



# RESOURCES IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Dedicated to Research and Reflection in Formative Spirituality

## REMEMBRANCE AND HOPE

February 15, 2010

... so for a while it seems possible  
not to think of the hold of the body weakening, the ratio  
of the body to the void shifting ...

~ Louise Gluck, *A Village Life*

As we celebrate Ash Wednesday the liturgical formula from the Book of Genesis reverberates in our consciousness: "Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return." We begin this season of repentance and preparation with a suspension of our ordinary forgetfulness of our destiny. We remember that we, as we take ourselves to be, come from the dust of the earth and are on our way to returning to that from which we came. A most sobering recollection! And yet, as we enter this Season of Lent 2010, there is also an invitation to know the profound consolation and the transcendent hope that a mindful living of these words affords us.

For us as human persons, the bad news is that everything passes and the good news is that everything passes. Everything that is created, everything that we strive to develop in ourselves and in our world is transient. When that something is a cherished someone, a valuable possession, or a painfully acquired talent or skill, the pain and grief are intense. This relationship, this valued object, this personal capacity are all so much a part of me that I feel as if *I*, as I have known myself, cease to exist. On the other hand, when the passing is of physical illness, physical or emotional pain, of guilt and aloneness through the experience of being forgiven, or the disappearance of an impasse or obstacle, we experience the transience with a sense of relief and even joy. At such times we recognize that we are always an as yet unfinished possibility. In that moment we know experientially what Adrian van Kaam calls the transcendence dynamic of human life that moves at the core of our being.

With each passing February day, those of us in the Northern Hemisphere experience the sun's return. Returning home in the late afternoon one day last week, my heart leapt at the sunlight showing itself for the first time in our long dark hallway. The sun had once again reached that point on the horizon where it could shine through the windows surrounding our west facing front door. At this time of year, the passing of each day brings with it a visceral sense of promise, a felt experience that invites us to ponder the relationship between transience and hope. For the light to return, the days must pass.

Lent is a time to remember what our ordinary ways of thinking are so invested in forgetting, the "shifting" of "the ratio of the body to the void" that is, in truth, occurring with each passing moment. Everything we know, everything we take "ourselves" to be is "passing away." This is true not only of our bodies but of our thoughts as well. It is true of everything we make as well as everything we are. Lent is the time to recognize that this truth that seems so fearful to us is really our greatest consolation



and our world's greatest reason for hope. In an essay entitled *The Uses of Adversity*, Wendell Berry poses the following questions:

Do all human societies have in them the seeds of their failure? Are those seeds likely to be the selfishness and dishonesty of the dominant people? Does failure typically reduce the society, or persons in it, to some version of the rare state of nature? And is there something possibly instructive and restorative in this reduction?

To remember that we are dust and that we shall return to dust is to recall that everything we are and everything we do contain within them the seeds of their own destruction. In the course of a lifetime we build a self, as well as cultures and societies that take on a sense of separate and even competing identities. There is a pride in us that longs for permanence in our personal identities and in the things that we build. But, the humility to which Lent calls us is to a lived acceptance of the reality that our efforts at self-creation are futile. It is a summons to recognize that all we are and all we build will, in time, return to the dust from which they came.

"Everything that is carries" within it, however, not only the seeds of its own destruction but also the seeds of restoration and rebirth. Thus, the humility to which Lent calls us also carries within it the promise of "joyful hope." What a relief to come to truly appreciate that, finally, all we have and all we are depends not on our efforts but rather comes from the hand of our Creator. How freeing it is to know that when we have done all we have been commanded to do and can do, we are servants of God's will and God's way, not "masters of the universe".

One Lenten practice that can help us to learn the humbling truth that we are servants and not masters is to take time each day to sit still. Blaise Pascal has written: "All human evil comes from a single cause, [our] . . . inability to sit still in a room." When we stop doing, even for a moment, we are brought to the realization that the life of the world continues in the absence of our agency. We confront the humbling, and at first frightening truth, that we are not the center of the universe but rather a very small part of creation. All human evil springs from our forgetfulness of our place, and all human virtue from our knowing our place and our unique potential, from that small but distinct place, to be a servant of the Whole.

This Lent may each of us take time each day to remember who we really are by sitting still. By taking this time of "not doing," we become mindful of the "shifting" of "the ratio of the body to the void" that is occurring with each passing moment of our lives. And in time may we discover that this "shifting of the ratio of the body to the void," this returning to the dust from which we come, is not to be feared but to be welcomed – for "the void" is not really a void at all but a plenitude of Presence, the Source of all Creation inviting us home.