

Our Interior Desert: A Journey of Hope

Hot. Arid. Dusty. Thirsty.

A mirage appears shakily, hovering over the distant horizon.
We look up, our brain crafting in detail what our mind's eye wants us to see.

Water! Shade! Shelter! Food!

We struggle onward, one tired step after another, chasing a clouded vision, a manufactured hope.
Of riches. Of things. Eventually, sometimes far too late, we discover: It isn't there after all.

There is no 'there' there.

At times, life itself feels like a desert—a desert of shifting sands.
With not enough water or wealth to go around.

We set artificial worldly goals—aspirations having everything to do with self-focus and nothing to do with living the good beyond ourselves. We construct hazy hopes, building habit-houses on sand, expending energy to acquire the latest gadgets or fanciest cars.

We've all heard it. Or said it.

“By the time I'm thirty, I'll be a millionaire. No matter what it takes.”

“I'm defiantly buying that Beemer at forty. It's all that matters.”

“To heck with the kids—they can take care of themselves. I'm spending their inheritance now!”

Sadly, these refrains are more Austin Powers than Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, in practice, “It's all about me, baby!” too often trumps: “Pick up your cross and follow me.” Especially when we're young.

But Austin Powers gets old. So do Beemers. And so do we.

A person can only handle 'fluff' and 'nonsense' for so long before becoming disillusioned—or disgusted. For most of us, the daily replay of the *Spiritual Ground Hog Day* becomes unbearable. Waking up every day chasing after the twin mirages of materialism and success becomes pretty old, very fast.

Eventually, according to St. Augustine, we realize *“Our hearts are restless, Oh God, until they rest in you.”* Or, from the desert perspective, one might paraphrase: *“Our hearts are thirsty oh Lord, until we drink from you, the Water of Eternal Life.”*

Unfortunately, even when we realize the mirage-of-plenty leaves us soul-thirsty, we still experience the desert of busyness, the daily drudge of *should do's* and *musts do's*. The desert of sadness at the illness or death of a loved one; the desert of sorrow for our troubles; the way of the

cross we walk daily, bent beneath the weight of the world—each of these slows our spiritual walk. We trudge onward, exhausted.

Fortunately, the desert isn't as dry as one might think. Especially if you know how to look past the cultural mirages and see what's real and true, important and essential—and change your life accordingly. In life, each of us is bound to experience periods of dryness—that is the natural cycle of living. This Lent permeates entire months, even years of our lives.

We struggle.

Growth seems sparse.

We wait upon the Lord in the desert,
where resurrection seems remote and discomforts abound.
Lent seems unending; life feels bland.

If only spring would come, we wish. If only Lent would end.
If only light would return and life would bloom again, we think.
If only.

No one really likes Lent. And few of us wish to live in a barren desert, spiritually or otherwise. It's just too hard. But what if the desert isn't as barren as we think? What if life's Lents aren't all pestilence and penitence? What if, instead, life's Lents are growth-intervals; times to clarify choices and illuminate life's journey? What if Lent is a necessary part of life, a time to heal, reflect, and prepare for light-to-come?

If so, what better time than Lent to choose life and welcome light? What better time than Lent to invite our interior desert to bloom; to notice our parched souls already have access to a river, an eternal river which never runs dry? What better time to know the river can run right through the middle of our desert-life?

If we only let it.

And the most extraordinary things will happen...

The desert is a place where seeds are strong and sturdy. Such seeds can withstand intense heat and long periods of dryness between 'felt' rains. Thus, when the desert finally blooms, we must imprint in our soul's eye, the beauty, the perfume, and the glory of the difference the water of life makes.

It is difficult to remember during Lenten seasons, especially in the midst of a sorrow-cracked spirit, but we need to hold the baptismal water within us, like cacti, as milk for the soul—to sustain us in sorrows and struggles. And the longest, most difficult of these are deserts of illness, death, loss and grief. These junctures—barren crossroads in sinking sand, help us reevaluate the course of our lives and recognize the mirage of plenty for the fantasy it is.

