



## The 'nested meditation' by Kevin Anderson

I am not a fisherman, but our 5-year-old son Jim was insistent: “Let’s go see if we can catch some bass with this purple, scented worm, Dad! Can we!? Can we!?” I was pretty sure we couldn’t, given a life of futility in the realm of fishing, but his boyish wonder was too vibrant to quash.

We walked out onto the dock and I tied on the artificial rubbery worm, all the while thinking, we’re not going to catch anything with this fake lure. In the dusky light, a fish stirred near the surface about thirty feet from the dock. To my great surprise, the cast landed right on the spot where the fish had stirred, and a moment later a fish struck that artificial, rubbery, purple, scented worm! While Jim fought the fish in, however, the line snapped. We hooked into two more fish within minutes, but each time I tried to set the hook, the line snapped. Almost everything was perfect – a beautiful evening, quality time with my son, the bass biting – but the line kept snapping! A voice in my

brain that I call the “heckler” said: “See, it really is futile.”

Taking my fishing frustration to reflection time later, I wrote the following “nested meditation”:

*Prayer is casting awareness into silence.*

*Prayer is casting awareness into silence,  
fishing for the Big One, waiting for the tug.*

*Prayer is casting awareness into silence,  
fishing for the Big One, waiting for the tug  
of the sacred—setting the hook, reeling.*

*Prayer is casting awareness into silence,  
Fishing for the Big One, waiting for the tug  
of the sacred—setting the hook, reeling  
with laughter when the line snaps again.*

In the 30 minutes it took to create this piece, I’d stumbled on a new image for prayer – “casting awareness into silence” – and a certain peacefulness with realizing that God is very much like the Big One that we can never quite land, hold in our hands,

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and put on a stringer. We live for those brief moments of being hooked into the sacred, but the line always snaps. We always return to a more mundane consciousness. The Gracious Mystery remains forever too big, too deep for us to reel in.

I've been writing meditations in this form for the past 10 years. I don't remember exactly how the first one came about. It was the result of an afternoon of playing with words, a predisposition instilled by a father who made humor with wordplay throughout every day of my youth. That afternoon I was curious to see if by keeping the words the same and adding a single line to each stanza I could get the meaning or direction of the piece to shift in subtle or surprising ways – like the tug of the fish becoming the tug of the sacred or reeling in the fish shifting to reeling with laughter.

The first collection of 76 of these meditations was published in *Divinity in Disguise: Nested Meditations to Delight the Mind and Awaken the Soul*. As the book made its way into the world, I heard what I had hoped: that many people are using this new writing form to reflect on their own life material.

#### WHAT IS A NESTED MEDITATION?

The nested form is rather simple. Each piece begins with a single line that makes a complete sentence. The next stanza repeats the first line, then adds another line, so that the entire piece continues to read as a complete sentence (or in some cases, more than one sentence). The order and spelling of the words and the line breaks (where the lines end) all stay the same, but punctuation changes and wordplay are used to make surprising shifts. The nesting can go on indefinitely. Most of mine nest to four levels, but I have written several that nest to six levels.

Unlike much modern poetry, which emphasizes the use of language that often leaves the reader feeling distanced or puzzled, nested meditations use plain, everyday language intended to result in

“aha!” moments. The whole idea of this form is to allow the sacred, the surprising, the miraculous to emerge from the ordinary. Because they use simple language, nested meditations are accessible both to the reader and to those who attempt to write them. All that is needed is some quiet time, a willingness to start with a single line from one's present awareness, and a playful approach to words.

#### WORDPLAY AS A PORTAL TO THE SOUL

The fascinating experience of writing nested meditations is that one never knows where they will go when the first line is committed to paper. The attempt to play with words so that the piece changes directions almost guarantees that it will shift in directions that surprise the writer. The feeling after writing a nested meditation is often something like, “Where did that come from?” That's because wordplay takes us into the right brain where anything can happen. It's almost as if the sacred is dancing in the spaces between words or lines just waiting for our playful energy to reveal it.

Recently I was at a friend's new home on a gorgeous lake in Minnesota. As I walked around the neighborhood, I felt the rising of that familiar enculturated longing for more. The line “I want to live on water!” presented itself in my brain. At first my superego moved in to judge: You should be grateful for what you have, you shouldn't covet what others have. But I opted to play with the line instead, and here is what emerged.

