



DECEMBER 1

Candles and Cocoons

Dreams are candles
to help us through the dark.
Once used, they have to melt.

Very often, we define ourselves by what we want or dream of. I want to be an actor or a musician or president or a grandmother. I dream of being famous, of going down in history, of being a hero or a heroine. Yet when our lives shape us differently, we often think we have failed, that we are settling for less, because we weren't good enough to become or have what we wanted.

Certainly, as we experience our limitations, this sometimes feels true. Yet even through our limitations, we *evolve* rather than fail, the way a caterpillar becomes a chrysalis becomes a butterfly, and the succession of life's trials is precisely the unfolding we need to find our bliss and rightful place in the order of things.

The truth is that what we want or dream of doesn't always last. It tends to serve its purpose in our development and then fades away, losing its relevance. And we can do enormous damage to ourselves by insisting on carrying that which has died.

As a teenager, I wanted very badly to be a professional basketball player. My gifts were enough to hide my limitations for a while and I played in high school and in college. But when I stopped playing my sophomore year in college, I discovered my calling as a poet. This carried me for almost eighteen years until cancer opened me to the uncovered life of spirit.

I did not fail at being a basketball player nor did poetry fail me. More accurately, my inwardness evolved with enough life experience, so that moving bodily in the air evolved into the poet's dance of feeling which then evolved into the spirit's grace of being. I no more failed in my desire to be a basketball player than the cocoon fails the butterfly, though the form of the dream was painful to lose.

Living up to a dream is rarely as important as entering it for all it has to teach.

- *Try to recall the first dream that really took hold of you.*
- *What did you want from this dream?*
- *What has the dream taught you and where has it led you?*
- *Is the essence of that dream still with you?*
- *Do you have a dream now?*
- *What is it teaching you?*

DECEMBER 2

An Invitation

Yours is to live it, not to reveal it.

—HELEN LUKE

Helen Luke was a very wise woman, deeply grounded in the life of the spirit. I knew Helen during the last two years of her life. During that time she was a mentor to me. These words are from our last conversation. They troubled me, for I have spent my life becoming a writer, thinking that my job has been just that—to reveal what is essential and hidden.

In the time since Helen died, I've come to understand her last instruction as an invitation to shed any grand purpose, no matter how devoted we may be to what we are doing. She wasn't telling me to stop writing, but to stop striving to be important. She was inviting me to stop recording the poetry of life and to enter the poetry of life.

This lesson applies to us all. If we devote ourselves to the life at hand, the rest will follow. For life, it seems, reveals itself through those willing to live. Anything else, no matter how beautiful, is just advertising.

This took me many years to learn and accept. Having begun innocently enough, there arose separations, and now I know that health resides in restoring direct experience. Thus,

having struggled to do what has never been done, I discovered that living is the original art.

- *Center yourself and think of your life as a story not yet written.*
- *Breathe slowly, and relieve yourself of the responsibility to record your own story.*
- *Breathe deeply, and imagine your path as the patch of sky a bird flies through.*
- *Now just breathe and fly. Enter your day, and breathe and live.*

DECEMBER 3

Hospitality

At heart, hospitality is a helping across a threshold.

—IVAN ILLICH

In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Virgil lovingly guides Dante through the hell of denial and the purgatory of illusion, up to a passage of fire that Dante must cross alone, beyond which he becomes authentic. Earlier in history, Aaron guides his brother Moses off Mount Sinai back into the world, where the prophet must live what God has shown him. Even in Eden, if we can get past the punitive tellings we have heard so often, God ushers Adam and Eve to the threshold of the world, offering them the bruised and wondrous life of genuine experience that only those who are human can know.

These are deep examples of spiritual hospitality, of helping kindred spirits further into their living. Truly, the most we can ask of others is for their guidance and comfort on the way—without imposition, design, or thought of reward. This is the hospitality of relationship: for family to help us manifest who we are in the world, for friends to bring us to thresholds of realness, for loved ones to encourage us to cross barriers of our own making into moments of full aliveness.

