Spiritual Teacher

Carroll E. Arkema

“The wind blows where it chooses,
And you hear the sound of it,
But you do not know where
It comes from, or where it goes.
So it is with everyone who
Is born of the Spirit.” ¹

When it appears,
One’s breath knows
Immediately,
But one’s mind gets it
Most clearly in hindsight,
Even if only seconds after,
leaving one breathless.

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When one begins to talk about it—
   And while doing so—
   Something surges
   From deep within, rising
   Along the alimentary canal
In inverse direction of digestion—
   A hot and molten feeling which
   Leads to tears and choking
   As its power overtakes one,
       Like a fiery pillar
       Deeply grounded
       In the body’s core
Conducting molten energy
   Near enough the heart
       To make it glow
   And the lungs to quicken
       With gasping breath
   As the words come.

One’s mind is awed, exalted,
   Partaking of a wisdom
   Far beyond one’s ken
   Yet known within—
       Seeking a receptive
       Respectful audience
Willing to be moved,
   To have one’s hair
       Stand on end
       As one listens
   With faint then stronger
       Recognition to
       Live Spirit within.

   I received the usual
Pre-Christmas floods of mail:
   Catalogues, letters, emails—
       Begging for purchases
   Or year-end contributions.
I put one such letter aside
As I tried to assess
Which pleas would survive the cut
Of recipients worthy of a contribution.

That letter lay there
On my computer desk
For three or four weeks
As Christmas drew nigh.

Meanwhile, into my office
Comes my therapy patient John
On his ongoing journey
Seeking mind, spirit, body unity
In his personal life,
Relationships, and vocation,
Beset of course by doubts
And vulnerable
To quick-fix drugs and sex.

Today he gets right to it:
Says he’s aware of missing
A spiritual teacher—that
He’s never really had one.

I begin to feel anxious,
Yet also on alert,
Guessing that
He’s coming to me for that,
Even if not consciously.

I feel inadequate, thinking
It’s not exactly my definition
Of what I’m about,
And wondering “Have I
Ever had a spiritual teacher?”
He’s not asking me yet,  
Directly, if I’ll be his teacher;  
Rather, he goes on to  
Tell me a story of  
Him and his friend enjoying  
Boxing with each other.

One day while doing so,  
His friend broke  
A small bone in his hand.  
“Immediately I felt guilty,”  
John said to me, “because  
Just a few days earlier  
I had had the thought ‘We  
Should wrap our hands  
Before putting on our gloves,’  
But I hadn’t said anything.  
Now he breaks his bone!  
I felt responsible.”

We discussed other things  
In that therapy session,  
But at a timely moment  
Near the end, I said,  
“Back to what you said  
About missing a spiritual teacher:  
I’m realizing that I’ve never had  
Just one spiritual teacher myself.  
But you’ve gotten me thinking  
That through the years,  
A few key people have  
Profoundly influenced me—  
Both by what they said  
As well as with the loving energy  
With which it was conveyed  
And the timing of what they said.
Those have been my spiritual teachers,
   And I guess I’ve taken them inside—
They’ve become part of who I am,
   And influence how I live.

You’ve told me about people
   Like that in your life
Whom you remember,
   Whose influence has helped
Things in your life to come together.

More and more over time
   You can become
Your own spiritual teacher—
   The more you trust
Your intuition,
   The Spirit within.

Your inner teacher
   Was speaking when
You had that thought
   Before boxing with your friend
That you should wrap your hands.

You can increasingly
   Pay attention
To those intimations."

He agreed, understood—
   Heard this not as criticism
But affirmation,
   As information
Which could help him
Listen to his
Inner Teacher
In the future.
We talked of other
Related things, and
As he was leaving—
While paying me
In cash as he always does—
He asked me if I
Contribute to charities.
“Yes, sure,” I said.
He asked which ones.
I stumbled, said
“A couple of churches,
Other organizations
I can’t recall at
The moment.” I was thinking
Also it was not his business.

He intuited my discomfort,
Said immediately,
“It doesn’t matter;
Would you be willing—
If I gave you an extra fifty—
To give it to a charity
Of your choosing?”

I was speechless,
Stirred deep within,
Felt Spirit moving,
Blowing.
I swallowed, choked,
Said, “Sure, I’ll do that.”

Yes, clinically, one could
Say that I was “enabling” him—
Doing this for him instead
Of encouraging him
To do it on his own,
To trust his inner
Spiritual Teacher.
But I sensed it was something
About our relationship that
He wanted to honor.
Autonomy would come later.

I felt deeply connected with him,
Both within, but also outside,
Beyond, or underneath
The framework of therapy.

Beyond my fee,
He was giving a gift
Both to me and through me—
Entrusting the wind which
Would blow the blessing
Where it willed, while
Giving us each a thrill.

In that spontaneous moment
His Spiritual Teacher spoke
To the One in me.
Our hearts were joined
In what transcended
The therapeutic framework
While being therapeutic.
We both were fed
And nurtured by Spirit
Within us,
Between us,
And in the room.

That evening at home, sitting
In front of my computer,
I suddenly saw that letter—
The one I’d left there
For three or four weeks.
It all came together!
The Spirit like the wind
Had been blowing,
Had led me to
Put that letter aside
For a time,
And in that moment
I knew that it was precisely
That Charity I was supposed
To give his money to.³

Which I did; and what
A fulfilling, awed,
And restful feeling of
Completion I’ve had.

I sent him an email
Informing him
Of the completion of
What his Spiritual Teacher
Through us both had done.

We’ll see what happens next.
It may be mostly more
Routine, but things will
Never be the same
With him or me
Ever again.

NOTES

1. John 3:18 (NRSV)
2. Identifying information has been changed.
3. Vacation from War.