

Emptiness
Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson
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I am weary. Lead me home.

The anthem was written by a former student for his retiring choir teacher.

It's beautiful.

Lead me home.

There have been times, I've been weak,
but you've been there, lead me home.

The image here is that home is a place of rest.

Well done, good and faithful servant,
now, you may rest your weary bones,
and be held in the peace of home.

This is the image.

I have two very different experiences of coming home.

In one, I come in after a day at work, or back from a run,
whatever.

Open the door.

The keys and the wallet go in the drawer,
the computer bag, the gym bag, go down on the window
seat,
and I exhale.

I am weary, lead me home.

There is a shedding of all these other responsibilities -
these items and talismans that fill our days -
and a coming to greater stillness.

To an emptiness that is peace.

In the other experience,
however,

I arrive home with kids in tow;
there's homework to get out and dinner to make
and it's go-go-go-go.

I am weary, and I'll be even more weary in three hours
when they go to bed.

Instead of emptiness, fullness.

I love it, but I'm *tired*.

So I know that everyone's life is different.

I know when we say,
"I am weary, lead me home,"

that for some of you,
coming home is a place where you can shed all those
extra things
and be at rest.

Where for others of you, coming home involves gearing
up for the work,

the challenges and the joys of your place.

Emptiness. Fullness.

Seems like opposites.

We'll come back to that.

Some of us have homes that are clear and simple;
others have homes that are full to bursting with stuff.
Some of you are sharing a home - with parents, friends,
or roommates -

and so it might not even feel like your own home.

So if I want to use the metaphor of "home" -
a place you get to go when you are weary,
a place of centeredness, of shedding the extra things,
of returning to simplicity -
if I want to use this metaphor, home,
to get at the healing quality of emptiness,
then I need to say,
not everybody has this feeling in their house.

But maybe there is somewhere like this.
Where you get to let go.
Be still.
Put down all the things - physical things and emotional
things -
that you are carrying around.
And exhale.
Breathe in, breathe out.

Maybe it is here, at church.
I hope so.
I hope this is a place where you can come
and hang up your coat,
and come take a seat,
and breath in peace,
and breathe out love,
and lay aside all that you carry -
for an hour -
and find that peace and stillness inside yourself.

Maybe there is another place,
or maybe just a feeling you've had on occasion,
or long for -
I am weary, lead me home.

That place, that time, when you have inner tranquility,
when we find that stillness that seems so illusive so much
of the time.

James Ishmael Ford writes of a secret joy in nothingness,
the release from fear of death,
the reconciliation of mind and matter,
the joy that "is our true heritage and our authentic
home."
"Nothingness and wild goose chases!"

Our true heritage and our authentic home:
Nothingness.
Or, the joy, the release, that is found in the embrace of
nothingness.

We long for peace, for inner calm, for serenity in this
crazy mixed-up world.
But so much of our longing is for something to add.
If only we had . . .
if only we had

more time
more gadgets
more money

more friends
more ideas

that's partly the work of capitalism and advertising,
but it's also the way we generally think in the west.
Ancient Greek philosophers, and the Christian theologians
who followed them,
argued that God was full presence.
The more being something had, the closer it was to God.
Suffering and evil, then, wasn't a real thing - it was just
less fullness.
Less being.

But in the east, generally, the sacred is found in
emptiness.
In the space of no-thing, where the words and theories
fall away.
Thirty spokes meet at a hollowed out hub.
Without windows, a room cannot be lived in.

This is Taoism, where Ford is talking about Buddhism;
there are important differences between these traditions,
but both emphasize the way that simplicity, clarity, and
stillness
can bring you to a deeper truth.
Of a joy of no-thing-ness,
beyond stuff,
beyond ideas,
beyond grasping and holding.
A place where there is breath.

In.
Out.

Inhale.
Exhale.
And that's all.
Just do that.

Find the stillness;
let the stillness carry you.

Zen Buddhism, which is the tradition that most emphasizes nothingness, emptiness, as at the heart of things, really comes from the mixture of more traditional Buddhism and Taoism.

When Buddhists left India and came into China, they discovered the Taoists, the emphasis on the motion of the Tao - the way - as something that flowed, but not something you could grasp. Emerging continuously and continually flowing back into nothingness.

The great Zen Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hahn, has written and spoken about this often.

He says that we have to understand what we mean when we say emptiness.

Take a cup of water.

Is it empty?

No, it has water in it, right?

What if I pour the water out? Or drink it?

Is it empty?

No, it has air in it.

Right?

So when we say something is empty, we have to ask, empty of what?

If we say that emptiness is at the heart of things, what do we mean?

What is everything empty of?

Thich Nhat Hanh says that emptiness means emptiness of a separate self.

If you look inside yourself, you will see that you are always changing, impermanent.

And all that is, is always changing.

Some fast, some slow.

But, also, every "thing" has a continuation with what came before

and in moving into what comes next.

It is only in our minds that we make discrete events and items.

Emerging continuously and continually flowing back into nothingness.

This Taoist and Buddhist idea is thousands of years old, but if you understand the insights of quantum mechanics

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and the rule of the conservation of mass, and how most of the cells in our body are replaced every few days, months, or years -

you see that this old idea corresponds, in some ways, to how we now know things are.

Emerging continuously and continually flowing back into nothingness.

Nothingness, emptiness, is not, then, just absence.

