

ROBERT J. WICKS

author of *Riding the Dragon*

crossing
the
desert

Learning to let go

see clearly

and live simply

SORIN BOOKS  Notre Dame, Indiana



CONTENTS

Acknowledgments / 9

Introduction / 11

1. Let the Desert Teach You / 21

**PART ONE: To Embrace the Freedom
that Humility Offers / 32**

2. Seek What Is Essential / 33

3. Enter Through the Narrow Gates / 43

4. Listen to Friends / 55

5. Be Grateful / 65

PART TWO: Letting Go / 82

6. Ask the Four Desert Questions / 83

7. Feed Your Soul / 109

8. Become a Desert Apprentice / 127

9. Take Three Steps to Inner Freedom / 163

Notes / 177

Selected Bibliographies / 182



ENTER THROUGH THE NARROW GATES

All of us must pass through three “psycho-spiritual gates” on the journey to a full life. If we wish to be open to and benefit from all we experience—including the painful deserts—we must learn to walk through each one. If we don’t, we consign ourselves to an existence that is one of merely going through the motions each day.

The first gate is passion. Passion is not unnecessary exuberance. Rather, it is a sense of commitment, faithfulness, and appreciation of the gift of life. It is not dimmed by failure because passion is not based on success. Instead it is fired by a spiritual sense of awe for what life can be

when it is touched by courage, openness, and gratitude for all we have been given.

The revered rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, had such a sense of passion. It pervaded his life and even his road to death. This is evidenced in the following story by his former student, longtime friend, colleague, and fellow rabbi, Samuel Dresner:

Several years before Abraham Heschel's death in 1972, he suffered a near fatal heart attack from which he never fully recovered. I traveled to his apartment in New York to see him. He had gotten out of bed for the first time to greet me, and was sitting in the living room when I arrived, looking weak and pale. He spoke slowly and with some effort, almost in a whisper. I strained to hear his words.

"Sam," he said, "when I regained consciousness, my first feelings were not of despair or anger. I felt only gratitude to God for my life, for every moment I had lived. I was ready to depart. 'Take me, O Lord,' I thought, 'I have seen so many miracles in my lifetime.'"

Exhausted by the effort, he paused for a moment, then added: "That is what I meant when I wrote [in the preface to my book of Yiddish poems]: 'I did not ask for success; I asked for wonder. And You gave it to me.'"¹⁸

Now, that's passion!

The second gate is knowledge. True knowledge can shield us from unnecessary mistakes in nurturing our inner life, as well as that of our family, friends, and others who seek our help when they are lost, confused, or in a "spiritual desert." Motivation is important but it is not enough. Passion helps us to start the car and be open to the adventure of the trip. But it also helps if we *know* how to drive!

To keep a healthy perspective in life we need to have both the psychological and spiritual wisdom that the different world religions offer us. Such wisdom helps one to differentiate between unnecessary suffering on the one hand, and the kind of pain that must be faced rather than defended against or avoided on the other. Good knowledge, like healthy food, is necessary for living. Consequently living by the principles of self-care and maintaining a healthy perspective are two things we naturally seek each day. We need this knowledge. However, it is the third and final gate that will determine the true *quality* of our life.

The third gate has been the focus of our reflections thus far: humility. It the narrowest one of all. Humility is the ability to fully appreciate our innate gifts and our current "growing edges" in ways that enable us to learn, act, and flow with our lives as never before. Prior to this important passage we may be drained by defensiveness or wander in

our own desert chasing a false image of self that has nothing to do with who we are really meant to be.

Most of us know that at some point we need to go through the gate of humility. That is not the problem. The issue is that we are often unaware of the fact that we have actually stopped being humble and, in the process, have lost our sense of perspective and gratitude. If we are lucky, something wakes us up to this fact, even if rudely. The following story shared with me by a Franciscan priest illustrates this point quite well:

I had a dream that death
Came the other night,
And Heaven's gate swung wide open.

With kindly grace
An angel ushered me inside;
And there to my astonishment
Stood folks I had known on earth
And some I had judged
And labeled unfit and of little worth.

Indignant words rose to my lips,
But were never set free;
for every face showed stunned surprise,
Not one expected *me*.

—Anonymous

With humility, knowledge is transformed into wisdom. Such wisdom then ultimately leads us to open up new space within ourselves where we, as well as others, can

experience true freedom and love. Humility allows us to be transparent. It is for this reason that humility is so important. So much unnecessary worry and stress can be avoided if we treasure this gift. A dialogue from a collection of classic stories and teachings of the early Christian writers (*Patrologia Latina* and *Patrologia Graeca*) told by the *ammans* and *abbas* of the fourth-century desert in Persia and northern Africa illustrates this. It is told from the vantage point of persons totally dedicated to living a full, meditative life of inner peace, humility, and unselfconscious compassion—a place all of us should seek to be.

The devil appeared to a Desert Father, in the disguise of an angel of the Lord, and said to him, “I am the angel Gabriel and I have been sent to you.”

However, the Father softly responded, “See if you are not being sent to someone else. I certainly do not deserve to have an angel sent to me.”

Immediately, the devil disappeared.¹⁹

This is the kind of natural attitude we need so that we can pass through the third gate. It will also allow us to have the perspective, peace, and joy that come when we know and value our ordinary, transparent selves without wasting the energy it takes to add or subtract anything from who we really are. Humility is an *essential* ingredient in life because it provides a *kenosis*, an emptying of the self—the very desert spirit of letting go about which this

book is written. At its core, humility dramatically opens up beautiful space in our inner life:

- a space for simplicity amidst the complex demands of both home and office;
- a space for solitude to listen to the messages of our quiet spirit lest they be drowned out by the day's noise;
- a space for pacing ourselves while resisting the lure of speed and new technology;
- a space for gratefulness and giftedness in a world filled with a sense of entitlement;
- a space for honesty and clarity rather than spinning the truth to our own advantage;
- a space for real relationships in place of mere manipulation of others;
- a space for restraint instead of instant gratification and aggression;
- a space for doubt and deeper questions rather than filling our selves with false certainty and pat answers;
- a space for reflection so that compassion doesn't lead to undisciplined activism;
- a space for generosity where previously only strident self-interest stood;
- a space for transparency where opaque defensiveness is our normal rule;

- a space for sound self-respect in lieu of inordinate self-doubt or unbridled self-assurance;
- a space for intrigue or curiosity about our actions and motivations so we don't wander down the blind alleys of projection or self-condemnation;
- a space for forgiveness so we don't fall prey to rigidity and self-righteousness;
- a space for what will always be true rather than solely having an interest in what is currently in vogue; and
- a space for the courage needed to be ordinary instead of wasting all of our time chasing after what we believe will make us someone special.

Yes, it is the ability to empty ourselves that creates new inner space in our lives for the surprising remarkable gifts of humility.

Humility in Silence and Solitude

Anthony de Mello, an Indian Jesuit priest and psychologist, relates the following classic dialogue between a spiritual master and a novice disciple: