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Leaving Mt. Baldy (Mark 2: 23-28)

Pentecost IX

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Leaving Mt. Baldy

*I come down from the mountain
after many years of study
and rigorous practice.
I left my robes hanging on a peg
in the old cabin
where I had sat so long
and slept so little.
I finally understood
I had no gift
for Spiritual Matters.
'Thank you Beloved',
I heard a heart cry out
as I entered the stream of cars
on the Santa Monica Freeway,
westbound for L.A.
A number of people
(some of them practitioners)
have begun to ask me angry questions
about Ultimate Reality.
I suppose they don't like to see
old Jikan smoking.*

Leonard Cohen

Sacred – secular; spiritual – material; discipline – freedom ... it's so easy to construe these words as opposed to one another, to relate to them dualistically. But in this wonderfully perceptive poem, 'Leaving Mt. Baldy', Leonard Cohen blows open that dualistic approach and reveals in the process the paradox at the heart of true religion

– the one the Buddha expresses by saying ‘my practice is no practice’ and Jesus through his teaching that ‘the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath’ (Mark 2: 28).

The poem’s title refers to the moment in 1999 when Cohen, Canadian poet and singer-songwriter, left the Zen monastery on Mt. Baldy, just out of Los Angeles, where he’d spent several years living as a monk. ‘I come down from the mountain’, he writes, and as commentator Roger Housden remarks, while this is a literal statement ‘it is also a metaphor, something of a self-parody. Cohen is coming down from his high notions of what *spirituality* means, coming back to join ordinary life and people on earth’.¹ He’s given the monastic vocation, serious ‘spiritual life’, a good shot – there’ve been ‘many years of study and rigorous practice’, he says. But now he’s leaving that life behind – he’s taking off his monastic identity as he leaves his robes hanging on a peg in the cabin ‘where I had sat so long and slept so little’, putting in long hours of solitary prayer. It’s time to rejoin the masses, ‘the stream of cars’, heading into the city. ‘I finally understood’, he says, ‘that I had no gift for Spiritual Matters’.

Except, of course, that this is itself a profound spiritual insight. The way Cohen capitalizes ‘Spiritual Matters’ suggests irony, suggests he’s awake to what the Trappist monk Thomas Merton also recognized as the perennial temptation of the professionally religious. That is the temptation to think oneself spiritually ‘special’, to believe that because you’re a monk, a priest, a born-again ‘Christian’ or serious practitioner that you’re somehow on a higher plane than everyone else. In his journal, Merton wrote of the day he too rejoined the human race – though in his case, it didn’t involve literally leaving his monastery. Rather, it occurred when he suddenly realized, in the middle of a busy shopping district, that he was no different from the people around him, no better or holier, no more beloved of God. This realization, Merton said, ‘was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness’.²

¹ Roger Housden, *Ten Poems to Change Your Life Again and Again* (New York: Harmony Books, 2007), p.60.

² Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1995), p.156.

And he marvelled: 'To think that for sixteen or seventeen years I have been taking seriously this pure illusion that is implicit in so much of our monastic thinking'.³

At least it took Cohen only five years to work it out and, as he leaves his robes behind and enters the stream of cars heading for L.A., he hears 'a heart [his heart?] cry out', 'Thank you Beloved'. The 'traffic is the perfect metaphor for everyday life's humbling ... ordinariness'⁴ – yet entering, re-entering that ordinariness provokes in Cohen the most profound gratitude and relief. It was the same for Merton. To understand, finally to accept, that one has 'no gift for Spiritual Matters' is, in Merton's words, to regain 'the immense joy of being a man', to experience it 'as a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race' and nothing more.⁵

But what does this mean? Does it mean there's *no* point in dedicated spiritual practice? That it doesn't matter whether we pray or not, are disciplined or not, that there's no such thing as the 'spiritual life'? Well – yes and no.

Both Cohen and Merton had dedicated years to ascetical disciplines that helped liberate them from habitual ways of being, that awakened their fuller self-awareness and openness to reality. The whole point of spiritual practice – meditation, fasting, retreat, pilgrimage – is to do with enabling such liberation and awareness. It's the work necessary to clarify vision, purify and simplify the heart and make us receptive to grace. But the whole point of *this* work is the transformation of ordinary life and the fuller realization of our humanity, the deepening of our capacity to love. The Zen parable speaks of the practitioner before Enlightenment, chopping wood and carrying water; and after Enlightenment, chopping wood and carrying water. Life goes on, but we see it afresh, we're in it differently, and we enable different possibilities for others.

Spiritual practice is corrupted when it becomes an end in itself, when our discipline and rigour are the means by which we assure ourselves and others of our righteousness and our 'holier than thou-ness'. Cohen picks up just this kind of

³ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p.157.

⁴ Housden, *Ten Poems to Change Your Life Again and Again*, p.64.

⁵ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p.157.

corruption in his fellow practitioners, who feel so threatened when he heads off down the road. They begin 'to ask him angry questions about Ultimate Reality' and don't like to see him smoking, but their anger and judgementalism are the very signs they're not quite as enlightened as they might like to think. It's the same with the Pharisees – who are fixated on adherence to the rule of Sabbath – without understanding what the rule is in service of. Which is why Jesus insists – the 'sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath'.

But this brings us, I think, to a difficult question. I've been saying that discipline in the spiritual life is necessary yet penultimate. Just as the musician practices scales over and over in order to liberate her art, so the lover of God practices self-control, a disciplined rhythm of prayer in order to learn simply to be with God, drawn deeper into relationship. Sometimes we can keep on with the discipline, the restraint, the 'work' of prayer and renunciation – we can keep on practising our scales, when really the time has come to play a concerto, to lighten up, let be, trust our deepest desires and 'come down from the mountain'. But sometimes it's the other way around – we can let go discipline prematurely and before our deeper transformation is wrought. In the name of 'freedom' we can become self-indulgent, self-willed, still enslaved without realising it by the ego-ic self.

How do we know which is which? I don't think it's always easy to discern. But here's one thought. John Main taught that when you meditate it's important to say the mantra throughout the whole time of meditation. At some point, he said, the mantra will cease – it will have brought you into silence. But the practitioner does not choose to stop saying it – your responsibility is simply to stay with it, until you can say it no longer. The discipline is transcended, in other words, when it transcends itself. John Main's is not the only method of meditation, but I think there's something in this teaching which has broader application. It's the insight that the transcending of spiritual discipline is itself a fruit of the discipline and occurs as gift.

How did Cohen know it was time to leave the monastery? He doesn't tell us in this poem – but it's telling that he leaves the monastery by joining the Santa Monica

freeway. 'The whole point of monastic life is freedom: freedom from duality',⁶ and when he has authentically attained that freedom then Cohen is (as it were) free to go. The practice has transcended itself. It's the same, it seems, for Jesus. He is so intimately connected with the Father, that in him the religious rules are all transcended and fulfilled – which is why he can say that the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath. How amazing to trust that in him, we too are being drawn by our practice beyond practice, and beyond religion into experiencing the whole of life as prayer.

⁶ Housden, *Ten Poems to Change Your Life Again and Again*, p.64.