

II

A Grammar of Holy Mystery

Experiences of the Poetic Life

Father Larry, O.P.A.

So which of our experiences are spiritual in nature rather than mundane, ordinary, without depth of meaning or mystical significance? I am not, of course, actually asking you to categorize your experiences in this way, but rather hoping that by asking this question you will see and grasp the obvious – that all experiences are spiritual, and that the real question is whether we recognized them as such. Everything that happens, everything you think, say, feel, or do; everything that touches you, no matter how lightly or subtly, is a spiritual experience. Most people, most of the time, do unconsciously sort their experiences into various categories – physical, intellectual, emotional or psychological, spiritual or religious. Often this is helpful in that it makes it possible for us to look at some specific aspect of our lives that we need to examine more closely. But it also frequently blunts our spiritual awareness so that we are like the fish that swims everywhere looking for that mysterious and wonderful thing called water.

One thing that our spiritual practice ought to do, over time, is to increase our awareness of the spiritual mystery in which, like the fish in water, “we live, move, and have our very being.” It should heighten our consciousness of God at all times, in all places, and in all things, both great and small, as the reality in which we are saturated.

My wife Brenda and I recently adopted a six-month-old puppy -- a Catahoula and Queensland Heeler mix we’ve named Jack. My last dog, a wonderful black Labrador Retriever, died about nine years ago and Brenda didn’t want me to get another dog. She said it was too hard on me when something bad happened to them, and besides that, she doesn’t think dogs belong in a house. She grew up on a farm where all the animals “live outside where they belong.” She is just not particularly sentimental when it comes to dogs. But not long ago, she started searching the Internet and found Jack. She didn’t say so, but I think it was because she loves me, and knew how much I would enjoy a canine companion. It was not a big thing to do, but it was full of God – at least that’s how I see it. Yesterday, Jack was playfully jumping and nipping at my bare feet as if to herd me into the next room and I thought, “You know, I am really happy right now in this moment playing with this lively, funny, smart pup.” No big thing, nothing dramatic, pretty simple stuff, but full of God.

So, how do we see God in the small, ordinary, events in which our lives are immersed? The first thing I would suggest is that we find God even in what may seem small and of little consequence through the cultivation of simple gratitude. Gratitude

involves a kind of openness and receptivity. If you have never read *Living Simply Through the Day* by Tilden Edwards or *Gratefulness, The Heart of Prayer* by David Steindl-Rast, I would certainly encourage you to do so. I have found both books helpful long after having first read them.

The first stanza of William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" also points in this direction and makes a wonderful meditation:

*To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.*

William Blake

But how does one "hold infinity in the palm of the hand", or "eternity in an hour"? I believe that it is possible to do so through a non-analytical appreciation of absolutely everything, a gentle awareness, a clear consciousness of what is, through the faculty of uncomplicated intuition, and quiet receptivity, and a thankful spirit.

W. B. Yeats imagines in one of his poems a fifty-year-old man sitting alone at a little marble topped table in a crowded shop with a book and now empty cup. As he watches all the ordinary people in the shop and on the street, he experiences an extraordinary and profound sense of gratitude, a sense of having been blessed, and of desiring to bless:

*My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table top,
While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless.*

W.B. Yeats

Is Yeats attempting to remind us of that modest altar, that common chalice drained to the bottom by earthy men and women, celebrating the plainest of meals, to the unpretentious words of that simple book? I think he is. I think he is alluding to the unassuming and, therefore, most essential realities of Holy Communion. I find this a profoundly religious, or, if you prefer, spiritual poem. It makes me think of that scene in Marilynne Robinson's book, *Gilead*, where John recalls how as a young boy he had gone with his father to pull down the remains of a Black Baptist church that had been struck by lightning and burned.

It was during a time of adversity in their rural community, everyone was poor, and now this church had burned. As they worked at pulling down the charred remains and clearing away the sooty debris, it began to rain, but still they all sang as they laboured. They sang “The Old Rugged Cross,” and “Blessed Jesus.” “The ashes turned liquid in the rain and the men who were working in the rains got entirely black and filthy, till you could hardly tell one from another.” John remembers his father down on his heels in the rain, water dripping from his hat, feeding him an ashy biscuit from scorched hands. For John this becomes a moment of Holy Eucharist. He thinks of a phrase often used in those days – “the bread of affliction.” As John’s work worn father breaks the ashy biscuit in two and gives John half, it is, for John, a “visionary” moment in which he “comprehends his life.” Can you taste the grace and love of communion in a piece of broken bread, or comprehend your life in a little sip of wine?

