

# **“Wide Awake”**

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When I was a young girl, growing up in Winnipeg,  
my best friend came from a family of Ukrainian heritage.

Because I spent a lot of time with her, from Grade One 'til Grade Seven  
when we started Junior High and our lives went in different directions...

I was introduced to certain things that I knew were Ukrainian.

One of them was borscht, the delicious beet and cabbage soup, served with  
sour cream.

The other one was pysanky, or Ukrainian Easter Eggs,  
which Kim's family lovingly and carefully made every year.

I can still remember visiting their kitchen around Easter time,  
and watching one of her relatives, perhaps her mother or grandmother,  
carefully creating the intricate and beautiful eggs...

Coloured with dye and then etched in symbols and patterns with a pen of  
beeswax...

Before being bathed in black ink, that made the colours and patterns stand  
out in vivid contrast.

At our house, we dyed Easter eggs with the much more humble Paas  
colouring kit...with its little tablet of dye that fizzed into life when it was  
dropped into a bowl of water and vinegar.

But the Easter eggs at Kim's house....  
they were something else entirely.

I was mesmerized by the beauty of those eggs,  
and the patience and skill it took to make them.

I recently learned something very important about the pysanky.  
Creating them was considered a spiritual practice.

They weren't just accomplishments of artistic skill.

They were invitations into another form of seeing...  
another way of being awake.

Which is really what the Easter holiday,  
and other religious festivals, are all about.

They invite us into another way of seeing.

A ways that often includes paradox: a "both-and" and a bringing together  
of shadow and light...

Which of course is something that is seen in the pysanky:  
light and colour shining through from darkness...

...brought forward by a patient and slow form of spiritual practice, known  
deeply at this time of year.

According to Olga Lang of the Ukrainian Canadian Culture Society in  
Vancouver:

"While you're doing a pysanka, you are in a state of love.

And that is really tough, because this thing is not easy to do.  
And it is also easy to be hard on yourself, or be critical or disappointed"  
but these thoughts can be set aside.

Creating a pysanka, she says, is "an exercise on how to cope with thoughts come into your mind, and staying in a prolonged state of grace."

"Hopefully that state of grace will carry on throughout the year.

You have that control over your thoughts... you recognize them, but they don't have to change your emotional state."

Because a simple design might take up to four hours, it's a meditative activity especially well-suited to the season of Lent, when Christians spent time in simplicity and prayer.

That said, the tradition of pysanky far predates Christianity... linking it with so many other meditative practices of many cultures and religious traditions.<sup>12</sup>

This weekend, as the holy days of Ramadan, Passover and Easter coincide, we're called to notice how they invite us to lose ourself in order to find ourself...to still our minds and come fully into the present moment...that we may more mindfully tend to the world.

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Now it might seem, on the surface, that losing oneself for hours in a meditative activity is the exact opposite of being awake.

But from the perspective of spiritual growth, just the opposite is true.

In virtually every religious tradition, spiritual practices that bring us into the present moment are the route toward a different kind of awakening:

Toward the "unitive" experience...

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<sup>1</sup> Sheila Potter, "Famed 'Ukrainian Easter Eggs' pysanky have a rich religious and cultural history," Oak Bay News, April 10, 2006. Reprinted, UNIAN Information Agency [www.unian.info](http://www.unian.info)

<sup>2</sup> Kyle Slavin, "The art of creating Ukrainian Easter eggs," Goldstream News Gazette, March 22, 2013 <https://www.goldstreamgazette.com/news/the-art-of-creating-ukrainian-easter-eggs/>

the state of grace.

The "oneing"...or being at one.

The deep knowing that we are not at all separate from one another, although we may seem to be.

But rather, that we are held together deeply within the interdependent web of all existence...

and that it is woven through and through by love.

The Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron went even further when she wrote:

“We already have everything we need. There is no need for self-improvement.

All these trips that we lay on ourselves—the heavy-duty fearing that we’re bad and hoping that we’re good,

the identities that we so dearly cling to, the rage, the jealousy and the addictions of all kinds—never touch our basic wealth.

They are like clouds that temporarily block the sun.

But all the time our warmth and brilliance are right here.

This is who we really are.

We are one blink of an eye away from being fully awake.”

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This is not, however, what our day-to-day life tends to teach us...

which is why "holy days" of fasting and "holy moments" of stillness are so very valuable to us.

Not only are we encouraged to stay connected and plugged into to as many channels as possible all the time,

And to continually acquire more,  
whether they are possessions or accomplishments...

We even monitor our own, and each other's behaviours,  
even the words we use, separating each other into groups  
based on the virtues we do or do not signal.

We're conditioned to do more and more,  
to become more and more aware...  
on subjects that are all so serious and significant...

Yet we often feel that we can control less and less.

And it's clear that much of the world's activity  
is beyond our direct influence...even if it isn't  
beyond our awareness.

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I recently had the opportunity once again to attend a talk by the Reverend Dr. Catherine Meeks.<sup>3</sup>

She's a leader in racial reconciliation in the U.S.  
as well as an Episcopal priest.

She remarked that in many ways we are addicted to activity...  
to information and action...

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/pressreleases/racial-reconciliation-champion-catherine-meeks-gets-presidential-awards/>

And that when she seeks people to work with in social justice, she seeks out people who know how to stand still in the middle of the storm... to wait until they know the next right thing to do.

This is counter-intuitive in a time when there are so many worthwhile activities with which to occupy ourselves.

Yet all of the great spiritual teachers in every tradition, teach us the importance of simply sitting, of patiently learning to be with the world as it is...

In order to develop a more awakened awareness that allows us to respond more effectively and creatively... And might help us refrain from adding to the violence of the world.

Our willingness to let go into stillness-- and I am still very much a novice at this myself--

helps hold the awareness of the horror and suffering of the world on the one hand...and the love and beauty of the world on the other...

And operate, as best we can, from the "still point" between.

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It's been said that mature religion helps us to live with paradox, whereas immature religion presents us with clarity and certainty at all times.

As human beings, we often want the clear and radiant answer... and the "solution" to the problems that face us.

We look in many directions to find this, including religion of course, wanting it to bolster our small sense of ourselves as individuals with our particular wants and passing desires.

But the wisdom of Ramadan and Passover and the Christian Holy Week take us in other directions:

They take us down, into paradox and mystery...

Into the sense of deep belonging and connection to God during a time of exile, for Jews.

Into an extended time of fasting that provides spiritual nourishment, for Muslims.

And into a tomb of hopelessness at the end of one remarkable human story...that is opened up, for Christians, into an ongoing promise of love.

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Whether or not we have personal associations with any of these religious festivals...

We can notice the invitation they hold for "awakening" in the spiritual sense.

That is, the invitation to let go of a small measure of certainty and control...that something new and creative might be born.

The invitation to stay mindfully connected, as best we can, to the abundance and renewal of life that takes place in every moment.

The invitation to listen for that "breeze at dawn that has secrets to tell us."

The invitation to be still in the center of the storm...

that we may be connected to the Non-Anxious Presence  
that can hold us...and can heal.

And finally, the invitation to follow Love down  
to the depths of our being...and discover there a  
Love at our core which is infinite...and can be infinitely  
given away.

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We all hold our eggs.

Our precious and fragile lives...adorned as they are with the symbols we use  
for meaning and the patterns we return to,  
again and again.

May we be awake to their meaning  
and their beauty for as long as they may last....

Grateful for the gift of life  
which contains both joy and suffering...  
shadow and light...

Yet that nevertheless  
provides us with everything we need.

May we be awake to the promise of this day.

Amen.

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