

*The Secret Embrace* by Thomas Keating

From the Spirituality and Practice online course *Thomas Keating's The Secret Embrace* with Cynthia Bourgeault.<sup>i</sup>

All poems from *The Secret Embrace* by Thomas Keating<sup>ii</sup>

Comments by Jonathan L Steele

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*The Last Laugh*

*I watch the seductive dance of every day life  
But the desire to join has ceased.*

*Two crucial questions arise:*

*Where are you?*

*Who Are you?*

*Nowhere is my destination.*

*And no one is my identity.*

*My daily bread is powerlessness.*

*Temptations can be overwhelming.*

*Gone is every hope of help.*

*An abyss opens up within me.*

*I am falling, falling,*

*Plunging into non-existence.*

*Is this annihilation?*

*Or, is it the path to the Silent Love*

*That we are?*

*As the false self disappears,*

*The true self is born.*

*Then the dance of human nature with  
That Which is  
Takes on a wholly new perspective,*

*And those who take part in it  
Are overwhelmed with laughter  
Too deep to be heard.*

## 1) Dark Night as The Path

Jesus' apophatic journey may not have been initiated until Gethsemane and carries on acutely through his passion, including abandonment by friends, betrayal and beyond cruel physical punishment. Yet, somewhere along the way, something else pops through him, where fully surrendered to love, he becomes love, literally speaking forgiveness on his enemies and transmitting transfiguration of the earthly plane through his dying and dead body, Blood and death, now become water, baptismal, divinization, transmission. The self has been fully donated to the cosmos. Having been willing to die before he died. Could this be what Thomas is pointing to through this poem? The transcendence of the traditional unitive map-where there is no place to get to. Just presence remaining as absence, free of anguish having borne it, even having become it. Wow. Is this what's being imprinted through evolution-an embodied non-dual Christian path bursting into transcendent and transfigured waters transmitting essence in its wake? Is this vision I'm glimpsing raising both the possibilities and the playing field? Accessed through dark night perception? Is this the fire in the cosmos that Yeshua has been guarding and that Teilhard saw at the heart of all matter?

## 2) Shining, Shining

May we all be like rocks making the brook sing, placing ourselves (include and include) allowing Transcendence itself to worry about outcomes, including transcendence for that matter. What is called for now is trusting this flow of mercy with the all of ourselves. Thomas is joining the other Thomas (Merton) in our Western tradition as icons of cosmic responsibility in their willingness to

go over the edge and return to tell about it-particularly in-sync with the incarnational thrust at the heart of Christianity, the dynamism of the intertidal expression of 4th Dimension vision carried out as Bodhisattva vow. I can hardly believe what we're seeing as possible and yet Thomas is making it, along with Bernadette Roberts, and the other Thomas, the benchmark for our collective destiny, where through divine assistance we take our place as cosmic servants with each conscious outbreath we breathe. There's no invitation to return to God, when God has returned you to Godself. Only shining brilliantly. As light, with light, through light. I guess getting to the eye of the storm is scary until it's not. Thank you, Cynthia, for your gorgeous role as cartographer in laying out these gems like diamonds before our feet-namaste, my Teacher.

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*Out of Nothing*

*To be nothing*

*Is to consent to being a simple creature.*

*This is the place of encounter with*

*"I AM that I Am."*

*When there is no more "me, myself, or mine,"*

*Only "I AM" remains.*

*Then the "I" may fall away,*

*Leaving just the AM.*

*God empowers our powerlessness*

*So that we never despair*

*Of unconditional forgiveness and infinite mercy,*

*Such is the grace of inner resurrection,*

*And the reward for seeking no reward.*

## 1) From Perfect Meekness, to Perfect Sorrow, to...Perfect...Love???

Here we see, to use the language of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an invitation in ranging spectrum from “perfect meekness” (a felt sense of awe and wonder in grasping the scale of things), to “perfect sorrow” (bearing the weight of knowing oneself to be infinitely loved in and as the veil between I and AM for which unmediated longing beckons), and then ultimately to what we might call...*perfect love*???

