

6. The Long Walk and the Leaking Pot

Some stories start with silence and seem to end there too. No climax, no miracle—just repetition, effort, and quiet questions. But stay with this one. What you think is empty may be working underground. What you carry with patience may be leaking grace where you least expect it.

One of the quiet truths of the contemplative life is that not much seems to happen. Day after day, the practice continues: silence, prayer, returning, waiting. Sometimes this faithfulness can feel arid. ‘What is this really doing?’ we wonder.

But if God is not a sensation, and prayer is not a transaction, then perhaps the dryness is not failure—it is fidelity. The soul, like the earth, has seasons. And the spiritual life is often like composting: the deeper work is slow, hidden, and often hard to smell.

For Christians, the invitation is to follow Christ not only in joy and insight, but in patience and obscurity. The Gospel does not promise constant clarity. It promises presence, even in dryness. This blog series explores how stories from the Sufi tradition can illuminate the way Christ forms us—gently, invisibly, over time.

In the Sufi story that follows, the surface seems uneventful. But that’s the point. In a world addicted to outcomes, this is a parable about quiet transformation—about the things God is doing through us that we may never see, until the path begins to bloom.



The Long Walk and the Leaking Pot

A young apprentice was asked to carry water each morning from the river at the bottom of a hill to his teacher's house at the top. He used two large clay pots, suspended on a yoke across his shoulders. One pot was whole; the other had a long crack that leaked steadily. Each day, the apprentice climbed the hill, frustrated to see the cracked pot half-empty by the time he arrived. After weeks of this, he apologized to the teacher:

"I'm sorry. I've been using a broken vessel. Half the water is wasted."

The teacher smiled and said, "Come with me."

He led the apprentice down the path and pointed to the beautiful wildflowers growing along one side of the trail.

"The flowers grow on the side watered by your leaking pot," the teacher said.

"You thought you were failing. But you've been nourishing this path the whole time."

Source: Adapted from a traditional Sufi story.

Reflection: The contemplative path is often quiet, repetitive, and apparently fruitless. We keep showing up in prayer,

keep practicing kindness, keep walking up the hill. And we wonder: is anything happening? The story answers not with thunder but with wildflowers. There are graces you will never see—ripples your prayer sends into places your mind can't measure. Christ invites us into this kind of trust: not a faith based on outcomes, but a fidelity rooted in love. In the dry seasons of contemplation, something may still be blooming behind you. You may not see it, but you're watering the path.



Discussion Questions

- Have you experienced times in prayer or service that felt fruitless—yet may have blessed others unknowingly?
- What helps you remain faithful to a contemplative practice during arid or unremarkable periods?
- Is there someone whose quiet presence or routine acts watered the path for you?

- What might it mean to trust that grace flows through cracked vessels?

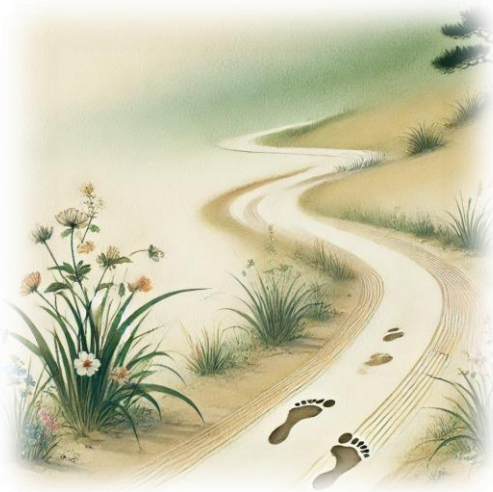
Scripture and Contemplative Echoes

Old Testament

They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit. — *Jeremiah 17:8*

Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again. — *Ecclesiastes 11:1*

He leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. — *Psalms 23:2-3*



New Testament

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a

harvest if we do not give up. — *Galatians 6:9*

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed... yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants. — *Mark 4:31-32*

Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. — *John 12:24*

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain. — *1 Corinthians 15:58*

Contemplative Christian Writers

Dryness in prayer is not the absence of God but the invitation to deeper faith. Many who persevere in silent practice feel as if nothing is happening. But that is where grace ripens in secret. Like the leaky pot, your simple fidelity to the practice may water a thousand unseen flowers. — *Thomas Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart, p. 74*

You are not asked to feel successful in your spiritual life. You are asked to show up. One drop of water may not seem like much—until you see the green it leaves behind. When you cannot sense God, keep walking. Your footsteps may be carving a channel for grace. — *Martin Laird, A Sunlit Absence, p. 59*

Christ did not promise constant ecstasy. He promised to be with us always. Often, he walks beside us unrecognised, as with the disciples on the road to

Emmaus. The patient act of walking—
day after day—is itself a way of love. It is
faithfulness without fireworks. — *James
Finley, Merton's Palace of Nowhere, p. 101*

There is nothing more fruitful than
barren prayer, when offered with a
surrendered heart. To sit in silence
without results, without visions, without
pride—that is true intimacy. God loves
not our performance, but our presence.
— *Henri Nouwen, The Way of the Heart, p. 34*

In the end, all true contemplatives
become gardeners. They learn to trust
the dark soil. They let things grow
slowly. They know the worth of rain, and
the grace of cracked vessels. Even their
emptiness is full of promise. — *Cynthia
Bourgeault, The Wisdom Way of Knowing, p. 88*



In Verse

Beside the Clear Stream

beside the clear stream,
perfumed pine trees still quietly stand...
the lazy song of the bees

is what it is

around the diplomat's desk
dozens of phones keep ringing...
scheming men keep straining
to be what is not

unrushed are pine trees
for their roots draw deep
from eternal water
beside the clear stream

tony macelli
05-07-2010

Still Pond

blue-green water in fog
reeds near water-lily pads
blue-veined taro leaves
small wet frog quite still
clinging to lotus bud

distant insects buzz
deep hush
red koi's mouth surfaces
the morning shines
I live here

light breeze trembles reeds
surface ripples spreading
breeze stills
ripples fade
I stay

tony macelli
29-10-2021

Ripples

blue-grey sky, open, clear, high

honey-bees drone, dung-beetles roll

mist-damp meadows flower
morning sun raises scented steam

yesterday's rain, puddles, pools
mud-settled clear water on the path

sparrow alert at water's edge
spies seed below limpid surface
dips beak, picks seed
spreads ripples across sky

tony macelli
28-12-2022

