



# **BUT A RIVER DOESN'T FLOW IN PIECES**

*by Ance McMahon*

## **ABSTRACT**

In or out, on or off, action or contemplation? We oscillate between the either /or until we deliberately, or as forced by circumstances, take up the challenge to enter the paradox of both / and. In the tension generated by the opposites we are changed and transformed, opened to a 'third way' of thinking and acting. The tension is thus creative.

To pause and linger in the suspension, rather than rush into fight, or escape into flight, runs counter to the prevailing culture of appearance and speed. It takes resolve to stand in 'the tragic gap,' between what is and what can be, where the old certitudes and ego-securities will be shed. But awakened to the truths, as revealed in the deep listening the gap makes possible, we become filled out and widened, become available as contemplative activists in a wounded, divided culture and world.

**T**he photo on the wall in my study shows a cottage set in a meadow on the side of a mountain. It's small, painted red, with white window frames. Leading down from the veranda there are wooden steps, on which one can sit and look out over the landscape. There is a cool scent of dew, the sound of birdsong, and wind. And there are trees, their stems luminous in the morning light, vibrant, alive, as if breathing.

And this also includes me looking at the photograph. Faced with the image I'm finding my breath again. Oh joy and glorious prospect. I'll be in that cottage, on that meadow, on those steps, in four weeks time, again.

Until then there are deadlines to meet and projects to consider. Better look at that photo again, often, in order to remember to breathe.

But is there a way I could breathe all the time?

### ***The trap of the either / or:***

Parker Palmer (1999) speaks about the trap of the either/or world; the division, separation, of action and contemplation. We either 'do,' or 'don't do,' as we take refuge in the form of a holiday or break some kind., where we draw breath, and start to repair, recover and regenerate what was lost during the dynamic action. And then we rev up again in order to return to the, so called, 'real world'.

Action *or* contemplation. Action versus non-action. We alternate, 'caught on the horns of the fight-or-flight'. . . (Palmer, 2004, p.177).

For some of us this seesaw helps us to stay up-and-running, but for some it might one day stop working. As we reach the long-yearned-for time off, the body-mind fails to respond and deliver; we can't switch off. The body protests, we get sick and end up spending our time-off in bed. The 'vacation approach' to general maintenance collapses.

Palmer (1999) suggests that we place a hyphen between the two opposites, (making it 'action-and-contemplation'). And thus put an end to the separation, so that we can 'break through' into the paradox of both / and (p.15).

So how do we do that, in practical terms?

### ***The paradox of both / and:***

Palmer (1999) proposes that we either be really 'wise', (and take deliberate, conscious steps towards it, I hear), or we can wait for the day when we will be forced into it, by necessity. Be forced to abandon all attempts to manage and control, forced to abandon will, and thus, in Palmer's words, 'fall' into paradox (p.16).

I belong to the latter category; I had to 'fall.' I wasn't at all wise, in spite of having had glaring warning signs, having been sick for three consecutive Christmas holidays!

### ***The 'tragic gap:'***

I didn't 'fall' gracefully; I collapsed. And ended up spending close to a decade, in what Palmer (2004) calls the 'tragic gap,' the void between what is, (the reality of the moment), and what can be, (the potential of something else, something better, emerging)(pp.174-175).

The onset of the burnout, that was my 'fall,' was sparked off in the middle of a group meditation I

was leading. I had to interrupt the session mid-stream, and find a way to get back home and close the door behind me. I had to retire, literally and metaphorically, to recoup, which turned out to be a process far more complex and all embracing than I could possibly foresee at the time. Because in it I had to let go of everything, of who I was, or rather, who and what I thought I was; and I had to let go of control, of plans and aspirations. And I had to let go of my will, which was the last to loosen its grip. Hell-bent on refusal to slacken the reins, it kept me down and under for a long time.