This is the honest welcoming to table, without judgment of what we eat. Often the purpose of love is for others to

guide us, without expectation or interference, as far as they can go, so that we might begin.

It reminds me of a dream I had when ill, in which I came to the edge of a forest where the narrow, lighted spaces called to me. I stood there through many opportunities till an ageless woman of great resolve appeared, saying, "You can't start, I know, and if I were kind, I'd see you halfway in, but I am more than kind. You must enter alone. I will meet you on the other side."

I'm not sure if that feminine presence was God or an angel or the peace of my own spirit, but its strong and gentle guidance was enough for me to make it through, and I never saw her again. But now, when I love by clearing paths that I and others may or may not take, I feel her in my hands.

This speaks to one of our deepest callings of love—that special hospitality for the injured, the strong action of compassion that makes it possible for those in pain to heal themselves. It calls mysteriously and arduously for the clearing of confusion and the comfort of what is real. It is the way that we who have suffered can take our turn, lifting the head of whoever has fallen, bracing their exhausted neck to drink, knowing we can never drink for them.

- *Breathe deeply, and meditate on one act of guidance and comfort you have received that asked for nothing in return.*
- *As you exhale, offer gratitude for that gesture of hospitality.*
- *As you inhale, feel your own capacity for guiding without interfering. Feel your own capacity for giving comfort without needing anything in return.*
- *As you enter your day, practice anonymous guidance by leaving a gesture of kindness or truth in the path of others. Leave half a sandwich where the homeless gather, or leave a book open to a passage of wisdom, or leave a flower on a bus seat.*
- *Help the world by leaving a trail of who you are.*

Work and Passion

Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

—HOWARD THURMAN

I remember when in college, many of us were herded into teaching because there seemed a need in the job force. But by the time we graduated, teaching jobs were scarce. The same thing happened fifteen years later when I was teaching college. Many of my students were herded into the study of business. But a few years after graduating, there were very few jobs.

This is another way that scarcity can direct our lives. Often when we shape our interests around what others need, we wind up selling our chance at happiness for what we think will be secure. But while supply and demand may work on paper, it can build a loveless life in the world.

This is why finding what we love, though it may take years, is building a life of passion. For what makes you come alive can keep you alive, whether you are paid well for it or not. And beyond the fashion of the job market, a life of passion makes us a healthy cell in the body of the world.

- *Center yourself and allow the things that stir you to come into your heart. It may be as simple as watching a candle flicker or running in the wind.*
- *Breathe freely, and just feel how these things affect your whole body and being.*
- *When you can, discuss with a loved one what makes you come alive.*

Pursue the Obstacle

Pursue the obstacle.
It will set you free.

When I came upon the mountain, I was in a hurry. I thought it would take too long to make my way around, so I set out to break a path through. Each rock and branch felt like a waste of time. If only the mountain weren't in the way. I cut my legs and arms as I rushed along. It grew harder to breathe, and I lost all sense of direction. Now I had to climb high enough to see.

Once I broke the treeline, something in me had to see the top. Then I hurried my way up, and strangely, as I worked the climb—step after step—I kept rising, but felt as though I were going nowhere. Finally, I broke the clouds. I had never seen sun on top of clouds. I sat in a clearing on a cliff, the light on top of my head, like a cloud. Suddenly, reaching the top or getting beyond the mountain no longer seemed important. I liked it up here and felt that I could live on the mountain. But I had to return. I had to eat. I needed love. But now when someone asks about breaking through what's in the way or being in a hurry, I look both ways and say, "Pursue the obstacle. It will set you free."

This story invites us to honor each obstacle as something flowing in its own right in the Universal stream, to see ourselves and the obstacle as two limbs of the same tree drifting in the same river, bumping into each other, and even blocking one another for a moment.

Looking at obstacles this way, we are asked not to oppose what blocks us as something mounting its will against our own. For the obstacle will simply give our resistance back to us. We are being asked not to empower or perpetuate the life of the obstacle, but to step aside if we can with openness to the energy of the obstacle—much like the ancient art of Aikido, where instead of blocking a punch, you help the punch move past you.

All the while we are invited to question that in us which insists that what is before us is an obstacle in the first place.

