

Innocence, Awakening, and Social Justice: How One Woman Transformed Her Piece of the World

By Catherine Dowling

This year Mary Quinalty sold her home in an upmarket neighborhood of Albuquerque, New Mexico, gave away almost everything she owned, and moved into Trinity House, a Catholic Worker “house of hospitality” for people who are homeless in Albuquerque’s impoverished South Valley. Her new job as the administrator of Trinity House is full-time and unpaid. Mary Quinalty is eighty-one years old.

I asked Mary what inspired her to give away her possessions and swap a comfortable home for a run-down building with a dodgy roof that she shares with an ever-changing set of housemates.

“I don’t need things anymore,” she explained, “and I don’t want them. It makes sense to me to give them away so other people can use them.” As for her social justice work—of which Trinity House is just the latest project—that began with a spiritual awakening that occurred on the side of a mountain in Chihuahua, Mexico over a quarter of a century ago.

Before her awakening, Mary was a program manager in an Albuquerque hospital. In 1987, one of the volunteers she managed returned to his home in Mexico and invited Mary to visit him. The next long weekend, Mary and her partner Frank headed south in their ’63 Chevy. Thirteen hours later, tired and hungry, they found the volunteer’s hometown, the tiny village of Colonias Juarez in Chihuahua, Mexico.

They never found the volunteer, but in the village Mary met the man who would change her life forever: Fr. Joaquin Martinez. The priest introduced Mary to a level of poverty she had never known existed, and for the next nine years she and Frank spent every three-day weekend working with him in the village.

Mary’s spiritual experience is not unusual. A 2002 Gallup Poll showed that forty-one percent of Americans have experienced some form of “awakening” or radically expanded awareness that has changed the course of their lives. Not everyone who has such a spiritual experience immerses themselves in community activism, but Mary’s story illustrates the age-old relationship between spiritual awareness and community service.

The Mountain Top

The little town of Colonias Juarez is nestled on the floor of a valley cut into sheer mountains. Every July, Fr. Martinez would take a group of seminarians up those mountains to the high villages where they would stay for six weeks. For two summers, Mary begged to go with him. His reply was always the same: She wasn’t ready. Ready for what, she didn’t know. Finally, during their third summer in the village, Fr. Martinez decided her time had come. Mary would get her wish.

The road to the top of the mountain existed more in theory than reality. Mary clung to Frank as the open-topped Jeep bounced over boulders and crevasses, at times barely gripping the terrain. Eventually they reached a village consisting of a few tiny houses with mud floors. When the car stopped, the men jumped out. Mary stayed put.

A few moments later, Fr. Martinez came back into Mary's view, wearing the glowing white vestments of his vocation. He stood before the car, arms outstretched. The sun-drenched silence was absolute, the air utterly still. Minutes passed; nothing stirred. Mary didn't understand what he was waiting for until finally she noticed figures emerging from the rocks high above them. Whole families moved in silence, drawn to the radiant figure of "the Padre." Mary had never seen him in his vestments before and, watching the white fabric flowing from his outstretched arms, she was profoundly moved.

The trickle of people coalesced into a crowd of fifty or more, all silent, all wanting to get close to the priest, to touch him, to bask in his presence. One old woman struggled to get through and, when she did, her face blossomed into an expression of pure, wide-eyed joy. Mary's heart melted. People brought sick children to be anointed and asked Fr. Martinez to visit the ill and the dying. As she witnessed the event, Mary realized she was in the presence of someone "holy," someone in whom these isolated people had complete faith.

The scene was repeated in village after village until, at sunset, they reached their final destination, a little hamlet perched near the top of the mountain. There, Fr. Martinez introduced Mary to Rosa, a community leader and mother of seven who invited them to share her family's meager dinner.

The next morning, before leaving, Mary felt herself drawn up the trail to Rosa's house at the same time that Rosa was descending to say goodbye. As Mary gazed upward, Rosa's form grew fuzzy against the morning sky. Then it began to glow, radiating brilliant light, a dazzling human shape without distinguishing features.

"I was mesmerized," Mary says. "The brilliance reached a peak. I was desperate to find a face, to see features. But there were none; no eyes, no mouth, no nose. Just beauty and light. I was outside time. There was no movement of time, no movement at all. All I remember feeling was awe. The awe filled me. It saturated my whole body."

Frank called to her, but Mary couldn't move her feet. She was aware of a tremor in her calves and she wanted to stay rooted to the spot, never to leave. Eventually, she couldn't say how long, the radiance began to vibrate and dim, and there on the path once again was a smiling Rosa.

The Nature of Spiritual Awakening

Spiritual awakenings take many forms. The kind of vision Mary experienced is just one manifestation. Grant McFetridge of the Institute for the Study of Peak States has documented over forty varieties of mystical spiritual experience and shows that the phenomenon transcends all cultures and religious traditions. Although the experience varies widely, spiritual awakenings, or peak states as psychologist Abraham Maslow called them, share some key characteristics.

