

## A Beginner's Guide to Christian Mysticism

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A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

Too often when people hear the word “mysticism” they think of dark, occult secrets or those untouchable saints who never spill tomato soup on their white robes, but that's not what mysticism is about at all. *Mysticism is the pursuit of—or enjoyment of—union with God.* As Julian of Norwich put it, “Thus I saw God and sought God. I had God and failed to have God. And this is, and should be, what life is all about, as I see it” (34).

Every religious tradition has its varieties of mysticism. In some systems, such as Vedanta, Buddhism, or Taoism, divinity is depicted as impersonal, the effort involved in the mysticism is mostly related to *awareness* of an already existent unity.

In theistic traditions, however, such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or devotional Hinduism, where divinity is understood as a *person*, union may or may not be a given, but the mystical process is seen as involving the growth of *relationship* between a person and the divine. In these systems, the Divine is first and foremost interested in one thing: intimacy with the human soul, and the metaphors commonly found in such traditions are likewise intimate ones.

Of course, different writers have described very different ways that this embrace manifests itself. If mysticism is the pursuit or enjoyment of union with God, what form does this union take? For what end is God wooing us? Is the goal of mysticism a union of wills—to unite God's will with our will? Or is it a union in essence—a gradual or given identification, or identical-ness, the “us-ness” of God and the “godness” of us, and indeed, of the whole creation?

The early Christians insisted on a differentiation between our essence and God's, and saw the purpose of mysticism as the unification, or identity of our will with God's—that our wills be knit together, so that what God desires, we would desire, so as to bring about God's plans for the universe. Mystics generally fall into one of two varieties: *apophats* and *katophats*. These are Greek derived words that refer to whether or not images are used in contemplating the Divine.

Apophatic mystics favor the negative way in mysticism, believing, as Meister Eckhart put it, that “God is found through a process of subtraction.” Their mysticism, therefore is about shedding images of God until one is left with only silence, and no image at all. When Eckhart wrote, “I pray God would rid me of God for the sake of God,” this is what he means: he wants to get rid of his images of God so that he can encounter reality of God unmediated by mental abstractions and images.

Kataphatic mystics, on the other hand, believe that humans need images in order to approach great Mystery, since the unmediated Divinity is incomprehensible. Their experience of Divine communion is therefore one of *relationship*. They relate to God as *an other*, even though they know that ultimately, this is a false distinction. But due to the limits of human understanding, this is how it *seems*, and so this is how they approach God. These mystics speak of their relationship with God as a love affair, a marriage of their soul with God's Spirit.

In the chapters that follow, we will see three metaphors emerge again and again to describe union with God: 1) *birth* or rebirth—our own or the birth of the Word in us; 2) *deification*, the transmutation of our will or essence into that of God's (favored by apophats); 3) and *sacred marriage*, the erotic enfoldment of our will or nature into the divine (favored by kataphats).

### **AWAKENING**

Awakening is a minor miracle—sometimes dramatic, sometimes subtle, but usually it is just enough to make us go, "Whoa! What was that?" and start us searching in a direction we might not have gone, otherwise.

It is, in a sense, an experience of conversion, but not in the way we normally think about the word. For it is not a conversion to a set of doctrines or beliefs, but a conversion—a transformation, if you will—of one's very perception of reality.

The language of rebirth is useful, here. When we are born the first time it is into a world that revolves around ourselves. When we have an Awakening experience, we are born again, into a world in which the locus of importance is not located in the self, but elsewhere—in fact, everywhere. Awakening is a momentary flash of insight in which we are granted a glimpse of the universe not as we have always seen it before, but as God sees it.

I remember when this happened to me. While I was in college, I was struggling mightily with the fundamentalist teachings I had grown up with, and was terrified that God would reject me. At the time I was reading a lot of Anglican poets, theologians, and mystics. So on the day when a friend of mine said, "Let's go see what those Anglicans mean by church," I was primed for the experience.

Primed, maybe, but not ready. What I experienced that day when my friend Mike and I entered St. Michael's Episcopal Church changed me forever. First of all, I was blown away by the artwork. The church of my childhood had a deep distrust of art or beauty, especially when it comes to adorning worship spaces. My jaw dropped when I encountered the gothic sanctuary, covered with tapestries, icons, and statuary. I was especially struck by the enormous, gory crucifix staring down at me in all its agony. I was mesmerized by it all, and deeply moved.