*I want to live on water.*

*I want to live on. Water  
stirs that up in me.*

*I want to live on. Water  
stirs that up. In me  
pulsates an eternal longing.*

*I want to live on. Water  
stirs that up. In me  
pulsates an eternal longing  
for what a breaking wave may know.*

In writing this piece, I was able to transform coveting and self-judgment into a realization that the longing for beauty and abundance in this world is just a mirror of my ever-present thirst for the Infinite One. The process of writing this brief piece was healing somehow—and this followed from moving the period in the first line from after “water” to after “on.” I want to live on! Yes, that’s it. My desire for the abundance of a home on the lake is one with my eternal desire for the Abundant One. A simple punctuation change opened up my soul.

#### **EACH STANZA IS ITS OWN MEDITATION**

Nested meditations are best appreciated when read slowly, pausing after each stanza for one or more breaths. Some readers want to skip the repetition of lines from stanza to stanza and jump ahead to the newest line, racing to get to some imagined final meaning of the piece. But this approach misses the fact that each stanza is its own separate meditation. The last stanza does not contain the whole or final meaning of the piece.

Consider, for example, the following meditation:

*I picked you.*

*I picked you  
to be my wife.*

*I picked you  
to be my wife  
and I didn’t know you.*

*I picked you  
to be my wife  
and I didn’t know you  
were a wildflower.*

The third stanza stands alone as its own reflection on how we know far less than we think we do when we commit our lives to another person. The fourth stanza is not a linear progression from the third, but a reflection on how surprising beauty can be discovered in relationships as they progress.

The final stanza also illustrates what I call the “circular” quality of some nested meditations. The last line (“were a wildflower”) allows us to circle back to the first line (“I picked you”) and hear it in a new way. What does it mean if you have been a wildflower all along and I have picked you? Is this a reflection on how we hurt the ones we love more deeply than anyone else in our lives; or an opening to the need for forgiveness to reconnect or re-root our relationships?

#### **DELIBERATE INEFFICIENCY?**

The repetition built into this form is intended to create a meditative experience. From Gregorian chants to breath work to sitting listening to waves roll in at the beach, meditation involves repetition. A commitment to making space for spiritual growth stands counter to the culture’s insistence on efficiency which abhors a moment lost to unproductive repetition. God breaks through when we slow down, when we stop focusing just on being productive and start paying attention to the sacred recurring rhythms of existence.

There’s something about the repeating of lines that models our own growth process. Like it or not, we often work and rework the same issues in our quest for growth and wholeness. Our progress is often incremental, much like the adding of a single line, moving our life work forward by degrees. Sometimes in that incremental growth process a shift occurs that allows us to break through to unexpected awareness and move in new directions. That is the hope that the nested meditation form symbolizes. The part of our lives that is already written need not completely limit where the story goes from

here. Openness and playfulness can produce magical encounters with grace. The next line, chapter, day, or year may hold surprising potentials we could not have glimpsed with the more limited awareness of our younger selves.

I have journaled for nearly 30 years, and that form of writing has been a reliable tool on the spiritual path. Lately, however, I have preferred to come to the page with an empty, waiting approach. By casting awareness into silence, a line appears or a stream of consciousness is set flowing that begins the process of letting simple words and

phrases lead me to the sacred. A teacher of mine used the metaphor of the rope tow in skiing to speak about this kind of openness. Just as a skier sidles up to a rope tow and gently squeezes down on the rope and follows it up the hill, we can quiet our spirits and squeeze down on whatever thread of awareness is running through us. If we have pen in hand and follow the thread with a playful spirit, new and healing discoveries can emerge as if they were trapped there among the words all along, just waiting for a childlike playfulness to set them free.

**A** pious caterpillar believes.

A pious caterpillar believes,  
an enlightened caterpillar knows.

A pious caterpillar believes.  
An enlightened caterpillar knows  
the winged life.

A pious caterpillar believes.  
An enlightened caterpillar knows  
the winged life  
requires metamorphosis.

Source: Anderson, Kevin, *Divinity in Disguise: Nested Meditations to Delight the Mind and Awaken the Soul* (CLB Press, 2003).