Thomas Keating’s poem points to this same progression reflected in the words and life of St. Paul: “It is no longer I who live but Christ in me,” and, “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain,” and the twin teachings and life of Gurdjieff respectively, “Life is only real then, when I Am,” and, “Behind Real I lies God.” Where the piercing and penetrating longing of God that is forever leading one beyond self-reflective consciousness, then beyond self itself, finally implodes beyond any density that can be held into form as we know it. It is in this spirit that I believe Thomas is returning to us now, reflected in the third stanza of this poem, like the same gravity defying gesture of Jesus walking on water, speaking to us in the boat of our earthly “empowered powerlessness” – “Be not afraid, it is I”- reminding us to “never despair” for the waters that surround us are depths of “unconditional forgiveness and infinite mercy” despite evidence to the contrary. If only we can make the leap to dwell and stake our truest ground in faith; read heart-cognition.

Is this viewpoint the grace of “inner-resurrection?” Evoking and cracking us open to the embodied prayers of Lord, have mercy and the intercessory breath of I AM? Oh, I believe, Lord. Please help my unbelief.

## 2) Will You Join Me Thomas?

Was God looking for friends? To become nothing, in order to join God as God-Thomas wearing Christ, Christ wearing Thomas. Sounded through, person. Logos made word. The olive pressed through, and the oil filtered. Through a lifetime immersed in grace and intention. The Ox-hearding picture where the whole journey belongs and is fit perfectly to scale in the return to “normal life.”

Thomas returning compassion to the Divine in his complete willingness to accept his creatureliness for the sake of the planet. What looks like simple service on the outside is reverberating being across space and time. Cosmic belonging is always inter-abiding trans-localized majesty. It just ain't tootin its own horn. You almost have to be it, to see it. Deep calls to deep. Thank you, Thomas. Thank you, Cynthia. Thank you, Father.

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### *Stillness*

*Our true nature is stillness,  
The Source from which we come.*

*It manifests itself within us  
As a rising tide of silence,*

*A flowing stream of peacefulness,  
A timeless ocean of calm,  
Or just sheer stillness.*

*The deep listening of pure contemplation  
Is the path to stillness.*

*All words disappear into It,  
And all creation awakens to the delight of  
Just Being.*

### 1) Apatheia

There seems to be a higher moving center intelligence connected with the way this poem is referring to stillness. The passionless, "free of all cares" attention must become stabilized-paying attention, no longer to "what you are but to that you are," encountered in the encounter with silence. Maybe this

begins in the experience of centering prayer until centering prayer becomes life. On the occasions that the “sacred word” drops out it seems that the word as well as the self that was holding the intention has become absorbed by the silence from which the word emerged. Is this kind of silence the only thing spacious enough to birth the stillness of being that can actually coincide with the Divine heart in the world? It seems that the motion of surrender that gets the ball rolling, seeded through centering prayer practice, is growing into a grounded letting into that can stand-through stabilized attention/stillness-in the face of the enormous tidal wave of silence. And then as Teilhard de Chardin says, “After mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire.”

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*What Matters*

*Only the Divine matters,  
And because the Divine Matters,  
Everything matters.*

## 1) When Lightning Strikes

My vision of Thomas as a servant of the Christian contemplative path has shifted to a vision of Thomas as a servant of the cosmos. Both being worthy endeavors and maidservants of awakening. The latter taking on tones of universality, infinite depth and simplicity, reflected in this beautiful collection of poetry. Somewhere along the way it seems he was struck by the same lightning that had Thomas Merton proclaim those piercingly clear words- Thomas Keating now having discovered his own shining, “I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.”

In his own right, Thomas too has become a transparent window for me. An icon of integration. An Ihidaya. Celibacy converted to singleness. Having road centering prayer practice all the way to the Ocean from which it arose, he's returned to tell about the experience through this book and through this course in the same spirit of his Master. May we all be made more courageous to live in the freedom of truth which compelled this great life of continuing service. God bless you Thomas. Thank you, Cynthia, for such a thorough introduction to the man and his vision.

“Love, however, is what uplifts and frees them, and yet in their freedom, true knowledge also makes them slaves of love on behalf of those who are not yet ready to live in the freedom of truth.”

-The Gospel of Philip, Analogue 61

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/ecourses/course/view/10274/thomas-keatings-the-secret-embrace>

<sup>ii</sup> Keating, Thomas. *The Secret Embrace*. Temple Rock Company: 2018