



JOURNEY TO THE SACRED

Writing
TO AWAKEN

LESSON 4: BEGINNER'S MIND

This week, I want to talk to you about beginner's mind and its relationship to the sacred. We spend a lot of our lives not in the present moment. Unfortunately, we cannot know what we feel, care about, or want to create, without actually being in the building. We have to be here *now* in order to communicate from our inner depths and retrieve the riches of deep writing: those first-thought pearls that await us under the mundane crust of the workaday world. The Christian mystics believed that there are two types of time operating in the world. There's ordinary time, *nunc fluens*, the tick-tocking time we measure in minutes, hours, and days, and use to stress ourselves out. And there is *nunc stans*, the mystics remind us, which is time in the eternal now, time as viewed through the lens of the cosmos.

Nunc stans does not hurry; it abides. Eternal time is not our enemy; it is the backdrop of our infinite nature, the geologically-paced time of the world as it turns, and on which we imagine ourselves to be running. When we meditate, pray, reflect, or zone out, we are falling into *nunc stans*. When teachers such as Eckhart Tolle speak of "the power of now," they are talking about the experience of eternal time, the pausing and breathing into the fullness of every moment we are alive.

Because this is difficult, it is also rare for ordinary folks to actually dare to make a full stop and smell the flowers. To do this, we must remind ourselves that we are made of the same divine substance as any rose or rhododendron – and those flowers don't seem to be rushing at all. *Nunc stans* teaches us to be slower, to

rest in our lives, and to put down the stopwatch for a moment to take in this blessed existence.

An excellent practice for the cultivation of *nunc stans* awareness is beginner's mind, first coined by teachers of Zen Buddhism. When we meet each moment afresh, like a chick pushing its head through the egg, or a child looking out onto the world with eyes full of wonder and awe, we touch our lives in a brand new way. We realize that we are always beginning, and can always begin again. Contrary to what the measuring, calculating left brain tells us (plan ahead, danger, time is running out!), when we dwell in beginner's mind, and use it in our writing, we expand our perceptions and the quality of our lives.

This week, I'd like you to take as much time out from the hustle and bustle of the quotidian as possible. Step into beginner's mind and simply observe, smell, touch, and absorb the details of the world around you, then write from that refreshed perspective. Describe what you see as if seeing it for the first time. Go beyond preconceptions about objects, people, facts, and consider them anew. Doing this will sharpen a critical tool in your journaling toolbox, that of paying tender attention to your own existence.

I would like you to try two exercises this week to cultivate beginner's mind. First, take an ordinary object that you see every day, and describe it without using identifying terms. For example, a plate would be round, white, and ceramic. Without naming the object, detail it as specifically as possible and let this writing rest for a day. The next day, look at what you've written and turn your attention to the object itself. What has changed?

Second, remember a moment when you felt reborn. In love, after a death, or during a life eruption of some kind, we often experience such pauses with peace and satisfaction, as if we've come through a storm. Describe this moment of beginner's mind in intimate detail. What felt different then from how you feel now? Try to go into as much detail as possible.