In the gap during that time I learnt, and unlearnt, a whole world and more, some of what is described in a previous article: *Meandering Through The Field Of The Unexpected* (McMahon, 2010). But there were core moments. I don't think I would be sitting here today had it not been for that day in hospital, where I was undergoing tests. I was on my own with time to spend, all the blood-samples taken for that day. I had brought some cassette tapes along and was listening to one of them, selected a random. The speaker, who I did not have a clue as to who she was, was talking about the 'dark night', and the ingredients of it, as she saw it. And something was said, and I can honestly not recall exactly what, but in one clean swoop I recognized myself. In that instant I knew where I was and why. The penny dropped. Which meant that I from then on had meaning and purpose, a framework for my experience, an archetypal perspective. Thus the rest of the journey, which turned out to be considerable in terms of both time and process, became bearable and do-able. I was no longer afraid. 'Death', which most definitely is a hallmark of burnout, was not just ok, but even encouraged; I could go with it rather than resist.

### ***Sustenance and fuel in the gap:***

In other words, the view I took of my circumstances, and finding meaning and purpose within them, came to be the key-and-core ingredients that ended up carrying me all the way, from then on, to recovery. It gave me a rationale, and the ground to stand on. And the power of will, which until then had been an obstacle, could be re-harnessed. Aligned and in rhythm with my new understanding it was put to service by keeping me to the necessary discipline of self-care and -maintenance: like getting out of bed, eating wisely, and making sure to get fresh air and sunlight.

For the onlooker it must have appeared as if I was on a permanent holiday. But the world I was in was the gap, in which I had to learn how to - sit,

patiently and openly, without scrambling for an ultimate fix or solution, or withdrawing into denial. I had to – sit. And I never worked harder!

So I ‘fell’ into paradox, into the both/and world by getting ill and burning out. And burning, as in ‘dying,’ is a major component of the gap.

### ***The gap as ‘liminal’ stage, and threshold:***

Richard Rohr (2003), prolific writer and speaker, founding director of the Center for Action and Contemplation (!), speaks about the ‘liminal’ space, the name taken from the Latin *Limen*, meaning ‘threshold (p.47).’ In his numerous retreats for men, emphasis is placed on the rite of passage, the initiation, as portal to manhood / adulthood. He describes it as a process of voluntary displacement, and a necessary prerequisite for change and transformation. We need to be shocked, he says, in order to take the leap out of the normal and habitual (p.48). The induced crisis is meant to both rattle and blast the windows open. And this process, we need to go through often.

In other words, the gap, the liminal space, is meant to wake us up from sleep walking, and open the door to growth and expansion. It is meant to serve.

As counsellors and therapists we know the gap and we know the space. But we need frequent reminders as to how to best sustain and hold ourselves in it, as we in turn hold and provide sustenance for others in theirs. Because the gap, the void, the stress point, the crisis, induced or thrust upon us, requires oomph and stamina, and a steady ground on which to stand.

### ***Care of self within the gap, and the ‘system:’***

When in crisis, when under pressure, the awareness of energy, the supply or lack of it, becomes heightened, and even acute. Hence the need to mind and tend whatever level there is, becomes essential. I was reminded of what I was taught in this regard, by the circumstances of the burnout, as I listened to a lecture about ‘compassionate caring’, by Frank Ostaseski, co-founder of the first Buddhist Hospice in the U.S. He was on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for twenty years. In terms of compassionate caring, he, in his own words, has been ‘at this for some time’ (Ostaseski, 2008)).

He attributes the ability to be available, mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually, to a number of principles, which he lists : The ability to welcome *everything*, without pushing anything away. To see everything as meaningful and of equal importance. To bring every bit of yourself to the experience,

which means that you don’t compartmentalize. And that you don’t wait for something to happen, as you then miss out on what is right in front of you; that you instead let everything be a continuous flow of experience. And that you, in that very flow, find a place to rest, even in the midst of chaos. And finally, that you let go, of expectations, of agendas and plans. And enjoy being a beginner, being open and curious, having a sense of wonder.