But what really shook me was when the priest gave the call for communion. Although I cannot say why, I knew in that moment that I had found what I had been searching for all of my life. I raced for the communion rail and knelt.

And that's when it happened. I heard the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking to me. As the priest placed that wafer on my tongue, I felt a presence wash over me like an ocean wave, and I heard an audible voice, saying, "This is my mercy for you. It is real, you can feel it. You can taste it." In that moment I knew that I had not only not been rejected, I had been chosen. I had been called. I had glimpsed something of God that completely reoriented my life. I had been *awakened*.

It takes different forms for everyone, of course. For some it may be a half hour in which everything seems to glow with transcendent import. Or perhaps it a brief moment in which you seem to see right into people's souls, and feel such profound compassion for them the heart is like to burst. Perhaps a walk in the woods turns into a more sacred experience than any church service you've ever been to. Or perhaps, like me you are actually *in* church, and the voice of the Spirit whispers to you audibly in a way you cannot ignore or deny.

Such an experience can utterly undo a person. It can be disorienting, frightening, inspiring, and dangerous. In spiritual direction, we call it a Spiritual Emergency, and indeed people often trundle themselves off to the Emergency Room when it happens to them, because they sometimes feel like they are going crazy.

For some, they are glad when it passes, and they go, "Thank God *that's* over." And they go back to life as usual. And of course, for some people, it is not so dramatic. But whether the experience is subtle or intense, it often spells the beginning of the end—in a good way. Because in that glimpse they realize that the way they have been living has little meaning in the grand scheme of things, that they are not who they thought they were, and more than this, they are *hooked*. They've had a little taste of God, and they want more.

### **The End of the World As We Know It**

If you want to know spiritual growth, if you want to walk the mystic's path, be careful, and beware what you ask for. Because it will mean the end of the world. You may be singing with REM, "It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine" and indeed, you may be so drunk on divine ecstasy that you're lighting the flamer-thrower yourself, but your world will end, just the same. Be warned: Worlds do not end without tears.

But here is the comfort—the only things coming to an end are unreal things—nothing real is ending, only illusions of security, or competence, or grandeur. Everything that you thought you were, but that you are, in fact, *not* is called into question by this experience, and it can be both liberating and scary as hell.

The Awakening experience is actually very common. Some people run from it as far and as fast as they can. But those who are truly mystics, who embrace the experience, set their feet upon a path that has no end. There will be more hardships, sure, more worlds to end, you can be sure of that, but also joy and the greatest gift God can bestow upon a human being: the knowledge of our true selves, our true nature, an embrace of that image in which we were made.

The experience of Awakening is, in a way, an invitation to Judgment Day. For in this fleeting glimpse of capitol-R Reality, the true nature of our lives is revealed. In the few precious moments that the veil is drawn back we see the ultimate worth of our lives, and the relative meaninglessness with which we fill them.

### **PURGATION**

About ten years ago my wife Kate and I owned a sweet, but frankly stupid black cocker spaniel named Abigail. Abigail was one of those dogs who would eat absolutely anything small enough to get her teeth around, so keeping our house dog-proof was a constant challenge.

One day my friend Brent—who lives in Bulgaria—was coming for a visit. He was going to stay with us, but this was problematic for him because he is, let us say, *not* a dog person. He considers them messy and dirty, and so in order to make him feel more at home, Kate and I had actually hired a professional housecleaner to come in and give the place a good polish so that Brent would feel as comfortable as possible.

So imagine my surprise when, Brent in tow, I opened the door of our house and was met by the most noxious smell. I stepped in, and nearly killed myself slipping on our hardwood floor. The entire floor, it seemed, was covered with a greasy, filmy substance that reeked to high heaven.

I got my first clue as to what was up when I saw Abigail lying on her side with her tongue hanging out of her mouth, moaning like a goat in labor. Brent uttered a blasphemous expletive and exited the house, while I investigated further. It didn't take long to piece it all together.

The evening before, Kate had been deep-frying spring rolls, and had left the cast iron pot of used oil on the stove burner. When the housekeeper came in, she moved the pot of oil to the floor in order to gain access to stove, unwittingly giving Abigail access to a gallon and a half of yummy used oil. She drank every last drop of it, and over the next several hours, was thoughtful enough to oil our floors as it started leaking out the other end.

