The World Community for Christian Meditation

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From the outset, walking up a steep hill requires commitment. First, you have to look at the hill realistically and evaluate the challenge it represents and your probable stamina. This may be done unconsciously because you can trust your instincts. There is no reason not to take the challenge, however, provided you adjust your pace of walking to the incline. Small steps will achieve a good result in a shorter time than impatiently trying to finish the distance too quickly.

When you start off you draw on fresh energy and the optimism that is inherent in every new beginning. But by the mid-point you have to integrate your focus between the goal and the next step you are going to take. The goal gives the motivation, the next step applies it. If you are walking with others their companionship and conversation carries you forward even when you are puffing as you climb; and your perseverance, in turn, supports them.

As with the interior pilgrimage a good bracing walk with friends on a sunny day to the top of a hill overlooking the sea, combines effort with pleasure and satisfaction. It is good work and it is good to share it.

Peter of Damascus, whose teachings on the eight stages of contemplation we are using during the retreat, taught about the nature of the spiritual journey. The first three stages are concerned with the ascetical training and preparation. Often we begin the walk, he says, from a sad sense of the falleness of the world and of our own ignorance. As we walk, both our ignorance and our sense that we are our own worst enemy are slowly dispelled by spiritual knowledge. From somewhere beyond the horizon our attempt to change direction is matched by a more than generous response of grace. This comes in ways we could never predict.

The new knowledge is not conceptual or practical knowledge of the kind that we get from books or learning skills. It comes through treading the way of unknowing, of climbing the hill in good and bad weather, alone or with good friends. We become conscious of this new spiritual knowledge as we discern the difference between ignorance and unknowing. Between effort and grace. And between success and love.

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