There is a sense of being outside time, of existing in an infinite present. In that present moment, people experience a radical expansion of awareness; they become aware of radiance, beauty, and an unconditional love so strong and solid it feels almost physically touchable.

The poet Hafiz wrote about “Pulling out the chair beneath your mind/And watching you fall upon God.”¹ Regardless of whether we have a concept of God or not, the chair must be pulled from beneath our mind in order for us to enter a mystical state. We must let go of what we think we know and assume a “beginner’s mind.” This is a kind of innocence, a voluntary trusting like the trust Mary recognized in the people drawn to Fr. Martinez on the mountain. Far from *naïveté*, the beginner’s mind is a form of wise simplicity. In that state of trusting openness comes an experience of oneness and profound connection with all of life.

Frank had not shared Mary’s vision or the overwhelming awe it generated. He couldn’t understand why she didn’t want to leave the village, why she could barely face the prospect of returning to life in Albuquerque. Mary, in contrast, felt stricken at the thought of leaving the mountain. Only Fr. Martinez’s mysterious comment, that she could take it with her, reassured her. They never spoke about what happened, but she knew the priest understood. He told her to go home and find a priest in Albuquerque to guide her.

Mary woke her first day back in Albuquerque to find that, while nothing had changed in her life, everything had changed in her. She found dressing for work almost unbearable. “I tried to pick out a suit,” she explained. “I threw one after the other onto the bed. I had shopped for them all so carefully, but I couldn’t stand them. The colors were so garish they repulsed me.”

Television shows she had loved seemed “ugly.” Her stylish and expensive haircut appeared unnatural and decadent. She struggled through work and couldn’t speak to Frank without crying. “I couldn’t understand why he didn’t see what I saw. I kept asking him about it as if I didn’t believe him. It was like I was accusing him of lying.”

Not surprisingly, a gap opened between Mary and her colleagues. Her loving, gentle relationship with Frank deteriorated into bouts of anger and tears as he struggled to understand her strange behavior.

As with Mary, if it is not understood, the experience of radical awareness can strain friendships and relationships. Rachel Vines, an Australian doula and breathwork therapist, writes about the spiritual dimensions of giving birth.² For many women, childbirth is a spiritual as well as physical and emotional experience. In Western society, this aspect of bringing a new life into the world has been all but lost to the medicalization of birth. During the birth experience, the mother, father if he is present, and doula or midwife share a numinous space, a form of expanded consciousness that is outside the normal daily world they usually inhabit. The experience is, like other awakenings, transformative. All involved are, in some great or small way, changed by it.

¹ Daniel Ladinsky, trans., *I Heard God Laughing: Poems of Hope and Joy / Renderings of Hafiz* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 56.

² Rachel Vines, “Midwifing Breath: Breathwork and Rites of Passage” (unpublished manuscript, 2014).

Vines emphasizes the need for what she calls *communitas*, a community for the family to return to that understands the experience they have just gone through. This understanding community welcomes the family back into the daily routines of living while supporting and accommodating not just the practical but also the spiritual changes brought about by the birth.

And so it needs to be with other forms of spiritual awakening. Despite the frequency of such events, society often reacts with skepticism, fear, and sometimes contempt. Friends and partners, like Frank, can fear for the sanity of a loved one who is behaving a little strangely, who may be rejecting the values they previously held dear, the values and norms society upholds.

Some forms of spiritual awakening can be mistaken for psychotic breakdown. In their book *The Stormy Search for the Self*, pioneers of breathwork therapy, Stanislav and Christina Grof, distinguish clearly between what they call “spiritual emergence” and psychosis. In a psychotic episode, ego structures break down. The boundaries between self and what-is-not-self disappear in an often-terrifying way. We find ourselves unable to make a distinction between external reality and our own inner perceptions. In a spiritual awakening, the ego is transcended but left intact. During a spiritual awakening, we are both ourselves and, at the same time, we are merged with the cosmos/God/life itself. We become nothing and we are everything. It’s one of the many paradoxes of mystical experience.

From the ancient mystics like St. Teresa of Ávila to the researchers at Harvard and Brandeis Universities in the 1960s, experts in the field of altered consciousness have advocated the use of maps or guides. Mary took Fr. Martinez’s advice and eventually found a priest who could guide her. The priest counseled both Mary and Frank and, with his help, they got their relationship back on track. Mary, a Baptist, converted to Catholicism and Frank, a lapsed Catholic, returned to his church.

At Harvard, Ralph Metzner developed the concept of “set and setting.” The context in which we experience the episode of awakening or radically expanded awareness influences the nature and interpretation of the experience. Not all spiritual awakenings take religious form or point to a defined god such as Jesus or Allah. For many, it’s a nontheistic experience of unconditional love, beauty, and oneness. Regardless of whether one interprets the experience as an encounter with God or an all-encompassing engagement with existence itself, the awakening can transform the way we live our lives. That experience of love and oneness is the link between spiritual awareness and social justice.

