

LEAVES, RIVERS AND SNOWFLAKES

I sat on a rock in the river while meditating. It was a beautiful experience inhaling deeply, exhaling slowly, and in the process coming back to the present moment. As I did this, I became aware of hearing the river flowing powerfully by me. It had rained for several days and the water was deeper, faster and more forceful than usual. It is usually a sleepy, gentle river. By mid-August it will be shallow enough to wade almost the entire length with only knee high boots. But on that day, it was twenty feet wide and in places eight or ten feet deep. The current was surging so as I gently closed my eyes in meditation I was impressed with and respectful of its power.



As I ended the meditation I allowed my eyes to float open and a branch of leaves and flower blossoms was right there. Of course, the branch was there when I closed them. But when I closed my eyes, *I was not really there.*



Then, after twenty minutes of following the breath and actually breathing in the river, I opened my eyes and this time I was right there, present to this particular branch. Everything else fell away. There were no distractions. There was just this particular branch, in this place, at this time, for this person who was now seeing not only with his eyes but through his Soul.



On the one hand, the branch was simple, common and utterly ordinary. On the other hand, it was simultaneously completely magnificent, totally captivating and absolutely perfect. The most beautiful dozen or so small leaves were right there six inches from my eyes. Perfectly there, just perfectly, very much there. ‘Flawed,’ with holes some insect had eaten in the leaves and yet, simply perfect. I could just breathe with them and truly see them in the totality of their ordinary magnificence. There was in that one

moment a loosening of the mirage of separateness. The leaves offered themselves to me, knowing that I was ready then to *see* them, *breathe* with them, *be* with them.

Meditation softened my heart, softened the hard edges around my being so I could open and see with soft, soulful eyes. The soft soulful eyes in turn further softened my heart, which opened me still further to these totally ordinary and totally magnificent leaves. We entered each other. I know that they came into me and I still carry them within my heart. And I believe that I left a part of my being with them.

Mary Oliver in her book *Winter Hours*, says, “I could not be a poet without the natural world. Someone else could. But not me. For me the door to the woods is the door to the temple. Under the trees, along the pale slopes of sand, I walk in ascendant relationship to rapture, and with words I celebrate this rapture.... What I write begins and ends with the act of noticing and cherishing, and it neither begins nor ends with the human world.... I am forever

just going out for a walk and tripping over the root, or the petal, or some trivia, then seeing it as if in second sight, as emblematic. By no means is this a unique way to live but is, rather, the path found by all who are mystically inclined.”



You know, leaves don't get as much credit as they deserve. The Quinapoxet River runs through a forest, which really is a community of trees, in close communication with each other and with the river. Each tree is filled with leaves. Each different kind of

tree has its own brand of leaf. And each and every leaf is different. They differ in size, shape and texture. Many are torn or have holes eaten in them. Each one is subtly different. In that way, leaves are very much like snowflakes! Eighty gazillion leaves and every single one of them is different. In all of New England, there are more leaves than anything (with the possible exception of insects). And each and every leaf is different! When you really see leaves, you know that they too have a life, and a spirit and a majesty of their own.



But this was not the end. The experience continued.

Still breathing, I again closed my eyes. At this point my heart was softened, my Soul wide open and my spirit unusually buoyed. After a time, my being expanded once again, only this time, to the river itself. Initially, I could feel it flow close to me, fast, powerful, deep. And then I went a step deeper into the process. And for a very brief instant, I opened up and merged with the river. For this tiny instant, the river flowed *through me*.



I want to be very clear. In this experience the river was not just near me. The river was not just around me. The river was not just flowing by me. I have had that experience many times. And while it is very pleasant, it is not what I am talking about. This was different. The river flowed *through me*. The illusion of

separateness dissolved. This time I not only saw the river, but I experienced it through my entire being. I felt it deeply to my very core. As I experienced this 'flowing through' a shudder of energy pulsed from the tips of my toes to the very ends of my hair. My ego boundaries like snowflakes dissolved as they fell into the river. This was not an experience primarily of thought. The river traveled through my mind and much more than that, for it went beyond words to experience, beyond words to becoming a non-conceptual revelation. It was an experience of total, organismic awareness. The boundaries merged and the river flowed through my entire being. There was no past and there was no future. There was only that moment. There was only that Eternal Now.

It was all too brief a moment. Unfortunately, this mystical experience was too much for some part of my personality and I was startled back to my ordinary state of awareness. The brevity of the moment does not, however, lessen its intensity or wonder. The doorway was opened to the beauty, connection and majesty of life in all its forms. In one fashion or another it will always remain

open. Or at least, my memory will keep the door ajar. The doorways having been opened will remain forever permeable.



