



Presencing

JACK BLACKBURN'S NEWSLETTER
Presencing (Issue 4)

Presencing Fear – a Preview

As I prepare for my September trip to Japan I am thinking about the next issue of my newsletter. Right now I am on retreat on Orcas Island. Yesterday while sitting in the sun in a beautiful garden setting, the following story about Saint Francis came to me... I have searched in vain for the origins of this story, which I thought I had read in Kazanzakis. Perhaps you have heard this story before. There are so many stories about Francis of Assisi. As I was rewriting the story in my own words a small bird flew from a nearby bush onto my foot and sat there looking at me. That was confirmation enough for me of the story's authenticity. So I present it to you as it came to me with all apologies to the original author.

Francis in the Cave – A Question of Knowing

Francis of Assisi and Brother Bernardo were traveling together. After delivering God's word in a small village, Francis asked if there was a cave nearby where he could find solitude. Upon discovering the cave Francis took up a waterskin and asked Bernardo to make camp nearby and wait for him outside. Bernardo was aware that Francis had seemed preoccupied for days. He knew better than to disobey his friend's request when Francis was in one of his moods. As he waited for Francis to emerge, he thought about the life of poverty and holy madness, he had chosen to share with Francis. He worried about his friend when he heard moaning and occasional stifled screams coming from the cave. Even worse were the long hours of silence that followed. This went on for two full days and nights. Bernardo performed his own prayers, more and more of which he devoted to his friend.

Finally, on the morning of the third day, Francis emerged; looking tired and wan, hardly seeming to notice Bernardo. He performed his ablutions, gathered his few possessions, and started walking. Bernardo soon caught up to him and walked steadily behind, watching his friend take arduous steps, occasionally pausing for water. At mid day they rested on some stones. With some trepidation, Bernardo broke the silence. "Brother Francis, what happened to you in the cave?" Francis looked at him with eyes that seemed withdrawn, far away. "I don't want to talk about it."

For the rest of that day and most of the next, they traveled in silence. Bernardo, still following, noticed his friend's pace slowing and stumbling. He wondered if he should insist that they stop and rest, but he held his concerns in silence. At dusk he made a fire and soaked some dried bread in water. To his great relief Francis ate one of the pieces he was offered. Just before evening prayers Bernardo asked: "Are you ready to talk about what happened?" Francis, with even more reeded eyes, said: "No."

On the morning of the third day Bernardo awoke before sunrise, said his prayers, and gathered firewood. Francis was nowhere around. This time Bernardo boiled some water and put some fresh greens, dried grain, and a little salt into the pot. As he was stirring this mixture, Francis, seeming to come from nowhere, silently sat down beside him – holding his wooden bowl and spoon in his hands, and waited for the porridge to cook. After they had finished eating Bernardo started to speak. Francis put his hand to his friend's lips. Francis's eyes were full of tears, but he

looked deeply at his friend – a small smile opening his face. “Now I will speak.” Bernardo breathed a sigh of relief. Francis turned and faced into the fire and held his hands out for warmth.

“For weeks I have been troubled by worries and doubts. Our movement is growing and growing. I now have to confront many demons inside that were never there in the beginning. Now I am bidden to travel to many unfamiliar towns, to stay in quarters that are sometimes too comfortable, to eat food and meet people that are too rich for my liking. And now I’m asked to preach to whole villages, and to the many that look to me for leadership. I am a simple man – God’s fool. I prefer to speak to a few at a time and preach to the birds. I began to ask inside: ‘How can I stay true to God’s calling, when I’m being tempted and charmed. And dear God, how do I know that these changes and requests are coming from you?’

In the cave I asked these questions over and over. I heard many responses – none felt authentic. I pleaded with God over and over to give me a sign – some sense of the rightness of my path. ‘I will do whatever you ask of me, but I need to know that it is you.’ I struggled and struggled with my doubts, my body tossed and trembled as if in fever. I saw many faces, tortured and angry. I heard many sounds, some otherworldly and some coming from my own mouth. Water was not refreshing, I could not sleep; the darkness and silence of the cave grew more and more oppressive. My prayers became cries and pleadings and sometimes remonstrances against God. Finally God answered me: ‘You will know it is my voice because I will ask you to do what you are afraid to do.’ I knew finally, that I was hearing my Lord speak, and I didn’t like what I was hearing. Since then I have wrestled with this new awareness – it is not what I expected to hear. I would rather live my simple life than to embrace all these changes. Last night I hardly slept, anticipating, dreading this new direction. At last a calm came over me, I felt the waves of fear recede. I realized for the first time that knowing my direction by my fear would give me the assurance that God is with me. Now I am ready to enter this new fold, to meet the challenges and join the movement forming around me. I will make mistakes, I will fail, I will continue to suffer doubts and fears – but never alone. Now I know the full extent of God’s love.”

Commentary - Going Where We Fear to Go

Like Francis, there are many times in our lives when we seem to be called by something that bumps us up against our deepest fears. Strangely, these deep seated fears have more to do with embracing our successes and happiness than going in a direction that is life threatening. Like Francis, it is at those moments when we are right on the verge of a new life and seem to be offered what we have been striving for, when we become most distrustful of our own creations. Those of us who are bodyworkers and other kinds of caregivers, can often feel these hesitations and doubts in our clients’ bodies – and in our own. We can feel certain tensions in the body that seem to be loaded with nervous energy. We can feel the shifts towards relaxation as these nervous energies are released by our hands. When our clients become aware how much their doubts and fears are being manifested in their bodies, these shifts become a kind of “rite of passage” towards understanding. We are able to help them reframe their trepidations as they feel these shifts occur in their bodies. In some ways our presencing touch can be more reassuring to our clients than any number of consultations, supportive friends, and relations.

All of us have times of doubt and fear. For many of us, and our clients, these frightening times are regular occurrences. By taking his vows of poverty, Francis was not plagued by fears that relate to mortgages, insurance coverage, competition for success, or even financial losses and failures. The irony is that even Francis was not able to escape from his fearful times. Once he heard God’s reply, he knew he would continue to experience fear. In all probability it meant that he was even more plagued by fear. However, by learning to follow his calling, and going where he feared to go, he became more and more able to convert his fear into an ally – into a continual source of direction and challenge – and revelation.

Presencing Our Own Fears

What happens when we reframe our lives so that we go where we are afraid to go? One of the gifts of presencing in our bodies is that we can feel a shift inside when the energies that are locked up in fear become available to us as mental clarity, physical dexterity, and emotional sublimity. When this shift takes place we realize that there is nothing to fear. Presencing our fears creates an alchemical transformation – we step through the doorways of pain and restriction into a space of creativity and ease.

In the next few issues of Presencing I plan to deal with various aspects of fear and how it is affecting ourselves and our personal relationships, as well as our work with clients. I believe that by practicing presence when we feel our fears and doubts taking over, we are able to come to a new sense of ourselves that is more joyous and peaceful. Here are some of the topics I hope to cover:

- Embracing our fears and going where we are called.
- How fear manifests in our bodies – what bodyworkers can feel.
- The growth of fearfulness in our culture – what caregivers can do.
- Personal fears and professional ethics – how to be available to clients in fear.
- Fear and Presence as an alchemical process – the rewards of presencing fear.
- Working with the pain body (Eckhart Tolle) by presencing the fear body.
- No excuses - nothing external can prevent us from loving or presencing.

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