It may not be so. It may be so. It may be something small that our history of struggle has enlarged into tragedy or bad luck.

So if we can, we must focus on our relationship to the stream and not to the things being carried alongside us. If something appears to be blocking our way, we must try to understand what is moving it and what is moving us. If our movement in the world is still blocked, perhaps we are meant to be still. We must try not to damage ourselves unnecessarily by trying to force a movement to happen before its time.

- *Identify the biggest obstacle in your life at present. What is it keeping you from?*
- *Describe the obstacle as a piece of nature that has its own history. Is it like a shell being broken by the surf, or a stone tumbling in a landslide, or like a small deer frightened in the middle of a busy road?*
- *How is what you want or need colliding with what it wants or needs?*

DECEMBER 6

The Color of Truth

The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or touched . . . but are felt in the heart.

—HELEN KELLER

There is an ancient Chinese art of painting on porcelain. It requires, more than skill and precision, a deep trust and patience in the process. It involves painting thin layers of pigment, one at a time, on the porcelain, letting each dry and soak into the porcelain itself. But even when dry, the pigment doesn't yet reveal its color. You never know what the color will be until the porcelain is fired in the kiln—that is, until the pigment is burned into the porcelain itself.

This is remarkably like the life of questions that come from living. We use the brush of our feelings to paint our questions into our heart. But only after the fire of experience, only after our felt questions are burned by experience into

our heart, only then do we see the color of truth emerge.

So there are no answers to the deeper questions of living, only the emerging colors of truth which we must find the trust and patience to live into.

- *Sit quietly and bring to mind the color of a truth you have personally lived into.*
- *Using your breath, unravel this truth back to the questions you had before living it.*
- *Note the difference and share the story of this truth with a friend.*

DECEMBER 7

We Have This Choice

The heart is a strong shore
and the ocean has many moods.

With each day, we have this choice: we can build walls, block ourselves from the light, and suffer a dampness in the soul. Or we can live barely, shine on through, and suffer the nicks of erosion for living in the open.

Most of us, myself included, live behind walls that were started by others and finished by ourselves. Very often, we fear each other without reason—the wall builders and those who shine on through. But it really comes down to how to make it through life—safely or fully. I confess this comes from one who struggles to shine on through, because in the end, not being touched by life is not that safe after all. What I've learned is that the more I risk being who I am—like a sun daring to shine—the thinner the walls need to be outside me.

My first experience of this was a painful moment as a boy in which my mother had ordered me to do something. We were alone in my room, and I said no. I don't remember what it was she asked of me, only that her demand was demeaning and unnecessary. I wasn't belligerent, just quietly firm. I remember fearfully building a wall as fast as I could in anticipation of her anger. I had barely prepared myself when she drew her arm behind her head and slapped me with a vengeance. The wall hadn't worked. My very soul had been struck.

She went to strike me again, but by this time my soul had somehow reflexed into a strength of selfness that she couldn't penetrate. I glowed. She stalled in midswing and called my father to enforce her demand. He felt my brightness, but held the line and struck me too. By the time he landed, I was shining through. It hurt, for sure, but I was protected.

There are times walls are necessary, but more often we can protect ourselves by being who we are. Neither hiding nor revealing ourselves will prevent our share of pain, but in being who we are, we get to be a part of the Universal stream, not just a nut in a shell waiting to fall.

- *Center yourself and meditate, by turns, on your sense of the wall you look out from and on your sense of who you are that does the looking.*
- *Breathe steadily. As you inhale, close your fist and feel your wall.*
- *Breathe slowly. As you exhale, open your hand and feel who you are.*
- *After a time, practice bringing who you are out beyond your wall by inhaling and exhaling with your hand open.*
- *After a time, stand and move about the room outside of your wall. Note how this feels.*

DECEMBER 8

In the Source-Place

Take a pitcher full of water and set it down in the water—now it has water inside and water outside. We mustn't give it a name, lest silly people start talking again about the body and the soul.

—KABIR

We can't help it. We make too much of where we end and where others begin. Yet only after declaring healthy boundaries can we discover and experience the true