Historically, the great spiritual masters have all taught this way of simple gratitude. The seventeenth century in France was a tumultuous time of power struggles, violence and poverty. But it was a time that also gave rise to a number of spiritual masters who still give good guidance for today – Francis de Sales, Blaise Pascal, Madame Guyon, and Francis Fenelon. It was also the century in which Nicholas Herman was born to peasant parents in Lorraine. Following his service in the army where he suffered a wound that left him with a permanent limp, and after employment as a footman, Nicholas entered the Discalced Carmelite Monastery in Paris, where he spent the rest of his life as a simple lay monk – as Brother Lawrence. In the monastery he was eventually assigned to the kitchen where he was kept busy with the tedious chores of cooking and cleaning. But Brother Lawrence had an uncommon understanding of the holiness within “the common business of life.” It is this understanding that has come down to us in the book known as: *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Brother Lawrence said that God was as real and as close to him when he was rattling around among his pots and pans as when he was in the chapel praying. Brother Lawrence saw “common business,” regardless of how mundane or routine, as the medium of God’s grace. Like Mother Teresa of Calcutta, he recognized that it is not the outward importance or drama of a task that matters most, but the love with which it is done. He said, “Nor is it needful that we should have great things to do. . . We can do little things for God; I turn the cake that is frying on the pan for love of him, and it is enough for me to pick up a straw from the ground for the love of God.”

In a 1999, letter to his Dominican brothers and sisters at the Feast of Blessed Jordan of Saxony, Father Timothy Radcliffe, OP, told this pertinent story:

When I was a student, I remember the visit of a priest from another Province to our community in Oxford. When he arrived there was a Dominican sweeping the hall. The visitor asked him, “Are you a brother?” “Yes” he replied. “Brother go and get me a cup of coffee.” After his coffee he told the brother to take his bags to his room. And finally the visitor said, “Now, brother, I wish to meet the Father Prior”. The monk replied, “I am the Prior”.

I think it is T.S. Eliot who said, “Christianity is a condition of complete simplicity.” Simplicity, gratitude, purity of heart are the conditions for finding God in all things no matter how small or seemingly insignificant.

Our culture is hungry for experience, and there are many movements and churches set to provide good feelings and emotionally intense moments, but what they provide is both transitory and shallow. Nor do the experiences created have the ability to sustain one through the long dry spells, through the desert and dark night experiences that are common to true spirituality. In the end the goal of spirituality is not experience, but God. Ancient contemplatives from every tradition and modern psychologists are all agreed that any attempt to “make something happen spiritually” is not only useless, but actually self-defeating. At the very least such attempts foster a *wilful* spirit. The spiritual disciplines like meditation, prayer, or contemplation encourage an awareness of religious experience but they cannot create it. There is no cause-and-effect relationship. Christian mystics, contemplatives, may have many ecstatic or dramatic experiences, but they see every experience, whether exotic or mundane, as pure gift.

Scholars have long questioned whether the full mystical encounter with the presence of God is *mediated* (dependent on some intervening, connecting, or conveying agency); or, whether it is *immediate* (nothing intervening, nothing between, direct and unmediated). Many people who have carefully researched various forms of mysticism conclude there is no experience that is not in some way mediated, that is not conditioned or helped in some way – by word or sacrament, by family and friends, by everyday events, by creation, by life history, or by some other element unknown even to ourselves; but which, nevertheless, has far reaching consequences (2 Timothy 3:15; Philippians 2:12-13). Yet the contemplative Christian may experience what can only be described as direct communion with God, and immediate consciousness of meaning and grace (1 Corinthians 6:17; 2 Corinthians 12:1-4). This paradox led Frederick von Hugel to think of mystical experience as a “mediated immediacy” thereby recognizing both the role of every spiritual influence on the human heart and the *immediate* quality of the experience itself. It may also be that if scripture, the sacraments of the church (ordinances in some Protestant churches), and the giftedness of contemplation were not considered as if they were somehow external objects to the Triune God, there would be far less occasion for debate. Clearly, the contemplative is more interested in meeting the Living God than engaging in a purely academic discussion, hearing a second-hand report, or listening to a mechanical reading of the minutes of a meeting.

