

O Holy Night

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I walk into a darkened room and my eyes are drawn to enter into the Czech artist, peace-activist, and mystic Alphonse Mucha's, epic *Woman in the Wilderness* painting.ⁱ Painted in 1923 in between two world wars and countless other tragedies, this painting evokes the suffering caused by war. Gazing through today's lens this could be the people of Ukraine, Russia, Palestine, Lebanon, Israel, Iran, Sudan and countless others suffering the ravages of war. Mucha is remarkable in his capacity to arouse the human spirit by illuminating the presence of light in intense suffering, even on the darkest of nights. This woman, alone, clad in rags, sitting in snow on a dark night, summoned me into her heart. She bade me to sit and gaze with her and to learn how to see love, even in the coldest, most opaque darkness. Enchanted, I sat with her, and I beseech you to sit with her now. As you enter into her reality, I invite you to focus on how she has not become depressed, despondent or despairing in her predicament, but has turned her face upward towards the light. The silver incandescence of a single star illumines her face. Reciprocally, the starlight illumines our face.

This single star connects her, (and all of us) with our origins in light, with the scintilla, the luminous still point within, that opens into the ground of divine love, into a oneing consciousness, into light, into pure presence. Notice too how the star-light illumines the snow, highlighting rippling, encircling patterns surrounding the woman, imparting a sense of her oneness with the earth and oneness in the boundlessness of divine love. This grounding, centering energy powerfully connects us into this boundlessness, opens us, expands us. Gradually, as we participate in this experience of being alone in the snow, inhabit the woman's aloneness, our own aloneness and the world's aloneness, our gaze becomes *be-hold-ing*. In this being and holding, we as onlooker dissolve. We awaken from within the ground of oneing love, in luminous oneing awareness. In this divine awareness aloneness transforms into solitude. We are infused in contemplation.



I hear words from Hosea resounding: "I will allure her into the wilderness to speak tenderly to her heart." (Hosea 2.14). Yet the pull of separation is strong and suddenly my eye catches other eyes peeping over the horizon watching this solitary woman. I wonder if this family of wolves is a symbol of danger, signalling the possibility of a savage devouring. Or, are the wolves protecting her and beckoning her to claim the natural wisdom, instinctual intelligence, loyalty and the resilience of the wolf? Is the woman in danger or actually one with creation, deeply connected with the heart of the wolf, with the soul of the earth, with the ground of divine love? Perhaps Mucha is suggesting that it is our choice to decide to feel alone, afraid and to disassociate from the darkness we are now living, or to hear the voice of Love speaking tenderly within the midst of this darkness, waiting to illumine a new way of being in the world. We can choose to live seeing life through a lens of depletion and diminishment. Conversely, we can choose to see the oneness of all creation in God, look for the point of Light, enter it and live life to the full. Each year in Advent, Love beckons us to respond to these questions once again and discover the light of the Christ child shining in the midst of darkness anew.



While I continue to wander, I notice hanging on the adjoining wall, Mucha's *Holy Night*.^{iv} Like the wilderness scene, misty infusing dark blues place us, as viewer, in the darkness of night. There is a quietness, a serenity, a stillness, imbuing a mystical sense of being enfolded by the shadows of the night-sky. Again, Mucha does not allow us to stay an onlooker. As our eye enters the fogginess, we are drawn by the same nascent light of a single star. Now, also alluding to Mathew's Infancy narrative (Mt 2:1-12), the star points to the place where Mary has just given birth to her baby, whom she names Emmanuel, "which means 'God is with us.'" (Mt 1:23). Mucha's ethereal, pastel colours and quietly flowing lines draw us into their rhythm, until we too are tenderly enfolded into the life enhancing maternal love of Mary. Sense how she is womanly, graceful, beautiful, affectionate, spiritually strong. Her outstretched hand touches, comforts the very human child, while at the same time there is a sense that she is offering vulnerable divine love into the world. A little lizard looks on keeping us earth bound, as the fluent shadows of dark and light become enfolding cloths wrapping the babe. The sensuality of the wrapping and enclosing stirs all our senses of body, heart and spirit, centering, and drawing us to rest our gaze on the radiant child. We behold. Mucha holds us in this present moment, present in Mary, present within her intimacy with her babe, present within the child. He allures us into the kiss of eternity with time. Now, with our intellect emptied, we are drawn well beyond the limits of cognitive knowing, into the point of light shining in Light. As we behold, our ripples of perception one. We know, through our oneness in love, that we are participating in the birth of divine love.

I invite you to feel the sensuality of flowing darkness and light stirring your senses of body, heart and spirit, leading you to rest your gaze on the child and behold radiant light. Bathe in the luminosity of the child. Feel yourself melting into the kiss of eternity with time, into the point of light shining in Light.



