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Bowing to One Another: Vulnerability in Spiritual Direction

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It is customary to take a bow when a performance has concluded and we acknowledge some well-earned applause. We might also bow at the beginning, with a *Namasté* bow that honors the spirit within another person and opens the possibility of a relationship of mutual trust. (The word *Namasté* comes from Sanskrit and means something like “the divine within me greets the divine within you.”) Let us begin with a bow.

How Do We Bow?

When we bow, we make ourselves vulnerable. We lower our heads, drop our masks and our performances, give ourselves over, and welcome the other. While many spiritual traditions associate bowing with reverence, gratitude, devotion, or a simple yet profound acceptance, modern Western cultures, unfortunately, often associate bowing with submission to someone of higher status. We commonly confuse service with subservience, humility with humiliation, and vulnerability with weakness or neediness. But bowing is, in fact, one of the most meaningful and powerful ways of communicating authentic openness and recognizing the wholeness of someone or something beyond ourselves.

We may not literally bow to each other in spiritual direction, but we do tacitly (and often explicitly) agree to trust and respect each other in the context of something or someone larger than either of us. In so doing, we also drop most defenses and make ourselves vulnerable. I believe that this vulnerability in the spiritual direction relationship must be mutual in order to be genuine, but since spiritual direction is a personal and

professional relationship as well as a spiritual one, balancing vulnerability with personal and professional responsibility is essential.

As spiritual directors, how do we invite and honor the vulnerability of our spiritual directees? And how vulnerable can, or should, we allow ourselves to be in a spiritual direction session? While the first question is a natural part of any spiritual director’s training, the second question is often set aside. Perhaps it is assumed that, in order to preserve good boundaries, the spiritual director should not be vulnerable at all. I would like to explore these tender questions with love and respect, bowing to the concerns that necessarily arise, while also bowing, deeply, to the potential for true mutuality within the spiritual direction relationship.

The Willing Sacrifice of Ego

If we are to be of service to our spiritual directees, we must face our own difficult life challenges responsibly, learning and growing in the process. We must make ourselves available, and this availability sometimes takes the form of vulnerability. Even, or especially, when we are struggling, we have an opportunity to make our learning and growth processes accessible to our clients and community, without burdening them with our loads.

I use dreamwork as a spiritual practice and also apply dream insights in spiritual direction. Dreams tell the truth, revealing our vulnerabilities and our common ground with others. Sometimes, when we are going through significant challenges in our personal lives, we experience breakthrough dreams, extraordinarily powerful dreams that represent authentic transformation of the ego



identity, allowing for an opening that is universal and will be instinctively understood by those who have also experienced deep change.

Several years ago, during a time of painful loss and grief, I had this extraordinary dream:

***The Willing Sacrifice:** I am a young Asian prince in an ancient indigenous community. My village has been suffering from a drought; our survival is at stake. We have just completed the reenactment of a sacred ritual that should restore harmony: the symbolic sacrifice of the community's leader (me). But it does not work, and I now realize that only a true sacrifice will make a difference. We must enact the ritual again, and this time I must actually die. I accept this with a profound sense of responsibility, feeling the weight of what I must do. The community is gathered to bear witness, to support me, and to honor and grieve for my sacrifice.*

Before me is a large ritual space—a square, marked on the ground by a golden ribbon. I am wearing a plain white tunic. I walk, formally, toward one side of the square, feeling turmoil, anguish, and intense vulnerability. I hope that my death will not be too gruesome or painful, and I wonder if I can bear it—but then I release that thought. It will be what it will be. I release the hopes I had for the rest of my life.

Before stepping across the ribbon, I must ask permission to make this sacrifice. I kneel down, as I have done many times before during the symbolic ceremonies, but this time I know I must go further. I close my eyes and bow all the way to the ground. It seems a long way down, an infinite falling in and giving over. At the moment when my forehead finally touches the earth in complete surrender, I feel flooded with love: the loving warmth and gratitude of con-

nection with all those who have gone before me, all those who surround me, all those who will come after me ... also, the overwhelming love that pours through me from the earth herself. It is more than I can contain.

