. They are all temptations to the misuse of power for purposes that are less than God’s purpose. Jesus passes all three tests and thus ‘the devil left him’ because he could not be used for lesser purposes. If you face such demons in yourself, God can and will use you mightily. Otherwise, you will, for sure, be used!”<sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Richard Rohr, *Spirituality in the New Millennium*, October 3, 2009.

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas Keating, *The Human Condition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), p. 38, 42.

<sup>iii</sup> Richard Rohr, *Wondrous Encounters: Scripture for Lent* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2011), p. 23-24.

Note: For more information on the false self — what it is, how it develops, how it affects our leadership and what we can do with it, see chapters 2-3 in *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership* (InterVarsity Press, 2008).

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