Awakening and Social Justice

Fr. Martinez died of tuberculosis in 1996, around the time Frank suffered his first heart attack. He could no longer travel, but Mary, animated by her experience on the mountain, felt compelled to do more. When she decided to move to Fr. Martinez’s birthplace, Frank gave her his blessing. A month after her retirement, Mary set off for Rancho La Colorada in the State of Guanajuato.

Nothing she had experienced so far prepared her for the poverty she found there: a *rancho* without a water supply, babies dying from malnutrition, staggering mother and infant mortality rates, and no education services beyond elementary school. People lived on rice and beans and

dug with their hands in the dirt for wild onions and potatoes. A morning's digging in season might yield a bucket or two of vegetables. Initially she tried to teach people about hygiene, but hygiene is not a priority for people who are starving. So Mary drove to the nearest city to research underground water supplies. She found a water table they could tap into, if only they had submersible pumps.

Back in Albuquerque, Frank raised the money for the pumps and, by the following summer, eighty-two families were able to feed themselves on crops they grew themselves. Mary turned her attention to education issues while Frank teamed up with St. Anthony's Alliance, a group of doctors who provided medical supplies to the village.

By 2009, the little Mexican hamlet had a thriving farming sector, health and education services, and a sewing cooperative, but Frank's health had deteriorated significantly. Mary returned to Albuquerque and, in 2010, she lost the man who had loved her enough to support her calling, even though that meant living apart.

When asked how she accomplished so much in the twenty-five years since her experience on the mountain, Mary says, "I didn't do anything. I'm not really doing anything now. Everything I do is through God's guidance. He led me to the resources I needed." For those whose spiritual awakening does not include a concept of God, this opening of a path forward is often experienced as a succession of synchronicities. Life just seems to open the way and provide the resources required.

Mary belongs to a long lineage of mystically inspired activists. The Catholic Worker Community where Mary now lives was founded in 1933 in New York City by American radical Dorothy Day and Frenchman Peter Maurin. Day often described herself as "haunted by God." She devoted her life to political activism because "We are all one. We are one flesh in the Mystical Body."³

Rabbi Jonathan Omer-Man, speaking about the effect of spiritual awakening on historical figures from Moses to Mohammed, says, "the experience is immediately translated into action, sometimes even into political action."⁴ The history of Mary's chosen religion, Catholicism, is packed with mystic activists. One of the best-known is the fifth-century Irish saint Brigid of Kildare. A contemporary of St. Patrick, Brigid, like Day, experienced the mystical from an early age. Also like Day, she went against the prevailing system of her time. She refused to marry, got herself ordained a Bishop in the male-dominated church, founded a monastery, provided health services to the poor and education and enterprise support for crafts people, and was well-known for distributing food to the hungry.

Brigid was not alone. During the fifth through the eighth centuries, mystic activists could be found throughout Europe, and in Ireland community-based mystics were so plentiful that the country became known as the Land of Saints and Scholars. The lineage continued throughout the Middle Ages in both Christianity and Islam with St. John of the Cross, Rumi, Hafiz, St. Teresa of Ávila, and others who founded or inspired communities. It lives on through our current troubled

³ Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* (New York: Harper Row, 1997), p.n. not cited.

⁴ Jonathan Omer-Man, "Global Spirit: The Mystical Experience," *Light of Consciousness: Journal of Spiritual Awakening*, Spring 2014: 33.

times. Some of the most inspiring community and political activists of the modern era—Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Desmond Tutu—were motivated by their spiritual experiences. Tutu describes the seamless connection between spirituality and social activism most eloquently. “God's dream,” he said, “is that you and I and all of us will realize that we are family, that we are made for togetherness, for goodness, and for compassion . . . there are no outsiders, no enemies. Black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, Jew and Arab, Muslim and Christian, Hindu and Buddhist, Hutu and Tutsi, Pakistani and Indian—all belong.”⁵

Most spiritually inspired community workers and activists don't become famous. They work away anonymously, diligently transforming their own little corners of the globe. They may prefer to remain unknown, to avoid the considerable hazards as well as the benefits of fame. A few, like Mary, a former journalist, have the skills to tell their own stories. Mary is currently writing her memoir, but there are thousands of Marys in the world and most of their stories go untold. Hopefully hers will stand as a monument to all of those unknown people who labor so quietly, day after day, far from the eye of the media, transforming their parts of the world.

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⁵ Beliefnet interview, “Desmond Tutu’s Recipe for Peace,” Beliefnet.com, April 2004.
<http://www.beliefnet.com/Inspiration/2004/04/Desmond-Tutus-Recipe-For-Peace.aspx?p=1>.