I absolutely live for moments like these. Without them life boils down to dull rationality and ordinary routine. However brief, I live for these experiences of glorious, mystical oneness. It is not that the other moments are bad or of no value. But they are just not enough. I know that at this point I am supposed to add something to the effect that the purpose of spirituality is not just to provide moments of bliss, ecstasy and wonder. After all, there is an ancient

saying that spirituality is about learning to do the ordinary things like ‘chop wood and carry water’ with a spiritual sense. Yes, yes, yes, I know, I know. It is important to be practical and live in the world. I’m learning how to do my chores. And sometimes I even enjoy them. However, the reality is, I live for these moments and any form of spirituality that does not cherish them is little more than a rationalization for a social club.

When the house needs painting I paint it. When the lawn needs mowing I mow it. (Actually, my sons mow it now.) When the checkbook needs to be balanced, I do my best. When the car needs fixing, I take it somewhere. The social and practical obligations usually get done. Sometimes I even enjoy doing them. I don’t find all of this as totally stultifying as I used to. It helps to accept that this is what needs to be done, but is not what I live for. Mostly I do these things halfheartedly. I don’t live for them. I live to return to the river, to my boundaries, to the leaves, to the place where my Soul opens up, and to the Cosmos. I live with the craving for times and places of Soul coming to full life.

What I want now is something altogether different from this ordinary world. I am hungry for the “Other” in life, the extraordinary, the Eternal and Infinite. There is a force pulling me out of what was and into what is emerging. And one can not fit this emergence into narrow rows. The confines of ordinary life no longer suit me.

These moments help me to understand how people get so hooked into cults and gurus. If I thought that by following some guru, teacher, leader, or ‘spiritual whatever,’ I could live most of my life in moments of this much bliss, I would probably be willing to follow a complete idiot to Nepal on my knees backward.

The presence of leaves and the infusion of the river are experiences which, can be accepted but never forced. Acceptance and willingness are the only true friends of these experiences. The only effort to be made is in preparation. That is, of softening the heart and opening the Soul so that when these experiences occur one can accept them. The experiences come when they come, swiftly in sudden influxes that a hardened heart closed Soul is

really very efficient at blocking. These experiences don't come with any form of regimentation, rules, requirements or demands. They come only with solitude, focus, discipline and a willingness to take spiritual, emotional, and psychic risks. They come with the willingness to go to the very edge of one's psychic comfort, safety, and familiarity. And once the edge is reached, they come with the willingness to take one more tiny step walking of the ledge into the void. It is helpful that often the step is a surprise. It is taken before one realizes what one is doing. The conscious step is staying there and not intentionally retreating back to safety. It is worth noting that I have done this many times and I have never encountered any real cliffs or free falls into disaster. Taking the step is not always comfortable or easy but I have never experienced injury or permanent damage in the step. These experiences require a willingness to give up some emotional security. To know the cosmos, one must see the stars and to see the stars one must be willing to come out from under shelter. One must be willing to go out at night into unfamiliar territory. One must be willing to break

many rules, sometimes talk to strangers, talk to strange people and at times appear to be a strange person. Most importantly, one must be willing to talk to inner strangers. There needs to be a willingness to be open to inner demand, craving and what is, at times, an insatiable longing for deeper connection to one's Soul and the Soul of the world.

Over the course of the past two years my personal access to the depth and breadth of my inner being has increased exponentially. If I have come this far in two years I can't help asking, 'How much more is there?' Two years ago things were pretty good. According to the standards of the ordinary world my life was cruising along at a fine pace. I knew something was missing but things were basically pleasant. And then I took a step deeper and began seeing more. I took a step deeper and responded to my long standing cravings for more. If I have come so far in such a short time, "How much more is there?" I feel like I have grown an 'infinity' and there is still an infinity to go. I can't help thinking there is more, and more, and more and more and.... And

I want some of all of it. I can't imagine an end. The infinite possibility calls me. There is no finished place. What if I get to merge with a fish next time, or a deer, or a hawk, or a chickadee, or a rock, or a tree, or a snake, or a muskrat, or a.....

How much more of the unknown can I discover? I have traveled to places hardly glimpsed before. My soul is elated. It yells with childlike glee. It is on a sled swooshing over an embankment and with unbound enthusiasm shouts YIPEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE as it flies. It is delirious with the prospect of embracing all the Unknown.