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Spiritual Journey during Apocalyptic Times

A Journey.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Little Gidding, TS. Eliot

Abbot Alison's introductory note: After our "zoom" conversation with Carolyn Baker at the recent gathering of the Order, I received a surprising invitation from her to write the forward to her new book, Apocalypse Anytime, an interfaith devotional for a world on fire. This essay captures my sense of the spiritual journey that we are on during these apocalyptic times as we traverse this season of Lent into Easter.

The front cover of this book is visually arresting. Carolyn Baker weaves the flames of the Apocalypse emerging in our times into an ancient form of Christian literature, known as a Devotional. This is not a Christian Devotional; rather Carolyn Baker uses contemporary wisdom drawn from a wide landscape. This book is an alchemical encounter between the fires of chaos and breakdown married with the wisdom of our elders. The result is this Interfaith Devotional.

The earliest devotional, the *Felire*, was written in the ninth century in Ireland as a daily monastic practice. Interestingly the word *Felire* has one of its roots in the Latin *vigil*, meaning watchfulness. Deep in the origins of this spiritual literature was a daily practice of spiritual reading. Running through this Devotional is the call into direct soul experiencing, an immersive embodied watchfulness. This is neither an intellectual study guide nor a self help book.

Carolyn Baker begins her devotional with the HBO series *The Last of Us*. I always steered clear of the horror of this dystopian and zombie genre. In her last book, — *Undaunted: Living Fiercely into Climate Meltdown in an Authoritarian World*. — Carolyn Baker Introduces the reader to

what she calls *fierce practices*, practices designed to challenge our complacency and denial, and to face our deepest fears and bottomless grief.

To test my courage, I decided to watch this series as such a fierce practice. Oh sure I flinched, covered my eyes but gradually I was drawn into this powerful narrative. I began to wonder if in a world overrun by sheer survival, with all its savagery and ugliness, was there room for goodness and tenderness. And thankfully we see human kindness and love, provided there are fearsome boundaries of protection made of landmines, barbed wire, heavily armed guards and fierce dogs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs reminds us that without basic protection the possibility of kindness and generosity is difficult. And yet right at the center of this TV series are the two main characters, a shell of a broken man and a raging teenage girl, both deeply traumatized, neither of them able to trust or respect each other. They are thrown unwillingly into the task of making their way across thousands of miles with no protection other than their intense need to get to their destination. Initially all they possess are their sharply honed instincts with a willingness and ability to kill to save each other. Gradually, exposed as they are to ever present danger, something deeply human grows between them, nothing sentimental, but a deep redemptive and healing love.

It is easy to think that only heroic figures like Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King or Joan of Arc, are capable of the fierce practices of courage, resilience and loving service. The fact that you the reader have made it this far into this devotional suggests that you are already involved in a deeper process, a psycho-spiritual journey of awakening in these apocalyptic times.

Through Carolyn Baker's devotional there is an arc of inner soul development that follows the wisdom laid out at the beginning of the recently discovered Gospel of Thomas, found in a cliff near Nag Hammadi in the Egyptian desert in 1945. It contains a hundred and fourteen aphorism or wisdom sayings of Yeshua (Jesus). Early in this text:

Yeshua (Jesus) says...

*If you are searching, you must not stop until you find.
When you find, however, you will become troubled.
Your confusion will give way to wonder.
In wonder you will reign over all things.
Your sovereignty will be your rest.*

If you are searching, you must not stop until you find....

In these few lines Yeshua sets out the path of soul maturation and spiritual awakening. We often our *search* out of some deep sense that something is missing. Maybe we are looking to heal some heartbreak within our hearts. Or maybe we are looking for a kind hope in order to face what seems like a hopeless future. Or maybe we need to find within ourselves some sustaining resilience? Or maybe we need to find somewhere below our fears the courage to face this civilization crisis. Perhaps we need some means to find a meaningful way to act within a world where there seem to be no solutions to the spiraling crises. This Devotional offers a place to land, a place to *find* yourself, a place to begin a pilgrimage of sorts, a map of a landscape to find your footing. Page by page Carolyn Baker takes us into this spiraling process of descent, discovery, wisdom, joy, compassion and maturity.

When you find, however, you will become troubled...

