

# *FAITHFUL WORDS MEDITATION: ON LONGING*

## ***Remembering Forward***

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It was the late 1960s and early 70s. Traditions and old structures and understandings were falling all around us, like statues beheaded, knocked from their pedestals, lying in pieces at our feet. Conflicts around war and peace, race and gender, capitalism and sexual freedom, charged the streets, the campuses, the news and my family's dinner table, like so many others.

As a young teen, I longed for anything that might help me to make sense of the tumultuous times. My family's rigid religion offered little guidance. We were instructed in the *defacto* propriety of authority; and questions were commonly met with a furrowed, silencing brow. So I often took my longing and my questions to a nearby Catholic cemetery. There I would walk a lonely leafy path along the river where the Stations of the Cross, earlier abandoned and some quite badly vandalized, were tucked into the steeply rising river banks.

I was Protestant and knew little of the Way of the Cross and the pilgrimage of prayer that many Catholics make while moving slowly through its 14 stations. But I did know something about reverence. I could hear the river rippling by and the wind blowing through the leaves overhead. I could see the shrines were meant for contemplation, and I would pause at each one, often sitting on the bench across the path, gazing into the arched and empty stone shelters where an ancient story had once been told. Some shrines were strewn with sticks and leaves and piles of mud; others were marred with paint and ugly words. A few still held the broken fragments of statues that had once traced Jesus' tortured march through Jerusalem to his crucifixion.

It was a story I knew well, though I did not know those 14 empty stations, each one numbered overhead. So I sometimes brought my journal and would sit and write my own words, my own stories, amidst the broken shrines. As I scrawled my longing for meaning across the empty pages on those quiet afternoons, memory and imagination met. I was remembering forward.

Today, we are again in tumultuous times, times when old ways and understandings, like statues, are once more falling all around us. Some have been toppled of necessity as oppressive systems are overthrown, and others have been felled by violent disregard for nature and life itself. In our longing for meaning, where will we turn now?

Deep in the southwestern Minnesota, we are reminded the options are many. There, where native prairies once spread like a sea in all directions, a small waterfall tumbles over an outcropping of Sioux quartzite, a wall carved by nature and interpreted by the Plains Indians as a holy place hundreds of years ago. Today, you can walk along this wall on a stone path marked off with explanations of the history and geology surrounding you. Just past the waterfall, you will come to a small wooden sign with a peephole about one inch in diameter. The brown sign reads, "Look here and you will see the oracle."

If you looked over the sign, you might spot the Oracle on your own. You could see the large face looking out over the small ravine, and if you listened carefully, you might almost hear the voices that were said to rise from the cold, stone lips. Tribal shamans of old could read those lips. But we, visitors in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most often need a little help. We might have to drop on bended knee before the small brown sign to view the Oracle in that small circular frame, as if the peephole were a telescope pointed toward the past. What might we hear if we do? What might we learn if we listen to the rock's ancient voice?

Yes, old ways and understandings are tumbling all around us. The truth itself sometimes seems to be in pieces. Still we are called to follow our longing for meaning, even when it turns us toward old oracles. We are called walk the path, to pause to pray and contemplate, to gaze into the old stories and to find in our own faithful practice and pursuit of justice, the wisdom waiting within.

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