***(III) Embracing Contraries***

*Step Three: Let It All Go*

**Piper’s Dad**

An old man is dying in a dark, fetid room.

His daughter is with him, in her kindness, praying

and holding his hand, though he was a harsh

and bitter man all his life and abused her

and abused his wife. He had been in combat

in a war and maybe that was it, but now

he is dying in a dark, fetid room and he is rigid

in his narrow, little bed, shaking, hands clenched,

and his daughter is with him. When I come

to read the Psalms to him he seems to recognize

the rhythm of the words and how one line

is parallel to the next and this seems to soothe him

for a while. He doesn’t shake as much.

His eyes stop darting back and forth beneath

the stony lids. And later, after I leave, he opens

his eyes. He seems to focus for a moment.

He seems to look through the darkness

at his daughter, and he says two words to her,

in a faint, croaking voice: *You bitch*.

Who knows what this man was thinking

or what he was seeing. Maybe he wasn’t talking

to his daughter, maybe he was talking to Death,

but this is what he says, *you bitch,*

and this is what his daughter does. She rises

from that chair, and she leans over that bed,

and she whispers in her father’s ear:

*Daddy, I love you.* And that night, he dies.

Love is a great emptying out and losing.

Love is a rising from a chair. It is a leaning

over a bed. It is a whisper in a room and a word

in a room. The last thing this man

ever said was ugly and vulgar and mean.

But this wasn’t the last thing he ever heard.

Chris Anderson

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*The Light*

A thought, a material improvement, a harmony, a unique nuance of human love,

the enchanting complexity of a smile or a glance, all these new beauties that appear

for the first time, in me or around me, on the human face of the earth—

the spiritual success of the universe is bound up with the release of every possible energy in it.

Our smallest tasks contribute infinitesimally, at least indirectly, to the building of something definitive.

That, ultimately, is the meaning and value of our acts.

Any increase that I can bring upon myself or upon things is translated into some increase

in my power to love and some progress in God’s blessed hold on the universe.

With every creative thought or action, a little more health is being spread in the human mass,

and in consequence, a little more liberty to act, to think, and to love.

We serve to complete the work of creation, even by the humblest work of our hands.

Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*

Whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me.

Matthew 25

*The Darkness*

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my mouth?

Psalm 22

Lord, my God, who am I that You should forsake me? You have thrown me away unwanted—unloved. I call, I cling, I want—and there is no One to answer. The darkness is so dark—and I am alone. Unwanted, forsaken. Even deep down, right in, there is nothing but emptiness and darkness.

Mother Teresa

*More on the Uses of Darkness*

Spiritual experience is so deeply satisfying that many who taste it wish to experience it more fully. And so they enter a monastery. The honeymoon may continue for a time as they adapt to a new mode of living, but eventually the waves of consolation cease and the novice is left with the monotony of daily chores, the ambiguities of community living, and a persistent dryness in prayer. To fill this emptiness, temptations of various kinds begin to intrude upon awareness which, even if they are successfully repelled, cumulatively cause weariness and discouragement.

So what does the fervent seeker after God discover in the monastery? Not the immediate presence of God, but the absence of God. . . . A monastery exists to guide us into the realization that our desire for God will be satisfied only in eternity.

Michael Casey

. . . And then there surfaced clearly in my mind what I had always vaguely seen but never laid hold of. This *was* Carmel. Here there was indeed nothing—no security, no “glory,” nothing to give satisfaction. I had vowed poverty and I had it. I had declared myself ready to depend on God alone and he had taken me at my word. Oh, if I had entered what I happily dreamed of as a perfect Carmel, with its fine tradition, its cloisters, I would have sought security in these externals, assumed the image of the Carmelite and escaped from God’s working in me. There had been no mistake; he had not let me down; this was the set-up I needed, where I would be open to him. This insight never failed me. I lost all desire for the “ideal” condition, the “ideal” Carmel. Ruth Burrows

[Desolation teaches us that] it is not within our power to acquire great devotion, ardent love, tears, or any other spiritual consolation, but that all of this is a gift and grace of God our Lord. [Desolation demonstrates that we shouldn’t] claim as our own what belongs to another, allowing our intellect to rise up in a spirit of pride or vainglory, attributing to ourselves the devotion to other aspects of spiritual consolation.

St. Ignatius Loyola

The best help for holding on to the light is to understand

that we can do nothing and that it comes from God.

St. Teresa of Avila

*Holding It Together*

“*Conjunctive Faith*: life can be paradoxical and full of mystery”

James Fowler

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? . . .*

*Yet you are holy . . .*

*I am a worm, and not human;*

*scorned by others and despised by the people. . . .*

*Yet it was you who took me from the womb . . .*

*I can count all my bones.*

*They divide my clothes among themselves . . .*

*But you, O Lord, do not be far away! . . .*

*All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord! Psalm 22*

Of course we don’t know what we’re talking about. If we knew what we were talking about, we wouldn’t be talking about God!

St. Augustine

Never try to get things too clear. In this mixed-up life there is always an element of unclearness. If I could understand religion as I understand that two and two make four, it would not be worth understanding.

Frederich Von Hugel

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There was a time when I would start the New Year by creating a master list that I thought, if I accomplished, would provide the purpose I was seeking in my life. I believed that if my house was organized, if my gardens flourished, or if I finally completed the project, then my soul would settle and life could begin.

Shortly after my little one died, a new year began and the page where the list would have been pored over sat blank. I walked blindly into an uncharted future with nothing to offer but an empty vessel clinging to a mustard seed of hope. When every fiber of my being begged to differ, I would whisper, *For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, not for woe! plans to give you a future full of hope* (Her 29:11). At times my whispered declaration was more of a question that he would answer through my brave one’s smile, my husband’s embrace, or a reminder of Catherine’s love. Each answer was a validation that I was placed in that moment for that very moment, and that was all that mattered.

Days have turned into years, and the page where the list would reside remains blank. I can now see that it is in setting aside my will that I am better able to see his. I see that each day is a blank slate in which he will provide what I need to live his purpose. While I may not see the purpose in its entirety, it is fulfilling his will for the right now that breathes life anew and settles my soul.

*Jennifer Hubbard, Newtown Conn. The younger of her two children, Catherine, was a victim of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012.*

*His mother kept all these things in her heart. Luke 2:50-51*

*Joy is felt as an expansion of the heart. St. Thomas Aquinas*

*God is bigger than our hearts, and he knows everything. 1 John 3:20*

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*Prayer is a long, loving look at the real.*

*Walter Burghardt*

*from Jesus’ Farewell Discourse in the Gospel of John*

I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. (15:11)

You did not choose me but I chose you. (15:16)

Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. (16:20)

When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world.

So you have pain now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (16:21-22)