The final sentence in my description of the dream says it all: “It is more than *I* can contain.” The ego *I* cannot hold the larger experience of life itself that rushes in with love at the moment when the sacrifice is accepted. The small self gives way, and the larger self can then be experienced. The larger self is not limited to one distinct identity but includes all who are taking part in this ceremony. And beyond the shared human experience, there is also a profound connection with the earth—in essence, with the divine. This parallels the spiritual direction experience, which is simultaneously very personal and completely without our usual goals of self-gratification or even self-actualization. It is something more.

In practical terms, this kind of “willing sacrifice” is just what a starving community needs to witness and recognize, because if a community is to survive, all individuals within that community must be willing to set aside their personal needs and goals, to experience larger, shared values. When a leader models such deep “bowing down,” the act invites others to bow as well. If we bow together, giving up our self-centered roles and rules, we make it possible for the community as a whole to survive and thrive. In spiritual direction, if I bow down and make myself authentically vulnerable and available, this is an implicit invitation for others to open up, to give whatever they have to give, and to grow beyond their own limitations.

Of course, the death represented in this dream is not to be taken literally as a ritual execution,



but instead it is to be recognized as the archetypal “willing sacrifice” of ego that accompanies movement toward a more inclusive identity. The “prince” is not diminished by his sacrifice, nor is he superior to the people; he is one with the community, with the earth, with the divine. Death in dreams often signifies spiritual transformation, where the personal becomes universal.

My experiences with hospice patients and with my own life-changing health issues have taught me that even when we are suffering the very real loss of our familiar roles, self-image, and physical abilities and certainties, our transformation happens not only on the dreadfully literal level but at a much deeper level as well. When a dying person lets go, or an ill person opens up to the possibilities of a “new normal,” there can be a kind of transcendent peace that comes with releasing ego-goals and expanding into the unknown. The transformation is intimately personal and difficult, and the scary vulnerability of being human becomes evident, but this kind of vulnerability is not pitiful in any sense; it requires nothing of others but embraces and invites them wholeheartedly to a larger perspective.

Therapy and traditional education are designed to strengthen our ego-goals in positive ways and help us develop tools to cope with our problems. But spiritual direction invites us to transcend our ego-goals and recognize our problems as opportunities for deeper change. While therapists generally need to model strong, capable identities for their clients, spiritual directors may need to model flexibility of identity and openness to change, which can include making mistakes, struggling with personal losses, and sometimes surrender or sacrifice. None of these things should be actively introduced into the context of a spiritual direction session, but it is essential that they can be seen as

aspects of the spiritual director’s presence, personal development, and integrity. As spiritual directors, we offer our best selves, but we also need to be authentically vulnerable, without the pretense of superiority or separateness.

In the years since this breakthrough dream, my ego-identity in waking life has been experiencing vulnerability on many levels, sometimes willingly, sometimes with great reluctance. The predominant characteristic of this process is love—just like the love manifested in the moment of complete acceptance in the dream. Such love involves a willingness to let go of ambitions and anxieties as much as possible, on behalf of others and in service to something larger, something indefinable yet trustworthy.

Illness and Sharing

Literal bowing—lowering the head, leaning forward—has become a real balancing act for me in the past two years. A progressive neuromuscular disease is making it increasingly difficult for me to support the weight of my head, so when I lean forward I usually need to prop my chin with one hand. The awkwardness of this movement is a good metaphor for the balancing act involved in deciding how much (or how little) of my personal health concerns and physical vulnerability to share with my spiritual directees.

Twenty-three years ago, in my mid-thirties, I was treated for Hodgkin’s lymphoma, a cancer of the immune system. The treatment included surgery, chemotherapy, and exceptionally high doses of radiation to a large field (the “mantle” region of the upper chest, back, and neck). In more recent years, radiation for Hodgkin’s disease has been scaled back considerably and still proves effective, but when I was treated, a “no-holds-barred” approach was thought most likely to save the



patient's life, and the dangers of the radiation itself were acceptable considering the alternative.

Radiation caused some permanent damage right away: I lost thyroid function, had metabolic imbalances and mild heart and lung problems, needed to have my gall bladder removed, and experienced some nerve and muscle damage. Radiation significantly increased my risk of other cancers as well as heart and lung diseases. But I was alive, and any real concerns were for the distant future.

