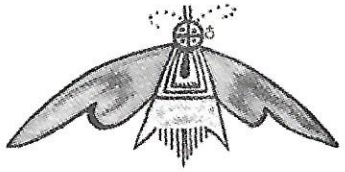

Transformation at the Margins

By Mark Longhurst

The spiritual practice of befriending margins is uncomfortable, terrifying, and yet contains transformative power and beauty. The monks producing Ireland's famous ninth-century *Book of Kells*, for example, appreciated the pregnant possibility of margins. They cherished the biblical text itself, of course, but what causes tourists to line up in Trinity College Dublin's Library is something else entirely. People peer into the Library's glass display cases to see the splendid color of ink illuminating letters, Celtic knots tying Gospel text, the oldest Western image of the Virgin Mary, and even hidden cats prowling amidst the first two Greek letters or "Chi Roh" (ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ) of Christ's name.

To pay attention to margins is to pay attention to how boundary lines are constructed in our world and lives—and then to cross those boundaries. The psyche draws boundaries around what it is willing to face, so exploring unconscious desires through shadow work is a way of welcoming the Holy Spirit to our inner margins. Christian

traditions have often neglected, shamed, or marginalized the physical body's wisdom. To begin conscious re-membering of our bodies, then, is essential for integral wholeness. Today, more people are awakening to the way social systems have marginalized society's most vulnerable populations. Prioritizing insights, friendships, and leadership from people on the margins is a way of yielding to holistic political transformation.

For contemplatives to engage margins, especially contemplatives accustomed to the comfortable, majority center, will require the heart's nimble resilience across social space. My own experience befriending Boston's marginal homeless population transformed my sight so I could see homeless people as beautiful bearers of God's image. In 2006, I moved into a scrappy Catholic Worker-inspired community called Haley House. The twelve or so intentional community members operated a soup kitchen from the brownstone building's first floor. On a typical morning, I woke up at 5:25 a.m. and, in a stupor of sleep, rushed to the basement walk-in refrigerator to make breakfast for dozens of men. Fair-trade coffee brewing, I opened the doors for the early arrivals: men who had slept on the street in hidden corners and were eager for grits and a heated room.

One man went by the name "Brother George." He often stumbled in at 7:00 a.m., already drunk. George was a gentle soul. He drew pictures on the day's menu board of a cartoon, tie-wearing man. I didn't know what it meant, but it marked George's signature. He waxed nostalgic about his former days in the Ukraine. "I was a master barber!" he repeated, with flourish, to anyone who would listen. Many of the men invented stories, but I liked to imagine George having his own barbershop, cracking jokes with customers as he gave them a hot shave. Sometimes George laid his head down on the table and wailed

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in grief. Sometimes he urinated in his pants. When this happened, the other homeless men sat two chairs away from him because the stench was unbearable.

I didn't change George or persuade him to stop drinking. I'm not even sure if he's alive today. But seeing George, day in and day out, changed me: I recognized his intrinsic human beauty and tragedy. I somehow knew that my wholeness was bound up with his wholeness; my wounds connected to his wounds.

In sociological terminology, summarized by biblical scholar Matthew Carter, margins make up a fluid and even ambivalent sphere: Marginal peoples live in the two worlds of both dominant and subordinate spaces of existence. Some wish they could escape margins and taste more of the center. George was a citizen in the world's most powerful and wealthy country, yet he slept on the streets and packed his belongings in a shopping cart.

Alternatively, marginal life is often "over-against." A group at the periphery of a culture or society's center develops subcultures antithetical, even violent or offensive, to those in the center. Marginalized, urban black youth sometimes turn to a marginal drug economy because it seems to be the only employment available. White, working-class Americans sometimes disdain the rhetoric and policies of elite politicians on both left and right. They are "over and against" the center of power.[1]

Jesus is a pioneer of transformation at the margins. Once John the Baptizer dunks Jesus in Jordan's waters, Jesus heads immediately to the wilderness for Satan's testing. The wilderness is that archetypal realm in Hebrew tradition where God initiates and stirs up repentance, which is to say, a revolution of consciousness. It is only after Jesus considers reaching for rocks as bread that he is freed to proclaim: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (see Matthew 4:17). Somehow testing, trials, and margins awaken us to God's nearness.

Margins are nothing less than what Richard Rohr calls "liminal space." From the Latin *limen*, threshold, in liminal space we dwell before, and sometimes dive through, a doorway of transformation. As Fr. Rohr writes in *Adam's Return*,

> Liminality is an inner state and sometimes an outer situation where people can begin to think and act in genuinely new ways.

It is when we are betwixt and between, have left one room but not yet entered the next room, any hiatus between stages of life, jobs, loves, or relationships. It is that graced time when we are not certain or in control, when something genuinely new can happen.[2]

GOD LOVES THE MARGINS in Jewish and Christian tradition. You could say God colors in them. The ancient Israelite story is one of relationship with God through successive marginal identities: first as enslaved brick-workers under the Egyptian empire, then as a liberated but nomadic people. Once landed, ancient Israel nevertheless suffers the marginal fate of a small nation sandwiched between rival imperial powers, vacillating in fealty to Babylonians and Assyrians. They eke out a thriving, if precarious, existence under Kings David and Solomon, only eventually to be crushed and exiled by armies directed by Nebuchadnezzar and Tiglath-Pileser III. The homeless, traumatized yearnings of exile give birth to the tortured cries of Jeremiah's lamentations, but also Isaiah's soaring visions of wholeness: The wolf shall lie down with the lamb, the cow and the bear shall graze.

