

When Your Liberation Draws Near

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People will faint from fear and foreboding... Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.
—Luke 21:26-28

What do you do when your world seems to be crumbling? It may be your personal life: a relationship gone sour, lack of fulfillment in your job, or demons of the past catching up with you, such as anger or grief. Or it may be the news: immigrants dehumanized and abused, democracy being undermined, global climate change progressing at an alarming rate. Sometimes we might think, “What’s the meaning of all of this? It all seems to be falling apart.”

The scriptures say that there is something unique about times like these. When there is “distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and waves,” when “people faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world,” when the “powers of the heavens are shaken,” when “hearts are weighed down with the worries of life,” when life is unravelling and tearing away. “When these things take place,” said Jesus, “stand up and raise your head, because *your redemption is near*.”

In this passage from Luke it says that “it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.” Each person ever born will experience times like this. Everyone will feel their grip slipping away and the panic of the moment. Yet these are special times. It is precisely at these moments that one should resist the urge to numb oneself, with “dissipation and drunkenness” or with entertainment and thrills. It is precisely at these moments that one should have a clear head and be ready, for redemption is close by. One has reached a moment of truth, and one can either shrink and withdraw, or one can stand tall and alert.

An enlightened path finds a way to embrace these moments, to move into them, to engage them.

In his book, *Iron John*, poet Robert Bly talked about the “road of ashes, descent and grief” that is part of our initiation into our full humanity, our spiritual maturation. He said that the Greeks called this road of descent, *katabasis*. Jesus, earlier in this story from Luke, took the “path down from the Mount of Olives” toward his cross, his crucifixion and death in Jerusalem (Luke 19:37). This was his *katabasis*.

When katabasis happens, a man no longer feels like a special person. He is not. One day he is in college being fed and housed—often on someone else’s money—protected by brick walls men long dead have built, and the next day he’s homeless, walking the streets, looking for some way to get a meal and a bed. People know immediately when you are falling or have fallen: doormen turn their back, waiters sneer, no one holds the subway car door for you...

We remember that Joseph's brothers put him down into a gravel pit. A few days later they sell him to the slave traders, who in turn take him still farther downward into Egypt, where he makes a third Descent into a dungeon after offending the commandant's wife.

It is as if life itself somehow "discharges" him. There are many ways of being "discharged": a serious accident, the loss of a job, the breaking of a long-standing friendship, a divorce, a "breakdown," an illness. (p. 70-71)

This time of *katabasis*, of confusion and distress, of anxiety and depression is a special time, a fertile time. It is when redemption is drawing near. Times like these are not to be feared. We are asked not to faint from our road of descent but to raise our heads to it, walk into it. The spiritual life is this: being alert to the coming of restoration and growth in the midst of a painful and disorganized life.

Richard Rohr wrote a great book, *Falling Upward*, that talks about this. He said that we all have two phases in our life: the journey upward when we are building up our lives and the journey downward when our lives slowly fall apart. And it is this second phase that is also a time of spiritual transformation. He says, "Failings are the foundation for growth. Those who have fallen, failed or 'gone down' are the only ones who understand 'up.'" We don't get closer to God by winning; we get closer to God by losing. The way up is down, spiritually speaking. As Jesus said, "Those who lose their lives will find them." Failure and humiliation to force us to look where we never would otherwise.

Rohr writes:

Sooner or later... some event, person, death, idea, or relationship will enter your life that you simply cannot deal with, using your present skill set, your acquired knowledge, or your strong willpower. Spiritually speaking, you will be, you must be, led to the edge of your own private resources... you must "lose" at something. This is the only way that Life-Fate-God-Grace-Mystery can get you to change, let go of your egocentric preoccupations, and go on the further and larger journey. I wish I could say this was not true, but it is darn near absolute in the spiritual literature of the world.

Here is a contemporary parable about being awake to redemption ("The Prisoner in the Dark Cave," *Healing the Shame that Binds You*, by John Bradshaw).

There once was a man who was sentenced to die. He was blindfolded and put in a pitch dark cave. The cave was 100 yards by 100 yards. He was told that there was a way out of the cave, and if he could find it, he was a free man.

After a rock was secured to the entrance to the cave, the prisoner was allowed to take his blindfold off and roam freely in the darkness. He was to be fed only bread and water for the first 30 days and nothing thereafter. The bread and water were lowered from a small hole in the roof at the south end of the cave. The ceiling was about 18 feet high. The opening was about one foot in diameter. The prisoner could see a faint light up above, but no light came into the cave.

As the prisoner roamed and crawled around the cave, he bumped into rocks. Some were rather large. He thought that if he could build a mound of rocks and dirt that was high enough, he could reach the opening and enlarge it enough to crawl through and escape. Since he was 5'9", and his reach was another two feet, the mound had to be at least 10 feet high.

So the prisoner spent his waking hours picking up rocks and digging up dirt. At the end of two weeks, he had built a mound of about six feet. He thought that if he could duplicate that in the next two weeks, he could make it before his food ran out. But as he had already used most of the rocks in the cave, he had to dig harder and harder. He had to do the digging with his bare hands. After a month had passed, the mound was 9 1/2 feet high and he could almost reach the opening if he jumped. He was almost exhausted and extremely weak.

One day just as he thought he could touch the opening, he fell. He was simply too weak to get up, and in two days he died. His captors came to get his body. They rolled away the huge rock that covered the entrance. As the light flooded into the cave, it illuminated an opening in the wall of the cave about three feet in circumference.

*The opening was the opening to a tunnel which led to the other side of the mountain. This was the passage to freedom the prisoner had been told about. It was in the south wall directly under the opening to the ceiling. All the prisoner would have had to do was crawl about 200 feet and he would have found freedom. He had so completely focused on the opening of light that it never occurred to him to look for freedom in the darkness. Liberation was there all the time right next to the mound he was building, but **it was in the darkness.***

Freedom and liberation is found by looking *into* the darkness.

Lately, one of the important voices I've found as we find our democracy under attack is Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor under President Clinton. And he recently said that you have every right to feel depressed and every reason to despair. "But wait," he said.

It's possible that future generations will look back on this scourge and see something else—not just what was destroyed but also what was born.

Even prior to Trump, our democracy was deeply flawed. The moneyed interests were drowning out everyone else. Inequality was reaching record levels. Corruption—legalized bribery through campaign contributions—was the political norm. The bottom 90 percent were getting nowhere because the system was rigged against them.

It's entirely possible that future generations will look back on this awful time and see the seeds of fundamental reform.

I keep coming back to a famous quote from the writings of Antonio Gramsci, who was a critic of Mussolini and fascism. He was put into prison for 11 years during the interregnum, when the normal government had been suspended. A translation of the quote goes like this:

The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters.

It is in the time of monsters, when the the world we have known is dying, that a new world struggles to be born.

It is by looking into darkness that we find the way out.

It is by taking the “road of ashes, descent and grief” downward that we discover our full humanity.

It is in the awful and despairing times that we can find the seeds of reform and social progress.

At times like these, may we not faint from fear and foreboding. As Jesus said, “When these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near!” Amen.