The future caught up with me in 2016. I walked the Camino de Santiago (five hundred miles across northern Spain) and confronted my physical vulnerability all the way, suffering from a serious respiratory infection and also wrestling with intractable digestive trouble, a straining heart, and extreme exhaustion. Back home, as I recovered from the pilgrimage, I began to have more and more problems with my back and neck. I had had a "slouch" for years—a sharp crook in my upper spine—but thought it was just due to poor posture. Now, however, I found I could not bend over without holding my head with my hand. The muscles of my upper body were wasting away, and my spine and ribs protruded disturbingly. I was getting weaker, and my heart seemed to be laboring more and more.

Eventually, I was diagnosed with radiation fibrosis syndrome (RFS), the result of those cancer treatments so many years before. The radiation does not just cause immediate damage and scar-

ring, it actually continues to influence the body at a molecular level, becoming increasingly destructive as time goes by. The condition is degenerative (a "wasting disease"), and an echocardiogram revealed that my heart muscle is also damaged.

My spiritual directees and dreamwork clients had followed the progress of my Camino journey and certainly were aware that I was weaker and thinner when I returned. As an aspect of

my professional work, I often write about personal experiences, using myself as an example in exploring life challenges. So the progression of my illness was not a secret, and of course my spiritual directees were concerned. I felt it was important to be open with them, rather than have them learn indirectly about some of the problems I was facing. But there are limits to this kind of sharing, and it was evident to me that choos-

ing how, what, and with whom I shared needed to be a kind of spiritual practice in itself—undertaken with conscious care, as well as respect for my own vulnerability and that of my clients.

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Taking Responsibility

If a spiritual director has a cold or the flu, the responsible thing to do is to cancel (and reschedule) spiritual direction sessions. This is not generally because of a fear of being vulnerable, but because the illness might be contagious or the symptoms could be distracting. Although illnesses like mine—or other significant, disruptive experi-



ences that can occur in the personal life of a spiritual director—would not be literally contagious and might not involve any overtly distracting symptoms, the analogy is still apt.

If I am experiencing something in my private life that I cannot contain appropriately, something that will convey “neediness” to a spiritual directee, thus triggering that person’s natural desire to help me, then I have a “contagious” condition that should make me refrain from putting that person in the position of taking on my needs. If I am experiencing or exhibiting physical or emotional symptoms that could prevent me from giving a spiritual directee my full attention, or could draw that person’s attention toward my concerns, then my presence in the role of spiritual director is distracting rather than beneficial.

So far, these issues have not arisen in a way that would cause me to cancel a session, but circumstances where my own vulnerability could not be appropriately shared certainly do arise in my private time. In the course of my illness, I have sometimes felt confused, anxious, grief-stricken, frustrated, victimized, and even desperate. Writing about these things, letting others (even clients and spiritual directees) know that I am capable of “losing it” and “falling apart,” may be meaningful and a form of appropriate vulnerability—but exposing others to my raw emotions when I am actually in such a state would be another matter entirely. I share at this level with my partner, of course, and with a few close friends. But such sharing would not be consistent with the relationship I have with my spiritual directees, no matter how much mutual trust and respect we have for each other. Similarly, if my illness progressed to the point where I could not concentrate fully on a spiritual directee during a session (due to unmanageable pain, for example),

or if I had symptoms that would distract the other person (such as severe tremors), then I would not be able to bring this kind of vulnerability to my work.

Of course, sharing vulnerability depends more on the readiness of the spiritual directee than on that of the spiritual director. Most of my spiritual directees happen to be very aware of good boundaries in relationships (many are therapists or spiritual directors themselves), but when I occasionally work with less-experienced people whose personal insecurities might lead them to defer their own needs or feel compelled to fix me ... well, in these cases it is essential to provide a strong, clear, compassionate, and consistent presence and keep my vulnerability to myself.

Nevertheless, assuming that spiritual directees have a degree of self-awareness, and assuming that basic boundaries are carefully maintained, there are ways in which a spiritual director’s vulnerability can be useful and meaningful to the work of spiritual direction.

