

Renunciation and Request
St. Augustine's Chapel
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Rev. Gordon Peerman

Luke: 11:1-11. "Ask, and it will be given. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened for you."

This time last week I was again in SE Alaska, co-leading a contemplative kayaking retreat in Tebenkof Bay, which is part of the largest natural wilderness area in the U.S. I was with my good friends Seth Cooper and Rob Barrick. The best image I can give you for this experience is that it's like kayaking through a Tang dynasty scroll, mountains and rivers all flowing down into an enormous bay. Tebenkof is **way off the grid**, a place of spectacular scenery.

Retreat, whether in a meditation hall or the wilderness is in part about renunciation: few creaturely comforts, wilderness camping, no cell phone towers, no books, limited conversation, no screens to distract us from the present moment. Kurt Hoelting, Alaska fisherman, Congregational minister, and dharma teacher: **"Out in the wilderness, that's all there is, this present moment."** And what a present moment it is!

Our Routine: qigong, sit, walk, drinks, breakfast, silent paddling, lunch in conversation, more paddling in silence, return to camp with qigong and sit, dinner in silence, talking stick around the campfire. The schedule's structure was designed to **help us drop into where we were.** "Be here now, be someplace else later." Of course, we got to watch the habitual movements of the mind, reaching forward toward the future or back toward the past. As with a traditional retreat, it takes a few days for the mind to detox from the habits of future-forwarding or past-rehashing and simply drop into the Now.

This theme of renunciation was in an email I got from Jay Groves. A busy executive, upon entering a monastery for a much needed day of quiet and reflection, was welcomed by the Guest Master Monk with the following words: "May your day be filled with rest and meaning and if there is any thing you need, please let us know and **we will teach you how to live without it.**" This is one energetic movement of the spiritual life: **the movement of renunciation**, of letting go. Let go and let God, counsels an AA slogan.

It's good counsel, but letting go is not always easy. Rachel Remen, a pediatric oncologist and one of the most humane voices in American medicine, says she never let go of anything that didn't have **claw marks** on it. Sometimes *before* we can let go, we have to practice *letting be*. **Try this:** Close your eyes, listen to ambient sounds ... feel sensations in the hands ... the in/out of your breathing. As best you are able, let them be the way they are.

In the wilderness the first big Renunciation is about one's ability **to control the weather**. SE Alaska is a temperate rainforest with over 100 inches of rain a year. We had a bunch of those inches the first day of our trip, and we weren't able to fly out to our base camp. All day from Pacific Wing: not yet.

The first meditation of our retreat was not in the glories of the outdoors, but in a conference room with what one of our participants called "**bad Feng Shui**." Noticing sounds, sensations, breath, and the wanting mind – allowing all to be just as they were. Our practice was not so much letting go of the wish to be out in Tebenkof Bay, but as best we could, letting it be. We did qigong outside in the rain under the covering for the elementary school's basketball courts. It wasn't what we wanted, but it was what we got. And it was magnificent – we surprised ourselves at how we were opening up to things as they were. **Try this** with something you want ... just let it be.

Once out in Tebenkof Bay, we had little rain and mild temperatures. We began by paddling into quiet estuaries. The surround sounds were of raven and eagle. In the distance, the sights were humpback whale spouts and a few seconds later the echoing sounds of their breathing. Closer to our kayaks there were the heads of seal and sea otter that would emerge to check us out. What I cannot fully convey: the **enormous spaciousness** of Alaska and the sensation over the days of the trip of melting into this spaciousness.

I'd like as best I can to give you a hit of this spaciousness. **Notice** how our eyes spear objects ... notice space ... now turn and look at what is looking. Douglas Harding, English mystic and colleague of C.S. Lewis says:

What do you see? You are now looking inwards – turning the direction of your attention round 180° from the objects out there to you the Subject, to the place you are looking out of. Do you see your face? Do you see anything at all there - any colour or shape, any movement?

Looking in to the place where others see my face, I find no colour or shape here. I find boundless Space or Awareness this side of my pointing finger. This Space is empty, clear, transparent. It is self-evidently awake, aware.

At the same time this Space is full of everything happening in it: my finger, my view of the scene beyond, sounds, feelings...

I am now seeing Who I really am – seeing the boundless One at the very heart of myself, the One in whom the world is happening. What do you find? Are you also looking out of this wide-open, crystal clear, Awareness? See headless.org.

