Columns
Spirituality



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Recently, I went on my annual retreat. The eight days of silence and solitude is a time for me to simply rest in the presence of Divine Mystery and quite often to do a bit of interior housekeeping — becoming more aware of what stands in the way of becoming my authentic, true self.

My director shared with me the book *Unbinding* by Kathleen Dowling Singh. Drawing on multiple mystical traditions but primarily Buddhist, Singh addresses how we must awaken to all that binds us in believing in a seemingly separate self who does not recognize that we are all interconnected, and more alike than different.

Part of this process is becoming more aware that the "me" as the primary point of reference — experienced as separate from everyone and everything else — is shaped and conditioned by multiple influences and forces within our lives. It is in the process of awakening to these conditions that we can become "unbound" from them and see our more authentic self, connected to the whole web of life.

As I sat with what she was saying, letting it sink in, I realized an experience I was having seemed to capture the essence of that teaching.

Where I went for my retreat was a new place. It is a motherhouse, an older building with five stories, multiple wings and many doors. As a temporary guest, I was surprised that I was given two keys — one for my bedroom and the other that opened every door outside and inside throughout the complex, with the exception of the bedroom doors.

As I walked around the plant, I was quite astonished, that this other key I had opened *all* the other doors. This seemed so unbelievable to me, as many of the motherhouses I have visited have someone at the door to allow you entrance, and certainly a guest wouldn't be given a key that accessed all of the entrances and the doors between floors. Intrigued, I began going in and out of different doors while I was there.

It was fascinating. Every time I did that, I found myself in a different wing with something new going on or being housed there.

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One time from an outside court area, I opened the door only to be confronted with two more doors on either side. They were locked but of course I could open them. One led downstairs, the other up. I had no idea where either led so I chose to go up and found myself in the back of a chapel. Every door led to a new experience and yet all in the same building. I was part of it all.

Then I had my bedroom key. It is where I would stay for the duration of the retreat. Even as a temporary guest, I got comfortable in the room, making it mine. I knew I would be very happy staying right here. I begin to take ownership of it.

The elevator is right across from my room and it takes me to the main floor where I can exit and go outside. For all practical purposes, I don't need too much more — I am in my room and I have easy access to the outside. I can live pretty unconnected to anyone else on campus.

As I pondered this concept of a false sense of a separate self, the keys came to mind as a perfect image to explore this concept.

I began to see that my room key is like this seemingly separate self. It is mine and I think I can function quite well apart from the rest of the universe I call home.

Yet I also have in my possession this other key. I can treat it like any other key that gets you into a house where one resides. But once I'm aware that it can unlock all the outside doors, something else happens. As I break the habit of always going in and out of one particular door, and risk opening different doors, I see all sorts of new things. I get a sense that I am part of a greater whole to which I am connected.

We have all been conditioned to see in a certain way and it is usually through the eyes of a "me," a separate self. Judging all that I encounter from my perspective. Keeping myself safe within the confines of my own room or worldview that feels comfortable and seems to work.

The reality is quite different. The motherhouse is like the world we live in. It is complex and full of seemingly diverse people doing many different things. But we are all connected and share more in common than not. We are all housed in one Earth home. The astounding thing is that we all have access to it ... we all have the key. All we have to do is unlock the doors ...