For the next several days, she was one sick puppy. She was also as cleaned out as it's possible for a dog to be, and live to tell the tale. She barely moved over the next seventy-two hours, and every now and then I went over to check that she was still breathing. She was, and I hoped that the experience gave her a smidgen of insight, but knowing Abbey, I tend to doubt it.

It was, to be sure, an experience of Purgation, and as Abbey found out the hard way, this is not always a pleasant experience. It is, however, if we are serious about walking the mystic’s path, necessary.

Like Abbey, we tend to be hungry for things that are not good for us—greedy for them, even. We consume without thinking, swayed by peer pressure and the media—which is just peer pressure writ large, after all—and by our own insecurities and our inexplicable inner longings. We consume because there is a place in us that feels empty, but very rarely do the things we try to fill that place with actually satisfy us. Like Abigail we eat and eat and eat—or we buy, buy, buy, or we work, work, work. But eventually such consumption will only make us ill.

Abigail had no choice but to excrete all she had consumed—and in such a thoughtful and convenient manner—and there was very little thought behind it. But with us, it is different.

In our last section we talked about Awakening, an experience that ushers us—however briefly—into the divine presence. It is often a profound and unsettling experience. But it is also an invitation. To borrow imagery from one of Jesus’ parables, in our Awakening experience, we have received our invitation to a wedding feast. We have a choice, are we going to go to this feast or not? If we decide to go, what next? Why, we take a bath, of course.

Purgation is the first step on the intentional path of Christian mysticism. Awakening is something that happens *to* us, but Purgation is something we set out to do. The invitation has been received, but we have to actually get up off our butts and get moving if we’re actually going to get anywhere.

It’s not a pretty sounding word—Purgation. It smacks of plumbing or unseemly bodily functions. Perhaps a more effective word these days might be cleansing.

If we want to be mystics, if we want to experience unity with God, then we, too, must consent to be cleaned out. We would not go to a wedding feast in dirty clothes, not because we can’t, but because it would be rude. But it is impossible to progress spiritually unless we allow ourselves to be cleansed.

### **Sin and Illusion**

The scene of Jesus cleansing the temple is one of the most arresting and troubling images in all of the Gospels. We hardly recognize the mild-mannered savior we’ve all come to know and love in this man who drives unsuspecting merchants with a whip, and turns over tables, creating panic and havoc. Wait, isn’t Jesus supposed to be forgiving, meek, gentle, and all of that?

This scene delights me precisely because it shows us a side of Jesus we don’t often see: a very human side that gets angry, goes a little out of control, and does things

that upon sober reflection, perhaps he ought not have done. It's a Jesus that I can relate to. But it's also a symbolic snapshot of what God is longing to do in all of us. The biggest difference is that I'm sure the moneychangers didn't consent to having their businesses tossed—God, however, wants our permission to bust our place up.

But he wants to do it just the same. Once again, even when we think symbolically, it's a strange image. Why would God want that? It's a violent scene, and it's scary to think that God has such violent feelings towards us.

The good news is that God's violent feelings aren't really about us—the bad news is he still wants to trash the place, and the place in question is our lives. He does want to shake it up—not just a little bit, a lot. What God is really up to is a huge spring cleaning.

Once we have our Awakening experience, and we get serious about wanting to follow the mystics path, we instantly come to the hard part—moral preparation. One way of looking at it is this: before God can live in us, we have to clean the guest room.

But clean it of—what? Sin? In my opinion, too much is made of sin, and at the same time, not enough. Christianity has done a terrible job in its teaching about sin, elevating sexual sins to a place of ultimate importance, and almost completely ignoring social sins such as our casual acceptance of hunger, disenfranchisement, or turning the mentally ill out onto the street.

For those of us who have been really wounded by over-moralistic versions of Christianity, however, the language of sin is not all that helpful. Another way of imaging it is in terms of reality and unreality. God can only really deal with what is real. So if we want to work with God, the unreal has to go. We must do the difficult work of separating the wheat from the chaff in our lives—gathering the wheat and burning the chaff—and discovering in the process what is really us and what is not, what is real, and what is illusory, and be willing to discard or cleanse from our lives everything that is not authentic.

In Hindu iconography, the goddess Kali appears as a horrific, violent deity with a flaming sword, a necklace of human skulls, and dancing on a corpse. And at the same time, she is the sweet and loving mother of the world. A contradiction? No, because her ferocity is directed only against illusion. Her violent action is always for our highest good. If you have ever seen a picture of Kali, I'm sure you'll agree that she's someone you want on *your* side.