These two night scenes of the *Woman in the Wilderness* and *Holy Night*, mirror and reflect each other and mirror and reflect our lives, so that in the mirroring something new is created that is endlessly creative, fresh and regenerative. If we can risk changing, and risk entering into this reflexive mirroring to be drawn beyond subject-object evaluative-seeing, and gaze into an ever-unitive be-hold-ing, we enter into the Light of all lights. This is the Light that is the ground of all being. In this Light there is only presence. We simply are, present, in the grace of this naked moment to the oneing of past and present creating a more unitive future. We awaken within the creativity of a luminous oneing spaciousness. Mucha as artist, helps us stay present long enough, so that our gaze becomes beholding. He enables us to appreciate how the star-light radiating on a freezing night in the wilderness, the star-light illuminating the birth of the child and the star-light illuminating the ground of our soul, mirror and reflect each other. Superficially it looks like the woman in the wilderness is alone, abandoned, forsaken in the snow. However, in truth God is with her. Obscurely, incomprehensibly, mistily, she is participating in and being transformed by the birth of Emmanuel, who is God with us (Mt 1:23). Although there is not a clear answer to what she must do, there is clarity around how she must be. No longer constrained by the psychic grid that creates separation, retaliation and war, she is choosing to wait in the dark, sense beyond the limits of her immediate vista, turn, and look for the light. Amazingly, or perhaps not so surprisingly, she is being showered in light.



This Advent, when we intentionally meet as a *Contemplative Evolution Network* each afternoon, in heart in heart communion, and together enter into the dark infusing of contemplation, sensitive to the pain of the world, I invite us to be delicately attuned to being grounded in Light aware that God is with us. It is only through being grounded in the one who is Light that we can enter into the world's pain with compassion that flows from the eternal womb of compassion. However, given the searing pain of the world at present, there is an important nuance here, that is essential to the evolution of our communion consciousness. While it is natural to feel overwhelmed, flooded with emotion, powerless and inadequate, if left unrecognized and uncared for, these self-limiting misconceptions can turn into aggressive anger, or dissociation, or even spiritual bypassing. Furthermore, the overwhelm can make us feel alone, isolated and helpless and cause us to forget that the ground of our being is Light. Importantly then, if we feel we are becoming overwhelmed, we re-turn to the *Holy Night*. Like the woman in the wilderness, we ground, turn and discover anew the light shining in Emmanuel, shining in the ground of our heart, shining in our communion in prayer together, and shining especially in the darkest of nights. It is only by being grounded in divine Light, so that by divine Light we see divine Light (Ps 36:9) that we will discover the stability to give our hearts to what God is already doing, deep in the midst of darkness, now.

The human rights lawyer and leader of *Ukraine's Center for Civil Liberties*, Oleksandra Matviichuk, who was recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize 2022, urges us to invent collective patterns which give opportunity to transform pain into energy for life.^{vii} Oleksandra's emphasis on the collective is crucial here, for it is our capacity to meet in the one who is Light, in communion consciousness, that is the very source of communal healing and transformation. Thus, at this poignant moment in our evolution, when so many feel afflicted by collective polarization, discord, separation, desperation, and bypassing of care, we as a contemplative community can offer our hearts to enabling the creation of a strong collective pattern of transformation. We can choose to enter into the fearful places where all meaning seems emptied out and lost, because we do so from our awareness of being grounded in the one who is the Light, the one who is God with us, the one who enables us to see in the dark.

The words of the French philosopher Simone Weil feel poignant here:

*"Affliction makes God appear to be absent for a time, more absent than a dead man,
more absent than light in the utter darkness of a cell.*

*A kind of horror submerges the whole soul. During this absence there is nothing to love.
What is terrible is that if, in this darkness where there is nothing to love, the soul ceases to love,
God's absence becomes final."*^{viii}

Simone knows the darkness where there is nothing to love. She knows the destructive power of the illusion of separation. Yet, her words resound in the darkness, drawing us forward: “The soul has to go on loving in the emptiness, or at least to go on wanting to love”^{ix} We as a communion of Beloved’s choose to go on loving in the emptiness. Simone then affirms: “... one day, God will come to show God’s love to this soul and reveal the beauty of the world to it...”^x God has shown up and is showing up, if we have the eyes to see. She continues: “Each soul has to, and we together have to go on loving into the very abyss of separation,” until in this void, “supreme love places the bond of supreme union.”^{xi} As we actively participate in the ongoing creativity of incarnation, by offering our hearts to suffering creation, we give our hearts to this bonding union. Entering into silence is crucial. When we enter into silence, Simone says, we hear this bond of union being created, “like two notes, separate yet melting into one, like pure and heart-rending harmony.”^{xii} This is where Emmanuel is, supreme love creating supreme union.

Our contemplation contributes to the intensifying of this union. We are enhancing the heart-rendering harmony of the vibration of oneing. In communion, we offer and give ourselves to the pain, enter and wait in the darkness, and turn our head towards the light for all who feel afraid. Deliberately, we strengthen the morphogenic field of compassion, enabling the creation of new patterns that heal and free us to convert pain into energy for life. May we relish the silence, turn towards the eternal star light and become radiant lovers, bearers of light.



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- i Alphonse Mucha, “Woman in the Wilderness”, *Spirit of Art Nouveau*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 15 June – 22 September 2024.
 - ii Mucha, “Woman in the Wilderness”, detail.
 - iii Alphonse Mucha, “Holy Night”, *Spirit of Art Nouveau*, Art Gallery of New South Wales. Created in 1920 as part of a series of Christmas-themed lithographs.
 - iv Ibid.
 - v Mucha, “Woman in the Wilderness”, detail.
 - vi Mucha, “Holy Night”, detail.
 - vii Oleksandra Matviichuk interviewed by Kosha Jourbert, *Collective Trauma Online Conference*, 2024.
 - viii Simone Weil, “*The Love of God and Affliction*”, in *Waiting on God*, Routledge, 2009, 120-23.
 - ix Ibid.
 - x Ibid.
 - xi Ibid.
 - xii Ibid.
 - xiii Mucha, “Holy Night”, detail.