I suggest that in exploring the question of spiritual experience and consciousness you read *Silent Music* by William Johnston, *Will and Spirit* by Gerald May, *Invitation to a Journey* by M. Robert Mullholland, and *God and You* by William Barry. Although William James’ book, *The Varieties of Religious Experiences*, detailing his research findings on religious experience is quite old, I have, nevertheless, chosen to use it as a model here. I do so because from the first time I read it many years ago, I thought it articulated my own personal experiences very well. So, based on James’ work I offer the following observations:

The most powerful mystical experiences, what some have called *oceanic feelings*, usually carry with them feelings of ecstasy, awe, wonder and reverence. Such experiences may even be frightening, but in a pleasant sense. The individual sees and feels the unity, power, beauty, truth, and love behind and in the universe. In some cases these feelings may not actually occur until the end of the experience. The experience itself is a simple being-at-one with God (1 Corinthians 6:17).

Such experiences are noetic, which means that they are experienced as a state of knowledge. It is not a knowledge that contradicts the facts or the truth already before the individual, but it gives the truth a new depth, clarity and significance. This is an experience in which Paul's enthused prayer in Ephesians 3:18, 19, seems to have a special answer: "That you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth, and length, and height, and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with the fullness of God."

A religious experience of this type has an ineffable quality to it; that is, it cannot be explained. So Peter spoke of our unutterable joy in the knowledge of Christ (1 Peter 1:8), and Paul asserted that spiritual things can only be understood by spiritual people. "All religions," said Tournier, "have had the sacred sense of the secrets of God, the esoteric. Great mystics, those who penetrate most deeply into the secrets of God, speak of them prudently, reservedly, and with difficulty. The greatest secrets are inexpressible. At times in the encounter with God, we have the impression of discovering life's secret, but we also sense that it is incommunicable."

Mystical experiences like this are also transient, lasting only a few seconds or at the most a few hours. Any attempt to analyse, appraise, or define what is happening will abort the experience. The experience itself transcends time so that its chronological length is irrelevant. Such spiritual experiences are so powerful that the man or woman who has them will believe that they make all of life worthwhile, even if they occur only two or three times in their lifetime. More important than any experience, however, is how we interpret and use it in our lives. My own opinion as to why they may occur only two or three times in life is that, since they are the means to an end and not the end, they are given when needed. The great Rhineland mystic, Meister Eckhart, thought that they were usually given at the beginning of our spiritual journey as a kind of "enticement" to seek the deeper life. What he said was so important that I quote him at length:

There is moreover, the effect or expression of love. It often appears like a bright light, as spirituality, devotion, or jubilation and yet, as such, it is by no means best! These things are not always due to love. Sometimes they come of having tasted nature's sweets. They can also be due to heavenly inspirations to the senses, and people at their best are not the ones who experience them most. For if such things are really due to God, he gives them to such people to bait and lure them on and also to keep them away from [worse] company. But when such people increase in love

such, [ecstatic] experiences will come less facilely, and the love that is in them will be proved by the constancy of their fidelity to God, without such enticements.

Supposing, however, that all such [experiences] were really of love, even then it would not be best. We ought to get over amusing ourselves with such raptures for the sake of that better love, and to accomplish through loving service what men most need, spiritually, socially, or physically. As I have often said, if a person were in such a rapturous state as St. Paul once entered, and he knew of a sick man who wanted a cup of soup, it would be far better to withdraw from the rapture for love's sake and serve him who is in need. -- *Meister Eckhart*, Translated by Raymond Blakney

In *He Touched Me: My Pilgrimage of Prayer*, John Powell offers three tests of authentic spiritual experience: (1) The time test: Even if the experience is not dramatic it will leave a permanent mark on the individual. There will be a permanent change. (2) The reality test: The soul touched by God will have a deeper awareness of the beauty and the sadness of the world. (3) The charity test: The person whose life has been touched by God will become more God-like. He or she will become more loving.

Saint Teresa of Avila had a wonderful metaphor. "The water is for the flowers," she said. The water, our experience of God in prayer, is for the flowers, the virtues in our life. Water is not drawn from the well for the sake of drawing water, but for the garden so that the plants will grow and thrive. Prayer is not done for the sake of experiencing good feelings, but so that a virtuous character will flourish – affection for others, joy and appreciation for life, serenity, commitment and loyalty, a sense of the basic holiness that permeates everyone and everything. Saint Teresa's metaphor is highly significant because much of our experience may be what has been called the experience of "desert spirituality." We may begin the life of prayer with many feelings and images of God. There is abundant water to be drawn from the well. But then everything, the well, our feelings and images, may begin to go dry until we come to know that God is beyond all images. Or to mix the metaphor somewhat, we cross a dry and trackless desert to an oasis where we discover God as living water – God as imageless life and love, God as more than words or thoughts. Saint Teresa's metaphor can help us to keep from abandoning prayer when the well runs dry; or, when we are in the middle of the desert.