Christianity's Jewish roots lie in this wilderness-wandering, exiled, and conquered history of ancient Israel. Yet the early Christian movement, first a marginal underground network, famously converted to the center when the Roman Emperor Constantine had a vision of the cross in the sky. He ordered his troops to paint those two Greek Chi-Roh letters of Christ's name on their shields, so that the vertical line of the Rho (P) intersected the center of the Chi (X). Those Celtic monks no doubt had something different in mind.

After millennia of center-dwelling, however, the twenty-first century finds Christianity assuming an increasingly marginal place at the center of culture and power. American Catholic and Mainline Protestant Christians witness ranks shrinking, while growing numbers of people declare "spiritual but not religious" interest. They are affiliated with "None" of the religions or they are "Done" with religion altogether. This exodus carries with it all the panic and grief that accompanies seismic change, but in itself is pregnant with transformative possibility. Western Christianity itself is in a liminal space: Something is dying, and something is being born. The late writer Phyllis Tickle called it a new reformation.

In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus is "transfigured" (which means, in Greek, transformed), not in the Jerusalem Temple, but on a remote mountain in the Galilean countryside (see Matthew 17). Jesus, Peter, James, and John hike up the mountain to pray. They witness a cloud cover the mountain and Jesus' face shine like the sun. Their teacher stands in the tradition of those who dared experience God face-to-face, as one. These are the mystics who risk everything to plunge into the mystery of God's love, glory, and unknowing. Jesus is joined by his Jewish forerunners, Moses and Elijah, each of whom experienced mountaintop transformations themselves, each of whom exemplify the mystical path in that they seek direct, intimate, unmediated relationship with God…at the margins.

Peter, however, symbolizes the center's desire to draw boundaries and distance margins. He humorously offers to build dwellings in which God's glory can rest, but Luke tells us, "Peter did not know what he was talking about" (see Luke 9:33). His suggestion to set up booths, or tents, is a reference to the Jewish Festival of Booths (*Sukkot*). This festival commemorates the Israelites' forty years of wilderness-wandering and tent-dwelling. Tents in Israelite tradition, however, are more than sleeping gear: God—who in those days traveled in the form of a cloud—needed a tent, too, so the Israelites set up what they called a "tent of meeting."

But the Israelites are not content with God dwelling in a tent, and pretty soon a tent becomes a temple. The evolution of God's presence starts in the wilderness margins and, as is all-too-frequent, ends in the Jerusalem center. David and Solomon eventually oversee a massive building project to house God's glory. Peter, bless his heart, wishes to do the same.

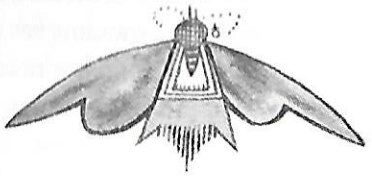
There's nothing wrong with temples, but the problem arises when the center is prioritized at the expense of the margins. Years later, Christian monarchs build basilicas, sanctuaries, and altars to house God. These religious centers are beautiful, but become sites where God resides, all too often, to the exclusion of marginal people and places. The religious, Jerusalem-dwelling leaders in Jesus' day said: "Nothing good can come from Nazareth" (see John 1:46). Followers of Jesus, then and now, think differently—such as today's evangelical new monastics that move into the "abandoned places of Empire."[3]

The threshold of margins is accompanied by fire, and fire is the painful part of transformation. The Celtic poet and author John

O'Donohue points out that the word "threshold" is etymologically related to threshing, which is what farmers do when they separate grain from chaff. John the Baptizer predicted this would be indicative of Jesus' way when he envisioned Jesus holding a winnowing fork in his hand at the threshing floor (see Matthew 3:12). Christians turned the image into hell's torment and thus missed the metaphor: Entering a liminal threshold involves threshing, or a necessary stripping down. As O'Donohue says, "threshold is a place where you move into more critical and challenging and worthy fullness."[4]

The present moment may be asking us, now and always, to embrace the power and wisdom of the margins—or, as writer-activist Teresa Pasquale Mateus says, to "center the margins." For white people coming from privileged backgrounds, this may mean non-defensive, open-hearted listening to the marginalized life experiences of black and brown Americans. Once hearts are cracked open, for example, to hear the horror of African American experiences, first of slavery and lynching, and now of incarceration, the war on drugs, and gun violence, it becomes a transformative human response to affirm with weeping, prayer, solidarity, and action that black lives matter. Once hearts are cracked open to hear and honor immigrant and refugee stories, our hearts become broken at America's long legacy of turning away or disenfranchising those who differ from the white mold. And, once hearts are broken, it ceases to become an ideology for people of privilege to stand with the marginalized. Solidarity with the different is transformed into simply a natural human response of compassion, reflecting our inherent, yet fragmented, oneness.

If margins are where God colors and spends time, then margins are holy sites beckoning us toward greater wholeness. They query what we think we know and invite us to a listening posture toward life. To some, this might feel like an annihilation of our identity, because the answers margins hold destabilize the center's certainties. This is full of possibility, but never easy, and often excruciating. The threshold of transformation is, indeed, a narrow gate. •



Coming to Our Senses:

Wisdom Interventions for a Troubled World

By Brittian Bullock and Mike Morrell

READING FROM THE SACRED BOOKS

In our essay, "Evolving Wild: Glimpses of the Garden City," in the "Evolutionary Thinking" issue of *Oneing*, we pull two "books" from the Library of Wisdom, dusting them off for civilized humanity's consideration: the revered Book of Scripture, and the equally sacred Book of Nature, as exegeted by anthropologists, archeologists, and ecologists.

We acknowledge that Axial Age religion, as revealed through the Abrahamic faiths, emerged in the past three thousand years. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam safeguard an oral tradition describing