Carolynn Baker situates us rightly into *trouble*, in the seductive and slippery slope of hope. We have to face that our hope is really a naive optimism, or a kind of magical wishful thinking to escape fear. We cling to hope only to have it dashed. And so fear returns and we scramble to find a new source of hope. So it goes back and forth between hope and fear until we realize that this hope creates a protective and numbing wall around our heart and grief that seems to have no bottom.

We are now drawn into the deepest *trouble*. This is a descent into the darkness of the unconscious, and all that we have repressed, the trauma and all the losses. Here we may be tempted to skip over this, bypassing this pain and in order to find an escape. Maybe hopeful AI, friendly aliens, or the Rapture will save us from disaster. But it is only in the Shadow will we find the true ground of our humanity and the spiritual gold of our being. This journey into the underworld is not simply psychological, it is an earthy encounter with our most treasured gift, our precious heart. Stripped of her hardened walls the heart begins to grieve for all that is being lost at the hands of the extractive greed of human activity. As this grief extends itself we encounter an unrelenting emptiness, an emptiness that cannot be filled by any of the consolations of our comfortable, material existence.

Your confusion will give way to wonder...

There is no hope and no fear, nothing to do but breathe and wait without expectation. And it is here that we may notice that this emptiness is not a gnawing sense of hollowness, but a subtle spaciousness. This is the portal to the *wonder* of our spiritual nature coming forward to touch us. The grief now turns into tears of gratitude as we awaken into a new experience of the world. The world now appears alive and precious. We see through our desecrated landscape into a living world, a conscious world. And now we know joy, not happiness in the midst of a world in trouble.

The US Constitution enshrines the pursuit of happiness as a foundational principle guiding this democracy. But happiness is ephemeral, entirely dependent on fulfilling the desires of our instinctual nature. We never cease from wanting, especially if it is glittery, yummy, cool. And for a while we are happy, but then its allure fades and we start looking for the next something to fill our hollowness, boredom, and anxiety. This appetite will never be satisfied. Soon happiness becomes a deadening and unquenchable addiction.

In 2010 following an explosion on the oil rig the Deepwater Horizon oil spill spread out over the gulf waters. This was the largest marine oil spill in history. I remember watching the images of oil rolling over the delicate marshes along the gulf coast. My heart hurt. One morning during meditation I saw the oil seeping in among the marsh grasses and to my surprise, instead of horror I felt sweet love, followed by joy. This made no sense to me and I felt guilty about my insensitivity to the obvious suffering of the Gulf ecosystem and the local population.

It wasn't until much later that I realized directly that divine consciousness "lies below" or "beyond", or "through" the surface stream of my experiencing. No matter the content, if we have traversed to some degree, the descent, the realm of trouble, we will know this wonder, this joy of being. Joy brings a depth of meaning to the soul, we are here for a reason. We taste

that it is possible to live in the midst of the crises without drowning in despair. Joy is not simply smiley and syrupy, it is radiant, it is zestful and grounded.

*In wonder you will reign over all things.
Your sovereignty will be your rest.*

It is this grounded lightness that draws our souls towards our particular expression in the world. We know what we are here to do. Right now in this moment just in front of us the next step appears, sometimes easy, sometimes trying, and sometimes we stumble. Something precious develops within us in this moment by moment encounter with what lies in front of us. Some call this preciousness this pearl of great price. It is the irritation of the grit of sand trapped in the oyster shell that produces the luminosity of the pearl. We also grow as we encounter the grit of life. If once again we try to avoid this maturation of the soul and seek to find more exciting spiritual highs, the glow of embodied wisdom cannot take root in our hearts. And we will cease to shine with joy and welcome.

Finally we are no longer desperate for the consolations of spirit. Instead we are offered up in service of care, healing and comfort for those we find around us. Oh sure we will fall down, make mistakes, bad things will happen and the world will continue to burn, but the life giving flames are never far away. When we fall, we can now stand back up into our spiritual maturity. Wendell Berry calls this the practice of resurrection. Yeshua calls this sovereignty. Carolyn Baker calls this fierce practice.

It was only when I looked closely at the front cover of this book that I noticed that the flames enclosed a beautiful tulip. The tulip is at ease and at rest. These flames don't destroy. The flames have transformed her beauty into radiance. The tulip has become a blessing. And so it is for us.

This transformation reminds me of the last lines in Little Gidding by T.S.Eliot:

And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

~~ Abbot Alison Hine