Sin and illusion are not the only way of viewing the stuff that needs to go. In fact, what we need to be cleansed from is *anything that separates us from God*. And that's going to be different for different people. What separates me from God might not be a problem for you. For Antoinette Bourignon, a Flemish mystic in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a

single penny was enough to create a barrier between herself and God, but for others, wealth was not an obstacle, because it was simply not that important to them.

This is a matter for great discernment. And to help us make this discernment, the mystics recommend a little practice called Recollection.

### **The Practice of Recollection**

Recollection is the medieval Christian name for a practice that will probably be very familiar to you. We call it meditation. It is, essentially, sitting quietly before God. We are gathering together—re-collecting—our scattered attention, and focusing our whole awareness into a single point. It doesn't really matter what that point is—it can be the visual contemplation of a flower, it can be the repetition of a mantra, or the concentration on one's breath going in and out.

Like all meditation, it is hard work, but what does it do for us? How does this contribute to our Purgation?

When we sit in silence, it is revealed to us how very little we actually need, how little there is to actually be concerned about, and how very much our lives are dependent upon the love of God. In Recollection it is revealed to us how little of our obsessive consumption is necessary or helpful, and how much we need the love and companionship and care of God.

Recollection reveals to us what we can let go of, what our lives need to be purged of, in other words, how to be simple—for it is only when we are standing in our simplicity that we can progress to the next stage of mystical awareness.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Purgation starts with getting quiet. Hopefully this will not be as fraught with gastric distress as Abbey's "quiet period" after her unfortunate purgation, but you never know. Few children *like* being told they have to take a bath, or clean their rooms. Part of growing into spiritual maturity is being willing to do something even when it isn't pleasant.

### **Step One: Detachment**

In the classic book of Jewish mysticism, the *Zohar*, there is the story of how Abraham came to know the true God. He rose one morning, and saw the sun rising in the east. It instantly occurred to him that this great orb of light must be God. "This is the King that created me!" he cried, and he worshipped the sun all day.

Then, that same night, the sun went down and the moon rose in its place. Abraham's faith was shattered, and he said to himself, "This silver orb must rule over the golden one I worshipped all day, since the golden one was darkened before it and does not shine any more." So he prostrated himself to the moon and worshipped it all night.

Then, in the morning, he saw the darkness flee and the light growing in the east again, and he wept for joy, saying to himself, “Of course! There is a King who rules over all of these orbs!” and in that moment he gained knowledge of the true God and began to worship him aright.

What I like about this story is that no one is blaming Abraham for worshipping the wrong thing as God—it’s a process of trial and error, and he eventually finds his way around to the truth. Christian mysticism, unlike how many have depicted it, is a kindly process. I’m not saying it isn’t hard work, or that it isn’t painful, just that it isn’t inhuman. We make mistakes, we learn from them, we go on to make other mistakes, we learn from them, and eventually we find ourselves closer to God than we were before.

The important thing about this story is not that Abraham made mistakes—but that he *does* learn from them. He doesn’t cling to his mistakes, he doesn’t get hung up on the fact that he’s made them, or get down on himself for them, he just gets on with the task at hand. But more than that, he does not, out of some misdirected sense of pride, insist that he was right all along. He’s all excited about that sun, but he’s quick to discard it once the moon comes along, but he’s not attached to that moon, either. When a greater truth is revealed, he just as eagerly grabs onto that.

It’s a story paralleled in the story of Jesus’ baptism. People were eager to latch onto John the Baptist, and to proclaim him the Messiah, but he dissuaded them. “Don’t get attached to me!” he was saying, “another one is coming, and I’m not worthy to tie his shoes!” And sure enough, when Jesus gets there, he proves his messiah-ness by casting out those gnarly demons right out there in public. Once people had picked their jaws up off of the sidewalk, they said, “Seeya later, John”—or at least some of them did. Some of them continued to follow John, but more of them, like Abraham in the story from the Zohar, were able to recognize their error and chart a new course.

This is what the Purgative Way in Christian mysticism is asking us to do: to recognize that what we thought was God, what we thought was religion, what we thought was us, has all been an illusion. In our Awakening experience, we’re given a momentary glimpse of the Real, of the universe as it really is. Then we have a choice, are we going to ignore this new revelation, and pretend that everything is just as it has always been, or are we going to drop the pretenses we have been living with and chart a new course?