Servant Leadership

When I was in the third grade, my class had an assignment to create a picture book. We were supposed to write a story, illustrate it, and then produce a book made from folded construction-paper pages sewn together with yarn. My book resembled a traditional fairy tale but with a peculiar twist: There was a king who saved his people by defeating a dragon—but the king was a stick, and the dragon was defeated because the noble stick bowed down to the ground, and the charging beast tripped over him. Then, with both of them lying flat, they shook hands and the dragon became a good citizen. The end.

I remember the process of inventing this story. I was nervous about my inability to draw people



or animals realistically, but I knew I could draw a dragon with a ferociously jagged outline, and I could draw a stick, with little twiggy arms and legs, a smiling face, and a crown. What could a stick do about a dragon? The answer seemed obvious.

Of course, I do not recommend that we make ourselves vulnerable as spiritual directors in order to “trip up” our spiritual directees! But I do believe that bowing respectfully and authentically to our inner dragons (or difficulties, illnesses, wounds, and losses) is more effective than violent resistance and that true leadership or nobility involves the kind of humility that invites rather than challenges others.

So, what does this mean in the spiritual direction relationship? Well, spiritual directors are not typical leaders; they do not assert authority by commanding, instructing, advising, or overtly guiding. But the spiritual direction relationship does involve a kind of *servant leadership*. This leadership consists of being fully present, modeling integrity, awakening potentials, and offering a kind of *friendship* that meets others as equals on holy ground.

In the Quaker tradition, we are all leaders, ministers, and spiritual companions to one another—each bringing our own unique gifts to our personal and professional relationships. Quakers are called “Friends” on the basis of the relationship that Jesus had with his disciples and the relationships that the disciples had with one another. We “lay down our lives for our friends” (John 15:13), not by sacrificing ourselves literally, but by letting go of our need to be special or better than others, and treating others—spiritual directees, loved ones, strangers, or dragons—honorably and kindly, to the best of our ability. This kind of servant leadership requires vulnerability, which manifests itself as the courage to acknowledge our fears, frustrations, mistakes,

weaknesses, pain, and problems.

Friends speak of being “broken and tender” in sacred relationship with life’s difficulties. We are like twigs broken from the sacred tree of life—we cannot stand, grow, or bear fruit on our own. Many of us have been carved or cracked or weathered by hard experiences—we are dry sticks, crooked sticks, frail sticks, or sticks that have been used for someone else’s purposes and discarded. If we allow ourselves to be misused, we might imagine that our only strength and value comes from controlling or resisting others, becoming a spear or a club. But if we recognize our weaknesses as our strengths, then our inner light can shine: we become kindling for a holy fire, or flexible twigs in an arbor for flowering vines to climb; or we simply lie down, bow down, return to the earth we all grew from and invite others to rest alongside us, to rest on the ground, in the sunlight, in the rain.

Dreaming with Others

Some of the tools I use to share my vulnerability appropriately in the spiritual direction relationship come from my work with dreams. Modern dreamwork (following the ethical guidelines established by the International Association for the Study of Dreams) acknowledges that the dreamer is the final authority on the meaning or value of the dream. Many modern dreamworkers, myself included, recognize that a dream, like a waking life experience, is to be explored rather than explained or “interpreted.” When a client or member of a dream group talks about a dream, the listener can only imagine the possibilities that the dream might represent; we use our imaginations rather than our analytical minds to relate to the dream. Like a spiritual director, a dreamworker trusts the larger field of experience (dream or spiritual journey) and simply supports the dreamer in encountering and



exploring that sacred field from various perspectives with an open heart. So, when talking about someone else’s dream, I would use phrases like “if this were my dream...” while genuinely imagining myself in the dreamer’s situation, responding to the dream as though I had dreamed it myself.

The shorthand version of this, which we use in dream groups, is simply to say “I” instead of “you.” For example, if a dreamer shares this dream—“A dog comes up to me. I am really scared, but the dog licks my hand, and I wake up”—then others would describe their own responses to the dream experience. Even if I am not scared of dogs myself, I would imagine that I am scared of dogs (because that is part of this dreamer’s experience), imagine how I would feel as the dog approaches me, and imagine my response when the dog just licks my hand.

