



That Friend Walking Behind Me, by Parker Palmer

Imagine that for many years a friend had been walking a block behind me, calling my name, trying to get my attention because he wanted to tell me some hard but healing truths about myself. But I -- afraid of what I might hear, or arrogantly certain I had nothing to learn -- ignored his calls and kept on walking.

So my friend came closer and called my name louder, but I walked on, refusing to turn around. Closer still he came, now shouting my name. Frustrated by my lack of response, he began to throw stones and hit me with sticks, still wanting nothing more than to get my attention. But despite the pain I felt, I kept walking away.

Since calls and shouts, sticks and stones, had failed to get my attention, there was only one thing left for my friend to do: drop the bomb called depression on me. He did so not with intent to kill, but in a last-ditch effort to get me to turn toward him and ask a simple question: "What do you want?" When I finally made that turn -- and began taking in and acting on the self-knowledge he'd been waiting to offer me -- I took first steps on the path to wellbeing.

Thomas Merton's name for that friend is "true self." This is not the ego self that wants to inflate us. It's not the intellectual self that wants to hover above life's mess with logical but ungrounded ideas. It's not the ethical self that wants to live by someone else'soughts. It's not the spiritual self that wants to slip the surly bonds of Earth and fly nonstop to heaven.

True self is the self with which we arrived on earth, the self that simply wants us to be who we were born to be. True self tells us who we are, where we are planted in the ecosystem of life, what "right action" looks like for us, and how we can grow more fully into our own potentials. As an old Hasidic tale reminds us, our mission is to live into the shape of true self, not the shape of someone else's life: "Before he died, Rabbi Zusya said: 'In the world to come they will not ask me, "Why were you not Moses?" They will ask me, "Why were you not Zusya?"'

Memo to myself: Stay on the ground, turn around, ask and listen! True self is true friend -- it's a friendship we ignore at our peril. And pass the word: friends don't let friends live at altitude!