Through Recollection—meditation—we can glimpse more of this Real World. Awakening is like the sun that Abraham saw, Recollection is like the moon, leading him further and further toward Truth. The next step in our Purgative journey is Detachment, the ability to let both of those revelations go so that a deeper, truer view of God, the universe, and ourselves can emerge.

When we hear “Detachment” we think of the Buddhist attitude of letting go, and this is really a very similar idea to what the Christian mystics are trying to get at. In the



Gospel of Thomas, Jesus commands us to “Be passersby,” to not get too attached to things here in this life.

The Catholic tradition has long insisted on three arenas in which we must practice detachment: *poverty, chastity, and obedience*:

*Poverty* refers to the complete surrender of one’s goods, the conscious process of stripping away all those finite things that you unduly value—such as money or social position. (And you thought this was going to be easy!) *Chastity* refers to a complete surrender of your body, of all that you are, to God—a commitment to be God’s lover and to be faithful only to him. *Obedience* is the complete surrender of one’s will to the divine will, being willing to simply “go with the flow” regardless of what floats your way. These are actually three aspects to one act of surrender—of all that you have, all that you are, and all that you want—to God.

Why is this necessary? Because when Christ arrives, he cannot lodge in an Inn if there are no vacancies. As Meister Eckhart wrote, “There, where clinging to things ends, is where God begins to be. If a cask is to contain wine, you must first pour out the water. The cask must be bare and empty. Therefore, if you wish to receive divine joy and God, first pour out your clinging to things. Everything that is to receive must and ought to be empty” (Eckhart, 54). God cannot pour himself into a jar that is already full—it must first be emptied of all attachments, all selfhood, all desire, and all illusion—before it can be filled.

Why is this? Is it because God is a tyrant who does not want us to have any sense of self or pleasure? Far from it. God instead wants us to break through the illusion that there is anything that is not God. Poverty is easy, letting go of your ideas about who God is or what God wants—that’s hard. Face it, friends, none of us are Abraham—I’d probably have been worshipping that sun for a month or more before I got that whole moon thing.

This is not just a poverty of possessions we are being called to, but a poverty of the spirit as well. We must let go of the idea that we know anything, or that we have achieved any spiritual merit—for these are just as much illusions. As Nicholas of Cusa wrote, “It is therefore clear that all we know of truth is that the Absolute Truth, as it is, is beyond our grasp. The more mindfully we learn this lesson of ignorance, the closer we draw to truth itself” (Cusa, 63). Letting go of our privilege is just as much intellectual as it is physical, because for many of us our self-worth comes from what we know or what we have accomplished rather than from the things we have accumulated. These non-corporeal belongings must be surrendered, too.

By surrendering ourselves to detachment, we open ourselves to be stripped of everything that is not real: our possessions are not ours, if we cling to them, they must go. Our spouses are not our possessions, either. We have them for a time, and they are gone. Only God is with us forever. Our will is a fickle thing, only the will of God is constant—we must give up the idea that we know what we are doing. Finally,

even our ideas of what reality is, who God is, and who we are has to go. Everything illusory must be stripped away until the only thing left is what is Real—Real with a capitol "R."

### **Don't Panic—You Have to Be Ready**

By this time you might be thinking, "This is *way* too hard. I can't give up *everything*. How will I live?" Don't panic. The truth is that it is that hard and it isn't. The ironical part is that you don't have to give up any of it, so long as you're not attached to any of it. If you don't care at all for your family or your car or your job, you can keep them. Only those things that you value more than God, that will get in the way of total surrender to God must go. Chew on that one for a while.

This is what Jesus meant when he said that "anyone who did not hate his father and his mother is not worthy of me" (Luke 14:26). He doesn't really want you to hate anybody, including yourself. What he's asking you to do is to evaluate your priorities—anything that you value more than God will become an obstacle on this path and has to go. Everything that is in its proper place is fine.

But remember that this is a willing letting go. If you're not ready to let it go, don't let it go. Be where you are. God will meet you in whatever form you can grasp. It will be fine. But when you are ready, when you are able, when you are tired of living in Plato's cave with only shadow-puppets for your companions, when you are hungry for the real and harsh light of day, God will be ready and waiting. Step on out. But it will only be when you are ready, when you want it more than anything you can imagine.