The desert of waiting and wondering at such times (even in the midst of the bloom) and the ambiguity can be wearing. When will it all end, we wonder? What will happen next? Our spirits and souls, not to mention our psyches, have a difficult time with uncertainty, with *the*

great cloud of unknowing'. Thus, we humans, who like to plan and control, can be left with a residue of sorrow, an interior landscape of frustration.

We face the thorny times in our lives as cacti, with the necessary nourishment hiding deep within. Or as camels, storing the water of life we will need for the duration of the journey, not knowing how far the sands stretch, how thirsty we will be—a matter wholly mysterious for each of us.

Our time on earth is holy time, the time between now and eternity, the time between this moment and our last. This time is individual for each: different for all. Some of us have years—many, many years—before us on this earth. Others: a single day. The timing of the journey depends on so much—the body, the soul, illness, injury, chance and ill-luck, age, and so much more.

But eventually we all must take the final pilgrimage.
Someday, if not this day.

To be prepared for the journey—even well in advance of its beginning, is a great good. It is fearsome to think about; this preparation; this final journey. But it is the most important one we shall ever make. Acknowledging its eventuality can set us free to live well now, to rejoice in every single day, to breathe the blessings of the moment, to live mindfully the sacrament of the present moment with those we love, even during desert times.

It can free us to see the beauty of the desert, to live in awe of the gift of this one life, to recognize the fragile beauty and delicate ecosystem of every person we'll ever meet, to tread carefully and forgive readily. Seeing the journey as real and the distractions as mirage can help us seek wisdom in experience and cherish those who have walked the path of life before us.

So, how can we learn from those who have gone before us in the sign of faith—those who have crossed the barren desert, gone forth from Lent to Easter, and preceded us into the Kingdom?
How to we survive their loss?

What can those we have loved teach us?
How can we learn from the wisdom of Saints and the lives of the good?
What must we do to live well and die with grace?

Have the necessary roadmaps been prepared, requisite letters scrawled in sand, words of love and forgiveness spoken, healing and sorrow left as monument valley for those in our lives who will cross a different desert after our passing—the desert of grief?

They too, will need camel and cacti to follow footsteps in shifting sand— across the barren desert of sorrow and loss. Wind and heat will sear the souls of the bereaved living; burning sun will leave them struggling to breathe, to get up each day, to walk even a few steps forward. In the time of sorrow, shade will be elusive; comfort fleeting. Nights will be dark and cold; days hot and arid.

But always, hidden deeply within, for them and for us, will be a well-spring of heart-love, a river wide and deep with memories and smiles, loving words and gentle asides from which is drawn life's remembrances—a heart-vessel, a canteen which can be filled or refilled—life saving waters to be sipped or gulped in time of need. And the well of loving remembrance, like Elijah's in the desert, will not run dry.

This desert of dying is holy ground, the holiest we will cross since that last time, when we crossed from the otherworld, the waterworld, to this one. Only then we were tiny, pre-born. Then too, we did not know what to expect. Then we cried as we entered the new world; this time we cry as we leave. Both times waiting arms catch us to break our fall, loving arms envelop us, holding us close, feeding us—the nectar of life.

One day we all must cross the desert to the oasis beyond, to the place of no pain; no sorrow; no suffering. But the time-of-crossing is different for each of us.

This time-before-time is mystery. It is unknown. It can be a fearful time. Or it can be a time of preparation, a time to live each day mindfully, with daily blessings breathed, gratitude remembered, lovingkindness chosen.

When our journey's end approaches, we will be accompanied. Even if alone, we do not die unattended.

Angles accompany us always, crafting from wings of love, Jacobs ladder, whispering to us songs of glory, soon to be remembered from the time before. So that when the day-of-leaving comes, we may rest on eagles wings, carried past barren deserts, and up stairs of living love, to the place of Oasis, to the very Heart of Love.

“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard the glory God has prepared for those who love him.”

“Well done, good and faithful servant, come and share your masters joy.”

We have little understanding of this promised glory, even less experience of it. But we ARE offered *“the peace which surpasseth all understanding,”* if not in this life, then in the next.

Our God IS a good God. And we little folk here in the desert below, are alas, so very, and blessedly, and vulnerably human, after all.

And well loved, Praise be to God. The water of life **will** run as a river through the center of our life's desert.

If only we let it...

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