Similarly, many contemplatives have spoken of the experience of the *dark night* journey. The *dark night* experience involves feelings of failure, loss, meaninglessness, and powerlessness. The Quaker writer and spiritual director, Sandra Cronk, says that the time of the *dark night* is most likely to be precipitated by one of three occasions in life: the extreme curtailment of human activity, when facing death, and inward preparation for ministry or mature Christian living. The *dark night* journey can be a painful experience, but one which can also lead to greater humility and trust in God. The Jewish scholar and spiritual teacher, Heschel, was correct in saying:

The way to prayer leads through *acts of wonder and radical amazement*. The illusion of total intelligibility, the indifference to the mystery that is everywhere, the foolishness of ultimate self-reliance are serious obstacles on the way. It is in moments of our being faced with the mystery of living and dying, of knowing and not knowing, of love and the inability of love – that we pray, *that we address ourselves to Him who is beyond the mystery*

From Abraham Joshua Heschel's *Quest for God*

As one who seeks to follow Jesus, my specific interest is obviously in the Christian experience of the poetic life – the spiritual life. There is considerable agreement here between theological conservatives and theological liberals that Christian spiritual experience is essentially an experience of God as Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or if you like Julian of Norwich's formulation better -- God the Maker, Lover, and Friend. In his book *Spiritual Direction and the Encounter With God*, William Barry, S.J. talks about an *Abba* or *Amma* experience of God. Barry says that such an experience has about it a sense of awe and mystery and a sense of being safe in that mystery. It is he says, analogous to being held safely, securely, and lovingly in a mother's or father's arms. This *Abba* or *Amma* experience is one instance in which we experience the Mystery itself as "Dear Father" or "Dear Mother."

When we contemplate Jesus in the gospels, Barry goes on, we encounter this very human Jewish rabbi as someone supremely attractive. Indeed, one may find that the beauty of Jesus not only draws us to Jesus, and stirs within us the desire to be like him, but also draws us into a deeper experience and relationship with the Mystery Jesus addressed as *Abba*. "Thus we do have experiences of Jesus as the Son of God in an absolutely unique way and that affirm a distinction within the One God."

In *God and You* Barry says that when we find the strength to go on when we feel terrified, without knowing where that strength came from; when we have a "light in the darkness" experience; when we respond to a dilemma, a crisis, or a verbal confrontation with a wisdom that we know is quite beyond us, we are experiencing God the Holy Spirit.

An academic theologian speaking of the distinctively Christian manner of experiencing God might say, "The Christian experience is the experience of God as the loving ground of all being." God is not, therefore, a being whose reality can be proven by syllogistic logic, but a loving reality to which we either become consciously alive – or we don't. In the introduction to *The Other Side of Silence*, the Episcopal priest and Jungian analyst Morton Kelsey, observed that the difference between Eastern religions and Christianity has to do with whether one sees ultimate reality as a Lover to which one responds or as a cosmic consciousness in which one seeks to lose identity. "It takes," he says, "an extraordinary amount of living and experience to decide between these deeply different views. A snap decision could be made only on the basis of prejudice or naiveté." Kelsey says that the most basic idea of the experience of Christian spirituality as a

spirituality of love and relationship is not given much consideration in either religious or secular circles. And Heshel points out that love and justice are not considered as essential realities of divinity in all religions.

The experience of real love for God cannot be described. It is too deep for words. It is beyond concepts. It is supraconceptual. It is the heart and mind at rest in the Infinite Mystery that is God. It involves the satisfaction of being wanted and the joy of belonging. In groping for words to express it we may lay hold of *gratitude, wonder, awe, beauty, longing, or contemplation* but it eludes the grasp of human speech. Love is communion, participation, or sharing. Love is self-giving. There is no clinging or grasping in love. Love is entirely for the sake of the other. The union of love is the highest meaning of Christian spirituality.

There are, then, many kinds of spiritual experiences. The truth is that everyone has spiritual experiences, and our practice of the disciplines will help sensitize us to them, create a space in which they can occur, or maybe better where we can discern their occurrence and meaning. But the most important of our experiences are not the dramatic or dazzling ones, but the simple awareness of God's love and presence in each moment, so that our consciousness, so that all of life, is qualitatively transformed.