But hey, what about the ‘real world?’ What about the ‘the system?’ How can this be implemented, given what many of us face on a day-to-day to basis, given the framework of ‘officialdom’?

By way of responding Ostaseski gives the example of a hospital orderly, who manages to create his own universe within the gap between what is, and what can be. Before he starts to clean up the dead body on the operating table, after everyone else has left the theatre, he addresses the dead person. And then continues to talk as he goes along, respectfully explaining what he is doing and why, while carrying out his prescribed duties.

As I listen, I hear how his perception, the view he takes of who he is and what he does and why, changes everything. He manages to bring meaning and will into alignment and manifestation, in and through action, and thus ‘reality’ transforms into ‘I & Thou,’ holy chamber and sacred space.

### ***Contemplative activism:***

There are those who manage to achieve great things in the midst of the sharp corners and hard surfaces of their circumstances. I am thinking of Rachel Carson who one day received a letter from a friend, describing how the aerial spraying of DDT, aimed at insects, had left a trail of dead birds behind (McKie, 2012). Carson, a biologist and science writer, was thus moved to look at the impact of pesticides on the natural world. This resulted in *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, which described how the fragile and intricate relationship between living organisms is disturbed and disrupted by the indiscriminate use. She also pointed out that chemicals accumulate in the food chain, and thus pose serious risks to human health. We are part of nature, she said, we are interrelated and interdependent.

It was a brave thing to do. Attempts were made by the petrochemical conglomerate to sue both her and her publisher, and The New Yorker, where *Silent Spring* had been serialized. She was written off as ‘hysterical’ and ‘unscientific,’ and the question was raised ‘why a spinster with no children

was so interested in genetics'! But *Silent Spring* sold in millions. And her work gave birth to organizations such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, and the Environmental Protection Agencies. The use of DDT was eventually banned, and the Clean Air Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, and the federal Environmental Pesticide Control Act were introduced.

Carson was a prophet and fearless messenger, who shook the cobwebs out of the *laissez-faire*; in terms of the way we trust the 'experts,' and the way we are in relation to planet earth - on and of, which we live. In the face of fierce counterattacks *Silent Spring* brought the environment, and thus also our health, to the table. To this day it 'remains one of the most effective denunciations of industrial malpractice ever written . . . (McKie, 2012).'

There are those who, just like Carson, have managed to bring action and contemplation together by becoming contemplative activists: Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, Rosa Parks, Dorothy Day, Bishop Romero, the Dalai Lama, Vaclav Havel, Aung San Suu Kuy... The list is long and incredibly beautiful. And they have all spent long periods of their lives in the gap, having had to endure considerable suffering and hardship as a consequence. But they have been passionate, not just for social justice, but also for non-violence and for democratic change.

They could have chosen an easier life. They could have gone into the either / or; met violence with violence, reacted by rushing into action, or resigned themselves, settling for cynicism and 'make-do.' But they didn't. They found a 'third way.'

### **The 'third way':**

So what is the 'third way?' Palmer (2004) describes it is '*a commitment to act in every situation in ways that honor the soul*' (p.170). Rohr (2003) sees it as a contemplative stance, a way of wisdom, which emerges when we hold the tension of opposites - '*until it transforms us*' (p.171).

And how do we know that we are 'transformed?' We know that we are when 'our ego stops getting hooked' (Rohr, 2003), when it is not all about us, when it is not just about our own private agenda. In other words, when we can make ourselves available, 'usable', come what may (pp.171-172). But it is a lonely and strenuous path to walk, which requires great determination, courage and stamina.

### **Contemplative activism and the 'third way':**

Barbara Kingsolver, whose words gave this essay its title, would know all about it. In the aftermath of 9/11 she was asked to write a number of articles in response to the attack. As she did she encouraged her fellow Americans to reflect and contemplate *a considered* response to the attack, rather than with the knee jerk reaction of more of the same, as in violence. And for this she was hounded. 'There was a monstrously angry response,' she says, and a 'dark, dark winter' ensued (Cochrane, 2010). But she remained steadfast, refusing to acquiesce to the pressure of maelstrom groupthink.