Instead, it is the recognition that nothing is permanent, that everything is connected and flowing together.

That there is no separate self.

That is what is empty.

But what that means is that emptiness is actually fullness.

Being empty of the illusion of separateness

means that we can become full of the truth:

full of the wholeness of reality,

the flow of being,

past, present and future.

Thich Nhat Hahn famously uses the illustration of a piece of paper -

you've heard this?

It is empty of "paper-ness," truthfully,

because it is full of the tree and the sun and the water
and the logger
and the loggers great-grandparents and the wind and the
stars.

And we are empty of us-ness;
there is no separate Matthew here,
despite my best illusions.

Instead there is the fullness of all life and ideas,
in this one moment concentrated into this form;
but the form comes and goes.

You were never the water,
only the wave.¹
Be still, I say, be still.

All that is flows in and through,
but it doesn't stick around.
Replacing our concept of fullness with this more dynamic
sense of emptiness,
of turning thing into no-thing into all-things,
is like the little boy who arrived before the emperor with
the empty bowl.

Like the other children,
we are all so tempted to fill our bowls
with the most vibrant and beautiful flowers.
We fill our bowls with the things of life:
to-do-lists and strategic goals,

¹ Words of Elder Olson

the shows we want to watch and the vacations we want
to take,
the things we hold onto and the things we covet,
and most of all,
our sense of identity, our sense of us-ness:
this is who I am,
and because of the things I have done,
I am therefore valuable and important.
Look at my beautiful flower.

What courage it takes for Ping, the little boy,
to come before the emperor with his empty bowl.
What courage it takes to sing,
"Come spirit come, I am empty, fill me."
To say, "I am weary, lead me home."

What courage it takes to let go of the imagined fullness
of a separate self,
and to rest in the flowing emptiness of the continuously
emerging.

What courage it takes to let go.
To let the bowl be empty,
so that it can be filled with truth.

One of the things I love most about Taoism and Zen
Buddhism
is that this focus on the fullness of emptiness,
of refusing to admit of separate selves,
of humility before the vagaries of knowledge,
of the incompleteness of words,

means that they don't spend a lot of time fighting about God.

Or the holy, or whatever.

That's just another name in our mind,
which we try to apply so we can limit the world.
But the universe is beyond our names and limits.
In this embrace of a holy nothingness, Zen and Tao
share an understanding with mystical western theology,
which affirms the inability to name and categorize what is
sacred.

In Islam, this mystical theology is Sufism,
and one of its prime poets -
and most Sufi's speak in poetry, not prose -
one of its prime poets is Rumi.

He writes this:

*Not Christian or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu
Buddhist, Sufi, or Zen. Not any religion
or cultural system. I am not from the East
or the West, not out of the ocean or up
from the ground, not natural or ethereal, not
composed of elements at all. I do not exist,
am not an entity in this world or in the next,
did not descend from Adam and Eve or any
origin story. My place is placeless, a trace
of the traceless. Neither body or soul.
I belong to the beloved, have seen the two
worlds as one and that one call to and know,
first, last, outer, inner, only that*

breath breathing human being.

My place is placeless.
I belong to the beloved.
Breath Breathing human being.

Breath breathing human being.
When I breathe in, I'll breath in peace.
When I breathe out, I'll breath out love.

If you do not empty your lungs of stale air,
you cannot fill them with the air of life.

If you do not make space for the becoming,
you will remain stuck.

If you don't let go of your old sense of identity,
you won't have room to discover your full possibility.

About 2500 years ago,
many of the people of Israel were held in captivity in
Babylon.

You know the song:
By the waters of Babylon, we sat down and wept.
They wanted to go home.
And then Cyrus, the king of Persia,
conquered the Babylonians, and sent the Jews home.
They were so glad! They sang and laughed and dreamed
of returning.

But the time away had been very important.
It was while they were empty of their homeland,
while they were exiled,
that they wrote down the sacred stories of their people -
what we now know as the Hebrew Bible, or the Old
Testament.

The emptiness — without the temple, without the land -
was full of sorrow; but something came from that which
might not have otherwise.

In Psalm 126, the author describes this homecoming,
the sorrow that was and the joy that comes.

And the author says,
“Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their
sheaves.”

Those who go out with the seed, weeping,
shall come home with joy.

You take that precious seed out into the world —
how can you, you have to hold onto it!
Your sense of your self, your life as it is, you have to hold
onto it!
But no, you take it out, and you sow it.
Hopefully it isn't cooked, but sometimes it is.

And then you come home to emptiness -
to a home, a being,

which is empty of illusion and deception.
But you don't come home empty handed.
You come with the harvest.
For uncooked seeds grow.
As do people, who are willing to do so.
As does the universe itself.
Continuously emerging, coming out of nothingness,
returning to it, coming out of it again.

And you come home with joy.
With laughter and singing.
You come home to stillness and emptiness,
but you come home in life and in fullness -
the fullness of truth, and of living in this moment.
The joy of release, the joy of letting go.

Breath breathing human being.
Singing, living, changing human being.
Part of all that is and was and will be,
unnamed, unnamable, empty of striving,
full of beauty and love and wonder.
Becoming empty so that you can be full again.
Leaving home so that you can come home again.
Breathing out so you can breath in.
Namaste, Salam, Namaste, and may it be becoming.
Let us sing.