What significance would a dream like this have for me? As a starting point, someone in the group might say, “If this were my dream, I would ask myself what I have been afraid of lately that could turn out to be harmless or even friendly.” And then he might give an example from his own life that would fit this scenario: “I have always been a bit apprehensive about guys with crew cuts, because when I was a kid, there was a bully who had a crew cut. Now, there is a guy at work who has a crew cut, and I notice I have been

avoiding him. But the other day I overheard him saying something really generous about another coworker, and it made me question my assumptions. I felt the same kind of relief and warmth in the situation that I felt in this dream—like I was allowing myself to consider a different relationship to my discomfort and resistance.”

The dreamworker shares a personal story that makes him vulnerable because it reveals his own prejudice but does not assume that this story is necessarily true for the dreamer. He does not say, “I think this dream means you have been scared of something, and you should not be.” He also does not say, “If this were my dream I would not be scared of the dog”—because this is the dreamer’s dream, and it is not up to the dreamworker to rewrite it according to his own feelings. Instead, good dreamwork involves empathy and vulnerability but respects the dreamer’s boundaries and recognizes that the dream

is big enough to encompass many meanings. The dreamer may not identify with the dreamworker’s insight into the dream, but the dreamworker has modeled a particular way of seeing the dream and a willingness to share his own fears that might invite the dreamer to explore personal fears as well. The conversation, of course, does not follow the tangent about guys with crew cuts—it stays with the dreamer and the dream, but does not

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force the dreamer into directly accepting or rejecting a particular interpretation.

Similarly, I might respond to a spiritual directee's personal experiences by imagining myself in her situation and sharing a similar situation in my own life—but in a context that invites her to point out ways in which her circumstances or feelings differ from mine. She might even draw conclusions from my experience that are not consistent with the conclusions I would have drawn—and that is fine.

Above all, this personal sharing, although it makes me vulnerable, needs to be offered in such a way that it does not make my story the focus of our conversation but instead offers possibilities for the spiritual directee that could otherwise seem presumptuous. When I share something about myself, I acknowledge that I am projecting and imagining; I invite her to correct me where I am wrong, and to clarify for herself what the truth is like for her. In the process, she sees that I, too, cope with all kinds of challenges—she is not alone. She sees that she can try out different perspectives on her situation without committing herself. We are playing with the possibilities, experimenting, learning what feels right by being willing to guess wrong and then figure out what is wrong about it.

Humor and playfulness (which come naturally with dreamwork) can ease the intensity of a spiritual directee's deep, transformative vulnerability—and so I bring my own vulnerability to spiritual direction sessions by inviting spiritual directees to laugh a little, as we explore, gently and honestly, the more sensitive aspects of their spiritual lives.

Being Vulnerable

There are different ways that a spiritual director can bring appropriate vulnerability to the spiritual direction relationship. So far, I have considered two of them:

1. When a spiritual director is dealing with her own physical or emotional struggles, she can share this in a way that models willing participation in life's challenges. She can prioritize spiritual growth over ego-centered ambitions by demonstrating a willingness to work through the inevitable difficulties we all face on the spiritual path, without burdening the spiritual directee with her personal needs or concerns.
2. A spiritual director can share mistakes and weaknesses in his own life, as long as he has a sense of humor and a genuine willingness to grow—and can even make mistakes within the spiritual direction relationship, if he acknowledges those mistakes and sustains his commitment to the well-being of the spiritual directee. As in dreamwork, the spiritual directee can decide for herself whether or not the spiritual director's experiences are relevant to her, and the focus remains on her experiences, not the spiritual director's.

A third aspect of vulnerability, which is essential to my practice of spiritual direction, should be added here:

3. The Buddhist tradition describes a quality called “sympathetic joy” (*mudita*). This quality is the opposite of resentment or envy—it is the quality that appreciates another person's successes, good fortune, or personal gifts, even when those gifts exceed our own. “Sympathetic joy” requires humility, open-heartedness, and vulnerability. In spiritual direction, I often notice ways in which a spiritual directee is more generous, more experienced, or braver than I am. Sometimes, I feel



a twinge of jealousy or anxiety along with this realization, especially if I am strongly identified with the particular positive characteristic I am seeing in someone else, but more often than not, it gives me real joy.

