

The Second Edition:
Remembering Who We Are
by Richard Thieme

Most of us live a large part of our lives skating on the ice of trivial essentials, the necessary tasks that fill our waking days. We pause from time to time and look at the etched images in the ice and think, this is the pattern of our lives, these images reveal our character and choices.

But more, much more, is going on.

Occasionally, the ice thins, heeding a midwinter springtime we don't know how to define, a season hidden inside us, a season determined by a different sun. That sun knows what we need and when we need it. Our readiness is all.

The ice cracks and we fall into darkness that explodes paradoxically with light, we are saturated, immersed in the root sources of meaning. We know in those moments what matters, what is real.

The contents of ordinary days quickly return and fill our waking state, the meaning of those moments almost but not quite forgotten. But we never really forget. And next time it happens, we recognize the experience for what it is. We link those moments into a different, more fundamental pattern, we say to ourselves, yes. I know this place. I have been here before.

We remember who we really are.

A few years ago, a long friendship with another couple kind of played itself out. It drifted for a year or two toward an end with a whimper, not a bang, as relationships often do. We had taken different paths, with divergent interests, values, and choices, and moved apart. After a while, there wasn't much point in getting together anymore.

That was acceptable. We knew that people grow and change. It happens.

Our lives, filled with those trivial essentials, moved on.

Then, a few weeks ago, seemingly out of nowhere, I felt intense waves of energy that surged or swept up in me or into me – the metaphors don't really enlighten, they merely point toward things we don't know how to explain – strong palpable waves associated with the name of the woman. As they came, I knew it had something to do with her but not what or why. I would be working out at the gym or driving or watching snow fall onto the trees through my office window, doing something else as it were with the other parts of my mind, when from around back at the edges, it felt like, her name and those waves of energy seized my attention.

That used to happen with regularity when I was in the professional ministry because, I think, I was linked to so many people with an intention to be open. Oh I know, I know, when we call someone and ask how they are and they say they were thinking of us too or something important is going on, it's easy to say it's nothing but coincidence.

But other times, calling it a coincidence is a bit of a stretch.

I think of the time I had been visiting the mother of a member of the parish who was in a nursing home, seriously ill. I would stop by in the morning and then go on with the rest of the day. One day, however, although I had been there for my morning visit, as I returned to the office from lunch, one of those waves came. I was in the left hand lane of a wide Salt Lake City street, ready to turn left onto Highland Drive and return to the church, when it flashed through me and I thought, no, I had better get back there now. I crossed several lanes - Brigham Young wanted Salt Lake City streets to be wide enough to u-turn a team of oxen, remember - and turned right instead and returned to the nursing home.

As I pulled up to the door, the parishioner was on the curb.

“How did they find you so fast?” she said.

I shook my head. “What do you mean?”

“Mother just died, I just ran to the office and told them to call you.”

Some said I had picked up subliminal clues that the mother was about to die and calibrated my anomalous return to what I knew unconsciously. That “rational” explanation begs more questions than the obvious one, that I got the call and responded.

Spirituality, I was discovering in those years, meant not that some had “special gifts” but that it was human to be this way, that spiritual discipline meant learning to listen and not shut it out because one might be embarrassed to act on an impulse without knowing why. The imperative was not knowing but knowing that you knew, then acting, even if you didn't know what you knew or how.

I learned to honor the experience by at least making a telephone call and saying, hi, what's going on? That's what I might have done twenty years earlier as a matter of professional habit. But this time, I did not want to reestablish a connection or reawaken the relationship. It was better, I told myself, to let it go, despite successive waves of feeling that always came with the name of my long-ago friend.

So I didn't respond. I rode them out, let them subside, and resisted the call.

Last week my wife said, “Look at this.” She handed me an obituary for the mother of my friend. She had been in the last stages of dying when the waves began. We went to the funeral, saw our friends again, and expressed condolences. That might have been the end

of it, but the following Sunday, remembering that my friend and her husband had had dinner every Sunday night with her mother and that this was the first Sunday without her, I telephoned and suggested that we have dinner. As it happened, no one else had thought of that connection and they would have been alone. So the four of us went to a favorite restaurant and talked for hours.

We were friends again, we realized, or still. But that's not the point. This is the point:

I told her what I had felt and when and how and she said it began when her mother sank toward certain death. The waves of deep feeling were indeed a distress call, non-localized, consciousness to consciousness, however that happens. It's like entanglement, we say, spooky action at a distance, Einstein called it, but that doesn't explain anything.

I said as we both shed a few tears of shared grief that I had betrayed my calling, not as a former clergyman but as a human being, a spiritual being, by resisting the call and refusing to honor the fact of our connection.

I have often said that professional ministry is a training program for those like myself who seem to need it to become more fully human. We enter the profession not because we need the training less but because we need it more. And it works, the ministry as a training program works, because you can't do that work effectively without learning each time a person brings you the truth of their lives and teaches you how resilient, elastic, even heroic humans are, not as an add-on but intrinsically. It is axiomatic to our humanity to transcend whatever life brings.

Once you know that, not once you read about it, think it, or recite it in a ritual, but KNOW that we are all connected, not metaphorically but in fact, that we really are all part of one another and of something bigger than we are, call it the universe, call it a body, call it whatever you like, once we know that we are cells in a body that may well grow to fill the galaxies and all of spacetime with its expansive meta-self, then it is axiomatic to know too that we belong to one another, that the well being of the other is as critical to me as my own, and to care for the other as for myself is an imperative – not as a duty, but as a concomitant aspect of knowing that to do this is what it means to be human.

As notions go, this is not new. But it makes a difference to "get" it and not just think it with the left-side part of the brain that thinks it knows everything and that what I am saying here is foolishness and rant.

Mechanical engineering is not the end of life, after all.

I realized that I had chosen, contrary to what I knew but forgot, to push away what I felt and not act, and that was a betrayal, a betrayal of the real, a betrayal of the non-trivial sources of meaning and love.

I told her at that dinner that I had failed to honor that ineluctable fact of correlated relationship. It is not what is related but relationship itself that structures the universe. The angle of inclination is an imperative I had disregarded.

She cried and we hugged and she said, in that moment, it was honored.

Our readiness is all.

We can not unlearn what we have learned but we can neglect to remember it. We are cells in a single body, a single trans-person as it were, human and non-human alike, knitted into a being that extends to the edges of spacetime, infolded into a single mysterious vital beating heart.

Our sins, then, are often sins of forgetting, omission or neglect. When we remember who we are, when the quotidian vanishes in a flash, we act in accordance with fact. And when we do, the stars and planets and galaxies, the pattern or the form of the universe that angles us into complementary beings of wonder, with countenance and form and purpose beyond our grasp ... we sing in a single thousand-part harmony, a chorus of myriad voices sounding one might guess like a shout.

The Second Edition is a periodic reflection by author and speaker Richard Thieme. Subscribe (or unsubscribe) by clicking below or writing to rthieme@thiemeworks.com and stating subscribe (or unsubscribe).

Richard Thieme (www.thiemeworks.com) speaks and writes about the issues of our times, with an emphasis on the impact of various technologies on the structures of our lives, creativity in work and life, and how to reinvent ourselves in response to challenges – all aspects of “enlightened practical spirituality.” If interested in having him speak to your organization, email rthieme@thiemeworks.com.