When we renounce control and rest in awareness, interesting and unpredictable things happen. I was teaching our group this bidirectional looking one evening around the campfire. We had a great group of twelve, but every group has its challenge. The **definition of community**: it's like being on a cruise ship with the person who most drives you crazy. Then when that person finally disembarks, they are replaced by

someone every bit as challenging.

“That person” was a woman in no way prepared for the physical rigors of the trip, cluelessly holding us up at every turn. As I was teaching this bidirectional looking around the campfire, she said, “Gordon, I can’t hear you.” I moved so she could hear me, then smoke from the campfire got in my eyes. Then an ember from the fire landed on my coat. I smelled something burning – it was me! My coat was burning. Breathing in, “I’d like to set her on fire ... breathing out ... I’d like”

My friend Rob, my tent mate, whispered to me in the supposed-to-be silence in our tent later that night, “Peerman, I could tell you didn’t like it when you had to move. And it got worse when the smoke got in your eyes. But when you’re coat caught on fire, **you sort of lost your groove.**” Well, there it was, my cover as a dharma teacher was blown. I was laughing so hard I was stuffing my sleeping bag in my mouth, and the giggling spread from tent to tent. There’s a letting go and letting be like no other than happens with humor.

While we were out paddling in the Big Medicine and Spacious Awareness that is SE Alaska, I recited to myself a Tibetan mantra: **Look, see, let go, be free.** Our attention usually faces out, like this (*hands facing out*) but we can turn it inward as well, looking both ways (*turning hands in*): look and see, let go and be free. The magic of the trip is this dropping into freedom, letting go of control, just being. It’s Big Medicine.

But there was one thing I wanted, one request I had, and like Abraham in the lesson from Genesis, I was doing some bargaining around it. If renunciation is one energetic movement of the spiritual life, *requesting* is another. Requesting is not, at least at first letting go. **Requesting is saying: I want this! And being very honest about it.** Ask, and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened to you.

Here’s what I wanted: I wanted to see the whales up close from our kayaks. “This is good, but we could take it up a notch if we just saw some whales up close.” I’d drug my good friends to Alaska, and I wanted them to see the whales up close. And so I was aware of this asking, seeking, knocking energy in me, and I just dropped it into the space of awareness. **I let that energy simply be in awareness, not as a demand, but as a request.** If we demand that reality be other than it is, that twice two not be four, reality wins, only 100% of the time. Requesting is acknowledging what you want, but letting go of the outcome.

Well, It was our last full day of paddling, and we saw spouts in the distance, and we started kayaking their way. We hit the **mother lode** of whale watching. When we caught up with the whales we were in a **narrow channel** with them, about as narrow as Benton Chapel is long. If you can imagine two humpback whales swimming in here, you get the picture, along with eagles, seals, and sea otters all working to get their share of the fish. I’d like to tell you this was a mindful experience for me. But it wasn’t – I was trying to get a picture of this scene with my camera, but then I

looked over and saw my friend **Seth was just watching, no camera – with the face of a child enraptured.**

And I got it: Oh, whale watching is like this, what Seth is doing. I dropped the camera and did Bidirectional viewing. There's a very different quality of attention when you are trying to "get it" with your camera and when you are aware of awareness itself. My request *was* answered, but I almost missed it. How often our striving to get it, whatever "it" is, is the very thing that keeps us from receiving it. When we ask without demanding, a certain energy gets moving.

D.W. Winnicott, the famous British pediatrician and child psychiatrist, kept a journal which his wife found a few days after his death. The last entry was: All my life my prayer has been, "God, let me be alive before I die. I asked for it ... and I got it.

After seeing the whales, these **more-than-human beings**, we were just speechless. After a time what came to my mind was a Tibetan phrase: **Emma Ho!** It translates as How Amazing! Or as we might say, Alleluia! Whoa, Emma Ho!

Our last morning's paddle in a tidal estuary, we paddled in, and just floated back with the tide. At the end we rang our mediation bell and a **sea otter came up to see what was happening in the neighborhood.** He took a long look, and then slid back under water. Maybe he'd been knocking on heaven's door and asking to see the human beings. He probably said, "Emma Ho – how amazing! Look at what I found – I asked for it, and I got it."

C. Gordon Peerman