

Seeking Peace

Spurned by society, a convict confronts his personal demons and finds solace

by Kenneth Hartman

There is said to be within the most powerful storm an eye of tranquility, a place of solace. Within the tempest of life everyone needs to find his own eye, his personal place of refuge. This is true for all, but for those of us in prison, the call to peace rings particularly clearly.

From time immemorial, man has sought contact with the transcendent. The tales of these quests reverberate down the ages. The Buddha sitting under a tree for weeks, in silent contemplation of what is and what is not. Moses climbing the mountain to come face to face with the fiery image of his God.

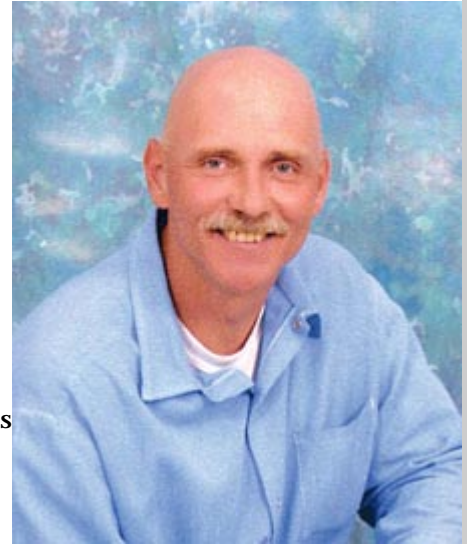
Native Americans set off on vision quests into a wilderness of primeval forests. Many times these journeys lasted weeks, into months. The traveler was celebrated upon his return from the edge of nothingness, while his fellows waited anxiously for the wisdom gained by the ordeal. And what was Jesus' suffering and death on the cross, if not a trek? A trek to find something, to reach out past the grasp of human hands into the dark of the universe, to touch the divine.

The common denominator of these odysseys is the element of suffering, of hardship and loss, of adversity. Shakespeare, the master of human nature, observed, "The sweetness of adversity, ugly and venomous as a toad, yet wears a jewel in its crown." In this society of ours, awash in things and pleasures, there are temples devoted to the course of discovering the jewel in adversity. These temples are our prisons.

Houses of pain, churches of isolation and separation, they crouch in the hills and deserts of our soulless culture. Even in the midst of these horrors, there rise from time to time miracles of the human spirit. In the many long years of my sojourn through the prison system, removed from my family and loved ones, scorned by strangers and demonized by the media, I have nevertheless come to find something quite extraordinary. The handiwork of God is to be found here if one cares to look.

I look. In the early mornings a prison is rife with expectancy, coiled noise and chaos waiting to break out of the little hovels we occupy. I lay awake in my bed and open myself to the energy flowing around the building. I still the voice in me that cries out for attention, and sometimes I hear the music, the gentle lapping of waves against the beach of time.

Quiet. Real inner quiet is the key to the door. A person needs to set aside a regular period of time, everyday, and within that time be quiet. Be still, and resist the endless fidget that is the hallmark of our culture. Tribesmen in the Amazon rainforest, on first encountering Western man, were astounded at the pace of our lives, our striving for the accumulation of things. As if these totems could somehow save us from the fate of all living things — the end of our earthly existence.



Once, I was told I would die shortly from a terminal disease. Unlike those in the “free world,” I was not given drugs to numb me out, nor was I able to use the distractions of materialism to ward off the deep sadness. I was isolated, locked alone in a 4 by 10-foot cell. In the span of several months, while I prepared to die, I found my true self. I struggled and strained and ultimately fell to the floor, exhausted, before I gave in to the stillness. In that place of utter blackness I stood in front of a chasm, deep and immense. It terrified me. Then, without warning, I fell into this virtual abyss, tumbling off into nothingness.

During my flight to the void, I realized the nothingness had become warm and inviting. I was swimming in honey, sweet, thick, nourishing. The stillness has never frightened me again. It is a coat to be worn in the tough times, a shelter from the wind. One must step off into the dark, alone, away from the lights and beeping intrusions of the modern world. It is in the terror of the fall that one finds the next key.

Long ago, when I was a young man filled with pain and rage, I struck out at the world. I worked to remove myself from humanity. Some would say I became a monster, some that I am still a monster. I suspect I felt the ringing wail of what was not there in my life, what is not there in most of our lives, more keenly than most. The empty confusion, the incomprehensible meaninglessness, filled me with fear.

I know now I have nothing to fear and nothing to desire. And that, of course, is the final key to peace. In my heart of hearts, in the part of me that is you and I and all of us, I am okay now. I know the storm of my life is but an eddy in the great whirlwind of the cosmos.

Seek your peace. Open your heart to the rush of wind in and out of your lungs, the rhythm of life, the great connection. I breathe the same air that everyone else does, that every bear does, that every baby fresh from the first ordeal of life cries out to taste. Be still and listen. You will not be disappointed.

Kenneth Hartman is serving a life sentence in the Lancaster prison.