

A SHIFT IN CONSCIOUSNESS

Excerpt from book chapter: “From Content to Context to Contemplation: One Professor’s
Journey”

Fran Grace, Ph.D.

.....

As I began my first sabbatical, I had little idea of the shift about to happen. I had been granted tenure at a university I truly enjoyed, yet I felt restless, exhausted, and disheartened. Weary of living from the neck up, my plan was to complete a degree in holistic healing. Just before I sent the tuition check, a dear nonacademic friend advised me: “You really think you can *study* your way to a healed life? The problem is not that you don’t know enough. The problem is that you don’t know who you are. Get over your fear and face yourself. The problems and the solution are both there, inside of you.” I gave up seeking another degree; instead, I went within.

What I saw was not all pretty: underneath the surface of success boiled unresolved resentments and painful insecurities. I felt despair about my life and could see no way out. Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross used the apt metaphor “dark night of the soul” to describe the interior “denuding” prior to “union.”²¹ What was gestating in this “darkness”? I had no idea.

“What is dark night for the world is day light for the soul.”²² This principle turned out to be true, in spite of my skepticism. Through a synchronicity of events, I came upon a book that unveiled the “day light” for me. The book ended with a brief account of the author’s spontaneous Enlightenment. As a scholar, I had studied mystics and sages for years, yet I had never come across a first-hand account of mystic realization so crystal-clear and subjectively compelling as this account. His consciousness seemed to be of such veritable lived truth

coherence that it induced impeccable clarity within me. I felt compelled to make a trip to see him, and that encounter re-directed the course of my life.

I do not presume that others would find him to be helpful. As we know from academic teaching, different students are drawn to different teachers, and it is impossible to decipher the exact reasons for this. Nor do I presume that a “teacher” in physical form is the answer for others. I have seen people emerge from despair similar to mine with the help of other fields of coherence: music; nature; pilgrimage; support groups; therapy; love relationship or loss of one; healing from cancer; near-death experience; the list of catalytic possibilities is endless. For reasons I still do not understand, it was an eighty year-old male sage that mirrored to me the truth of my life.

The discovery of this teacher for my inner life was profound, perhaps in the way that it would be for an initiate in any field of human learning to come upon a “coach” or “mentor” or “master” who had attained the highest degree of excellence in that field: the music composer who meets a Mozart, the physicist who meets an Einstein, the writer who meets a Jane Austen, the painter who meets a Rembrandt. In the vast literature on the inner sciences, a principal requirement specified for advancement is the guidance of a “realized master.” This would be true for any field of endeavor. When I was a competitive tennis player, I sought out the best tennis coach I could find. In the realm of interior work, I needed instruction and transmission from a realized teacher. Sufi philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr calls this realized state “the ultimate goal of human life, the crown of human existence.”²³ Before encountering this sage, my academic interpretation was that Enlightenment did not exist except as fantasy in the minds of well-meaning religious people. But this third-person theoretical interpretation fell away in the presence of a real sage.

I remembered Rumi's famed encounter with his teacher, Shams, many centuries ago. Rumi was an erudite theology professor and Shams a traveling dervish. Suddenly, out of nowhere, Shams appeared in the marketplace and asked Rumi a question that yanked him out of his scholarly sobriety and into a whirling intoxication of heart-stirring poetry and salvific joy. Shams was a living fire, and Rumi's heart ignited from the contact. Shams told him: "Intellect takes you to the threshold, but it doesn't take you into the house." He explained: "Whoever is more learned is further from the goal. The more abstruse is his thinking, the further he is. This is the work of the heart, not the forehead."²⁴ Christian mystics and Zen masters affirm a similar path to illumination: the ripening from intellectual erudition to experiential heart-knowledge. Dogen, thirteenth-century Zen master, realized that his sitting meditation would benefit others more than his book-knowledge: "I stopped reading recorded sayings and other texts. I sat wholeheartedly and clarified the matter."²⁵

With my teacher's enlightened consciousness as a guide, I put the books aside and "sat wholeheartedly." To initiate this inward focus, I spent several weeks in a rustic cabin, off the grid, down a rough, dirt road in the middle of an Oregon forest. There was no cell phone, computer, email, electricity, or indoor plumbing. I hiked downhill through snow to get to the compost toilet, and I heated the cabin with a woodstove. In this isolated and simple space, I faced several years' worth of jagged inner pieces.

In the years previous, I had grown exhausted from a way of teaching and "doingness" that aimed at changing external behaviors and institutional structures of justice. I saw in myself, students, and colleagues that behaviors could *appear* more just while inner prejudice remained. How could I eliminate the prejudice from the inner core of consciousness itself? The teacher taught me that when the source (heart-mind) is radiant with compassion, then the outflow

(actions) cannot help but be compassionate—much like an uncontaminated water source effortlessly pours out pure water. He taught me to see myself as consciousness itself, rather than the contents of consciousness; in other words, to see myself as the screen upon which the movie is projected, or as the light of the projector itself, rather than a character in the movie. I started to pay more attention to the silence underneath all sounds than to the sounds themselves. This radical shift in perspective made possible the dropping away of mental patterns that had carried a lifetime of suffering. Through contemplative practice, cultivation of positive inner states became possible: attention, compassion, contentment, forgiveness, and stillness.

When I returned to work after my sabbatical, colleagues and friends remarked that I appeared happier, healthier, and calmer. As the years have passed, I recognize this period as one of inner transformation from a state of incoherence to one of lived-truth coherence. There is obviously much further to go, for as I let go of one barrier to compassion, another reveals itself. The gaps in my inner evolution are ever before me.

The primary point is that those first-person experiments out in the woods changed me radically as a teacher and scholar. I learned that meditation had the capacity to reduce suffering—without drugs, without cost, and in a way that activated a person’s own ethical agency and refined the mind itself. Meditative practice seemed to offer a means to fulfill the purpose of what I understood liberal education to be: to foster “excellence, private and public,” “train the mind,” and “hold the habitual vision of greatness.”²⁶ I left my solitary retreat knowing that my teaching and writing would be different than it had been. I came to see Religious Studies as a field rich in resources and methodologies for inner liberation and thereby foundational to the classical liberal arts aim to “know thyself.” Eager to return to the classroom,

I intuited that the interior (contemplative) dimension would complete the informational (content) and interactive (context) dimensions characteristic of my previous teaching.