

Theological Imaginings: Contemplative Seeing

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“Blessed are your eyes, because they see;” (Matt: 13:16). It is a gift to see beyond the first level of sight, to see beyond appearances into the heart of what is perceived. Contemplative seeing does that. It leads us beyond the surface into meaning. It moves us into the revelatory moment of sight. It is the experience of living sacramentality.

I learned this truth from a tree standing deep within an ancient Sequoia Grove. At first glance the tree was unremarkable, battered and beaten by hundreds of winters, scarred by searing lightening. But it stood, straight and tall, offering its word to generations of visitors.



As I gazed upon this ancient tree, I began to see more than a burnt Sequoia. I saw the scars of chainsaws where, inexplicably, humans had skinned this tree once called the Mother of the

Forest. Section after section was stripped away, leaving the tree unprotected from the elements, from predator and flame. This proud tree had offered its silent hymn of praise to

God since the middle ages. Each day it reflected the beauty of simply being. Each day it gave a window into God's grandeur. It was 1854 when men cut away the Sequoia's bark. They wanted to prove to the world that such massive trees existed. They took the bark and reconstructed the tree at an exposition in London. The act was greeted with awe and horror; awe at the wonder of God's creation, horror that such beauty would be so violated. The outrage forced the grove to be protected by law. The violation of one tree led to the preservation of the grove for centuries to come. The Mother of the Forest surrendered her protection, surrendered her life but gave life to other trees. It was renamed the Sacrificial Tree.



The Sequoias are more than trees inspiring wonder. They are living parables. They are born through fire. Their seeds will not burst forth from their cones without fire's touch. They grow together, in small clusters surrounded by a community of other plants and smaller trees like dogwoods. Massive, they are also vulnerable, roots spreading out near the surface of the land. They are protected by their asbestos like bark protects the tree from the devastation of fire. When struck by lightning, its wound covers itself over leaving only a scar. It endures.

If you gaze at the tree with contemplative eyes, it is possible to see the story of endurance overcoming violence, of praise emerging from suffering. When you look up to its heights, you see two outstretched branches in *orans* pose, an invitation to offer praise in spite of wounds endured. The tree speaks of lasting fidelity. It is what it is, and in its authenticity,

challenges contemporary gazers to ask, “How can humans ravish earth?”. How can we strip away from another or earth itself what protects and sustains?

I have visited this Sacrificial Tree many times, and each visit reveals more. Each time I grieve for what we do to each other and to creation. Recently, in the midst of my reflection, I looked up to the heights of the tree and was deeply startled. As time yearly carves away the surface of the tree, it left a lasting mark. Time carved a heart into the trunk of the tree.



The tree had spoken once again. When I saw the heart, I was reminded that sufferings embraced create loving hearts, create a new spaciousness within one's spirit. Where once that space was covered over, now it provides a homing place for small birds, forest creatures and turns nothing away. Contemplative seeing has created a bond of intimacy between this ancient tree and myself. It is part of the power of contemplative seeing, for when we gaze beyond the surface we are drawn into the unique and holy beauty that lies deep within another part of God's creation.



Perhaps a day will soon come when I return to the Sequoia grove and find that my tree has finally crashed to the ground. It will continue the journey of its return to earth from which it came, but it will be doing more than that. It will speak to me of resurrection. From its substance will spring new life. It will feed new growth even as it surrenders its own existence. It will draw me into the Paschal mystery and remind me that daily I must die and rise that others might live.

Joan Chittister OSM speaks powerfully to the dynamic of contemplative seeing saying:

“To be contemplative we must be in tune with the Sound of the universe. We must become aware of the sacred in every single element of life. We must bring beauty to birth in a poor and plastic world. We must heal the human community. We must grow in concert with the God who is within.”ⁱ Such a contemplative stance means being open to the sacramentality of creation, to internalize the words of Hopkins: “The world is charged with the grandeur of God”.

Contemplative seeing is not limited to discovering the holy in the beauty of creation. It is about seeing the holy in the stranger, the outcast, the lonely and forgotten. It sees beyond human frailties and woundedness to the image of God dwelling within our brothers and sisters. It is the way Catherine McAuley saw the persons she was sent to serve, the way expressed in Matthew 25, “Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me.”

Each of us will discover our own Sacrificial Tree. Julian of Norwich found it in a hazelnut. Like Julian, one day we will hold in our hand a small piece of creation and hear God speaking to us through its holy gift.



¹ **Joan Chittister.** "Millennial wisdom stirs in the desert: amid mind-boggling change, monasticism's ancient truths remain vital. (Religious Life: Special Section)." The Free Library. 1999 National Catholic Reporter 12 Sep. 2020