

A Spiritual Awakening

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I was on a four-day personal, spiritual retreat in the middle of the Pisgah National Forest in western North Carolina. My car was parked at the trailhead, perhaps 10 miles out a washboard dirt road. I have a bad back which prevents me from wearing a backpack, so I rode my mountain bike from there, pulling a single-wheeled trailer which contained my gear. I had scouted the area beforehand, and had found a perfect spot, in the crook of the s-turn of a stream, six or seven miles out the trail. The spot was probably used by hunters or backpackers, as a small fire pit marked the middle of the small clearing. A flat, smooth area between the fire pit and river was perfect for my tent. Access to the site was through a large field of chest-high golden grass, beyond which lay the trail.

I was doing this retreat in consultation with my therapist, whose psychotherapeutic orientation is therapy as a tool toward spiritual awareness. One of his frequent themes is to 'be in the moment'. Together he and I had worked out the time table and the basic parameters of the retreat. My objective was to do nothing, for I am a doer, always busy with something. On this retreat I wanted to still my body and mind in order to let my feelings or emotions or spirit or anything other than the incessant Thinking Mind come to the forefront. I wanted to really 'be in the moment'. I took only the smallest notepad and a pen for making brief notes. I didn't even take a flute.

I was an avid mountain biker, and the trails around my camp were wonderful for biking, so it was important that I not be tempted to ride during the retreat. Upon arriving, after setting up camp, I chained my bike to a tree and covered it with a tarp. The key to the bike lock, on a ring with my car and house keys, went into a little pouch inside the tent where I would try to forget them for the duration of the retreat.

Though my therapist had advised against fasting (since I would be alone), I did. I hadn't planned to, but it just worked out that way. I simply wasn't interested in food. I used my camp stove to heat water for tea but that was it. Mostly I meditated. Sitting in my camp chair (a sleeping pad that converts into a chair), I fixated on three logs standing on end at the other side of the camp. They became my focal point; my mandala.

The night after my second day it rained. I love lying snug in a good tent listening to rain falling outside. There's something comforting about it.

In the morning the sun rose and I broke down my camp to let things dry. Because the camp had a tree cover, I took the tent out to the sunny field to dry. I shook it out to remove leaves, dirt and pine needles, then spread it over the tall grass.

Several hours later I collected the tent and reassembled it in my camp. As I did so I heard a jingling which reminded me of the keys that I'd stowed in the tent's pouch. It turned out that the source of the jingle was a pair of zipper pulls, and the key pouch was empty.

I methodically searched the entire camp then, coming up empty, figured the keys must have fallen out when I shook out the tent in the field.

I couldn't identify exactly where I'd stood as I shook out the tent, so I approximated the spot and searched on hands and knees. Then I placed my jacket on the ground I'd searched and began spiraling my search out from that point. My world consisted of about six square inches of ground at a time. (I was very 'in the moment'.) The key ring was small, the grass was tall, I didn't want to overlook the keys, and I had all day.

After an hour or so I must have crawled onto a bee's nest, because I was suddenly stung several times. I jumped up and ran from that spot, only to realize that I'd then lost track of where I had and had not searched.

A profound feeling of despair and futility washed over me. I returned to camp, sat in my chair and cried. My body was agitated, seeking action, but I was overwhelmed by the futility of the search. My body shook as I wailed, but my mind continued its incessant process. I pondered how I'd get out of there without the keys. No bike. No car. It was about six miles to the road and maybe another 10 miles to the paved road. I would not be able to carry my gear out. (Even if I could wear a backpack, I didn't have one.) The more I thought, the more overwhelmed with despair and the futility of the search I became.

Words came unbidden. "I can't do it alone!" My mind settled on that thought as my wails ebbed to sobs. I was spent. Sitting, quietly now, I knew in my heart that I couldn't do it alone. Staring at the three logs, I gave up the struggle and humbly asked for help. My gaze dropped to my feet, and there, beside my right foot, were my keys.