She decided to save the hate mail she received and make something beautiful of it. The result was the 500 page long *The Lacuna*, which deals with the witch hunts of the 40's and 50'. And for which she was awarded the literary Orange Prize in 2010.

Rachel Carson, Barbara Kingsolver, and all the men and women who have stood tall, when they could have acquiesced and crumbled, know that 'violence of every shape and form has its roots in the divided life. . . (Palmer, 2004, p.174)'; that 'the divided life is a wounded life, and that the soul keeps calling us to heal the wound (Palmer, 2004, p. 20).'

Because 'as I stand in the tragic gap between reality and possibility, this small tight fist of a thing called my heart can break open into greater capacity to hold more of my own and the world's suffering and joy, despair and hope' (Palmer, 2004, p.178). The personal breaks into the societal and global. The self is widened.

Our hearts and minds are pulled open 'to a third way of thinking and of acting' (Palmer, 2004, p.174). And the importance of that was made clear by Albert Einstein, when he said that no problem is solved by the same consciousness that caused it. We need that tension to tear us open!

### **How to define 'action' and 'contemplation?'**

Action and contemplation. What do these concepts mean, exactly? Action is any way that we co-create, and externally manifest inner power, Palmer says (1999, p.17). And contemplation has nothing to do with chanting or lotus positions, he says. It's about the unveiling of our illusions; it is about revealing the reality behind the masks. Simply put, it's about waking up to what is real and true.

This takes time and requires space; and thus it runs contrary to today's culture of high-tech speed and rationalized slimmed-down efficiency. It runs counter to the 'decisive' performance, and the get-up-and-go success. We need to be able to – sit.

### Conclusion:

There will always be a gap, – and choices within it. We can pick up the kaleidoscope and turn it around and around, until the coloured fragments fall into a formation, which somehow resonates with us at a deep level. We then have a new picture, and a new way.

This is the sublimation, as just demonstrated by Kingsolver, in the way she found use for her hate mail. This is the harvest, the creation, or rather, the co-creation. And today, looking at the world where the old power structures and paradigms are crumbling and falling, exposing society, or the lack of it, nothing could be more important.

And just as we find our selves in a very tragic gap, so does planet earth; what Rachel Carson once saw in terms of toxic damage on land, is now seen in our seas and oceans. And then there is the global warming, ozone depletion, deforestation... And all of it, once written off as something 'out there', we now find in our own backyards. And this is, of course, precisely where so many of the answers lie. So if ever there was an urgent call for an informed, insightful, deep and wise engagement, it is now. The contemplative activist, the wide self is needed.

This is not just for the 'spectacular' few; this is for you and me. And so, the gap, the in-between place, the liminal stage of threshold, the incubation chamber and cauldron – may we not waste it.

"The miracle is not to walk on water." says contemplative activist Thich Nhat Hanh (1992, p.1), who thus challenges us not to shy away from mindful action, with the excuse of improbability. "The miracle is to walk on the green Earth in the present moment, to appreciate the peace and beauty that are available now." And on the advice of Mary Oliver (2006, p. 4), whose active contemplations always help us to look and see, we 'never hurry through the world / but walk slowly, and bow often.'

To never hurry, but to walk slowly, and bow often. To be a living breathing part of the path, where 'opposites collide and unite, and everything belongs' (Rohr, 2003, p.159). To listen to the song of the river, as we let it run, unimpeded. And heeding the words of Seamus Heaney, whose words imbue our veins with earth and soul: 'What looks the strongest has outlived its term. The future lies with what's affirmed from under.'



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- The five precepts presented by Frank Ostaseski can also be viewed at: <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~davink/FivePrecepts.pdf>.