For example, though I have always had a particular kind of analytical intelligence that stands out; the crispness of this intelligence has wilted a bit as I have gotten older—I can see that some of my spiritual directees can be smarter, in this particular way, than I am. In fact, every one of my spiritual directees is smarter, in her own particular way, than I am. When I first realized this, I expected to feel somewhat insecure about it but was pleasantly surprised to find that it delighted me. Encountering the gifts of these wonderful people, I enjoy their intelligence, share my appreciation with them, and actively encourage them to take the lead or explain things to me when I am slow to catch up with their way of thinking. I bow to them. I really thought I needed to be the clever one, but I find that it is wonderful to let myself stand back while someone else shines.

As my illness creates more limitations in what I can accomplish in the world, my own truest gifts are expressed through supporting others as they step forward. Their successes are my successes; their gifts are my gifts; their joys are my joy. In fact, the more I step aside, the more meaningful my own role becomes.

Other Considerations

Although it is not possible to include every conceivable aspect of “vulnerability in the spiritual direction relationship” in an article such as this one, I realize that I have failed to address a significant concern relating to this topic. In societies where inequalities of power and privilege are rampant, and especially in the United States, which has a grotesque legacy of slavery that reverberates through all of our cultural institutions and interpersonal dynamics to the present day, vulnerability always has racial implications and cannot be considered without also looking at the implicit power imbalances in all trust-based relationships that cross racial and cultural lines. As a white woman, I acknowledge that a person of color writing the same article that I have written would not have had the luxury of forgetting to address this issue.

People of color in the United States and many other parts of the world where the majority population and power structures are white must deal with vulnerability every day of their lives. Although I am a lesbian, a person with disabilities, and a person with some economic “disadvantages”—all things that might make me involuntarily vulnerable to prejudice—I generally have the option of choosing when or how I will share these aspects of myself with others. If I am in a situation where I might encounter hostility, intrusive assumptions, or even inadvertent but hurtful misunderstanding, I can choose not to make myself vulnerable to other people’s projec-

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tions by not revealing certain aspects of myself. We all withhold some aspects of our authentic selves in some situations, both to protect our own boundaries and to respect the boundaries of others. However, African Americans and other people of color often do not have these options and regularly have projections (including overt aggression and physical and emotional violence) thrust upon them whenever they step outside of their homes and immediate communities.

In an article like mine, where I advocate increased vulnerability in appropriate circumstances with careful attention to boundary issues, it is essential to acknowledge that such chosen vulnerability is a privilege not always available to everyone. For an African American spiritual director with a white spiritual directee (or an African American directee with a white spiritual director), such vulnerability is far more risky, and good boundaries require far more effort to sustain.

Virtually all people of color in the United States (and elsewhere) have experienced many, many occasions when their vulnerability has been exploited for another's gain, and cannot help but be aware of the potential for similar harm when making themselves vulnerable in the spiritual direction relationship. This does not mean that spiritual directors and directees of color cannot or should not make themselves authentically vulnerable in these relationships of trust—but it does mean that the challenges of building interracial relationships of trust are complex. The work of boundary balancing and the higher-stakes risks of such relationships place a far greater burden on people of color than on white people. Therefore, as a white person, I consider it my responsibility to become more aware of these differences, to make myself more vulnerable in an effort to redress some of these imbalances, and to face the ways that I

have perpetuated norms of the dominant culture that impose vulnerability on people of color.

If this article is an invitation to vulnerability rather than an imposition of it, then it is vital to acknowledge that some of us—people of color in particular—have had to be more courageous and work harder in order to accept such an invitation. Still, I hope we can all accept some shared vulnerability, when it is possible, and bow to one another.

Shared Strengths

When I had just completed my Camino pilgrimage, I had a dream that echoed “The Willing Sacrifice” with a similar East Asian context, again including a powerful example of bowing down. It is interesting that in both this dream and the previous one, I experienced myself as male, and of a race and culture different from my own. This sense of being someone other than my familiar self may add an element of vulnerability and possibility to my dream identity. By perceiving myself from another perspective, I open myself to learning—and revealing—things about myself that I might not have recognized otherwise.

***The Grieving Warrior:** We are a group of travelers following a path through a dense forest. Night is falling, and I am in the lead, feeling my way, finding openings between the trees. But then there are no more openings, only thickets on all sides. Even the way we came has closed behind us. Trapped in the dark, we come under attack and are lifted up in the air where we fight for our lives. We cannot see the enemy.*

Apparently, we are Japanese samurai. The leader is an older warrior who has survived many battles. I experience everything from his perspective. As the warrior, suspended in the air, I fight fiercely against the invisible enemy, but I'm



weakening, and I recognize that I'm probably going to die. I will face my death bravely. Yet, somehow, I survive after all. Instead of dying, I see my brother, my nephew, and finally my son, all killed in the battle around me. It is more than I can bear, and much worse than if I had died myself.

The battle is over, and the dead are being buried, the wounded are being tended, and the beleaguered survivors are resting in some stone ruins. Exhausted, I walk among them, looking for someone. Finally, I find her: my daughter-in-law. She sits leaning against a wall, uninjured, but heartbroken because she has lost her husband (my son). I stand before her, and we look at each other. She is supposed to get up, keeping her gaze lowered to honor her father-in-law, so we may exchange formal condolences. But, before she can rise, I kneel beside her, breaking protocol. I bow deeply, then gently rest my forehead against hers, and we cry together, overcome by our shared grief.

The daughter-in-law is pregnant, and the child will be a girl. The old warrior will live, now, in a new way, for the future of his family.

A dream like this reverberates with personal and universal significance. Such a dream requires my personal attention, as it speaks to the core of my life experience, my unique perspective, and my deepest longings and learnings—but it also calls for sharing, as it is not meant only for me. Such a dream makes a lens of my life, through which the larger world can be seen—so rather than looking *at* that lens (focusing on myself), I can look *through* it.

This dream came when I needed it. I had reached the end of my long Camino pilgrimage, which had exhausted all of my inner resources—at

least the resources I recognized. Although I had hoped that two months walking across Spain with thousands of other pilgrims would change me, it first tested my resistance to being changed. I faced the journey like a warrior, and fought bravely, until there was no fight left in me. I struggled against the rain, heat, and wind, against the crowded hostels and unfamiliar food, against my body's pain, illness, and weakness. More than once, I felt completely lost. I fought hard but was always up in the air, without any solid place to make a stand. Then I came to the end, where I could rest. It was time to surrender. It was time to feel the heavy grief I had been carrying (for my parents, who had recently died, and for other losses in my life), and it was time to bow down to a new way of being in the world, a softer way. So the dream came—for me, and for something more than me. The dream came to help me define myself differently.

Everything is always changing, and that is both frightening and hopeful, for me and for everyone I know who is following a spiritual path. I have not actually shared this dream with my spiritual directees, but the dream seems to reflect the kind of vulnerability I need as a spiritual director. We all need dreams like this one now, as we face the future. What is our place in this world, and how can we surrender to the new possibilities that will be born from our hard battles and long journeys? Perhaps we have reached the limits of the warrior's path; it will no longer take us forward, and we cannot go back the way we came. Many of us find ourselves "up in the air" and "under attack." We think it is the end for us; our strength has been exhausted. But instead of dying, we have to survive our losses and grieve the pain of unrealized potential. The warrior is defeated, and his lineage is swept away. But even in grief, there is relief in surrendering our privilege, power, and



position; there is a blessing in kneeling down beside others, “putting our heads together,” crying together, and committing ourselves to new life.

I try to bow down to the deepest sources of gentle strength I can find in myself, my community, the earth, my dreams, my dragons, and especially my spiritual directees. When we are authentic with

each other, we support the potential for new life, a new generation that could require fewer defenses, more permeable boundaries, more possibilities. We can open our hearts without abandoning ourselves or burdening those we serve. Let us bow to that. *Namasté.* ■



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 Live and Let Live
 Creation Sustains Gratefulness.

Let go and Let God
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Obstacles become Teachings
 Live and Let Live
 Empathic, Intuition Unfolds
 Above the Smoke, Light. ■

Kevin Laughlin