In the Desert Fathers there is a wonderful story about some bandits who come to raid the cave of one of the hermits. They hold the old man at knife point and tell him, "We've come to take everything you own." He told them, "Take whatever you see." So they piled everything they could find on their donkey and went on their way. But they unknowingly left behind a little bag that had fallen behind a rock. The hermit, seeing the bag, picked it up and ran after them, shouting, "Hey, you forgot this!"

Scripture says, "God loves a cheerful giver," after all. So when you are ready to hand back to God everything you have ever known, and ready to do it with a smile, well, then we can get serious about this Detachment thing. Are you there yet? Don't worry—just like with Abraham, these things happen in little ways, and they occur to us almost naturally.

If you are serious about the spiritual path, if you are sincere, and you have brought your desire to God earnestly, then it is already underway. Quietly, slowly, in doses we can tolerate, God is revealing to us the unreality of our lives. We have only to decide whether we will cooperate with this slow process of revelation, whether we are willing to let go of the things in our lives that are not real once they are revealed to us. God is working on us all the time—usually we don't notice it. But he is. That's a comforting fact that you can trust.

Not all of us can let go of things as heroically as a Saint Francis or even a Martin Luther, but heroes are overrated. Fortunately, Jesus didn't come to call heroes, just normal folks like you and me—people who put their pants on one leg at a time, people who blaspheme when we slam our hand in the car door, people who love God as much as we can with the woundedness that we carry. Thanks be to God.

### **Step Two: Mortification**

The desert fathers and mothers emerged in the fourth century due to a completely unforeseen tragedy that rocked the fledgling Christian church. And just what was that tragedy, you might ask? According to some, it was the worst thing that could have possibly happened to the church, an event that effectively destroyed Christianity as they had known it. Have you guessed it yet? The tragedy was *acceptance*.

In one fell stroke, the Emperor Constantine took the embattled little church and made it legal, legit, and worst of all, *popular*. Suddenly gone were the intimate services held in people's homes by candle-light. Gone was the sense of danger and the specialness that comes when you alone are God's faithful people.

Suddenly, the bishops were moving from their hovels into palaces, trading their homespun for Roman finery. The services moved from house-churches to enormous government buildings, the basilicas. And not only that, they incorporated lots of elements from the mystery religions: let's show the bread, no let's hide the bread, let's play a shell game with the bread.

Nonsense! The old-time Christians shouted. All this stuff is nonsense! Where did our religion go? They felt like Constantine, in making their faith legal, had, in fact, stolen it away from them.

It forced them to do some heavy-duty discernment. It forced them to reevaluate their own lives. They had to ask what, in the way they were living, was congruent with the Truth they had received, and what was not.

In the end, their discernment complete, they left the cities—and Constantine's "new and improved" Christianity—behind. They sold their houses, gave the money to the poor, and took up residence in caves in the Egyptian desert.

It took a lot of guts to do that. They felt that they had received the Truth about what it meant to follow Jesus, and when another, new and shiny truth arrived, they rejected it and went to extreme measures to be faithful. They believed that God required a certain way of life from them, and when times got hard, they came through. They said "yes" to God—and not only did they do it with their lips, they did it with their lives.

A little girl named Mary did the same. When the angel appeared and told her what God had planned for her, it was not some kind of romantic, beautiful revelation, as we imagine from the safety of 2000 years remove from the event. In our imaginations, this event is seen through the gauzy haze of piety and religious romanticism, all of which is absurd.

Imagine that *you* are Mary, a thirteen-year-old girl, being told that you will bear a child out of wedlock, that you will shame your family forever, that your child will be a bastard, that every shred of safety and decency and respect is from this moment yanked away from you in a moment's notice. How do *you* respond?

I'll tell you, if Gabriel had come to me, which would have made for a miraculous birth indeed, I would have said, "Are you nuts? Find another incubator, smart guy, because I have plans." Which is, no doubt, why God chose Mary and not me to bear his son.

What amazes me, though, is the magnitude of what was being asked of her—the son of God was to be born in her, and to say yes to that would completely turn her life upside down.

And she said, "Yes." Amazing.

And yet, this is what God asks of all of us, in our own, unique ways. We have seen the things we cling to that are not real—so what? We must let go of them. Not just in our heads, but in our lives. The next step is changing how we actually *live*.

The mystics call this second stage of Purgation by an odd name: Mortification. Now, like you, when I hear this word I think of medieval processions filled with stringy-haired pilgrims whipping their own backs into bloody strips, and that is indeed one meaning of the word. But the mystics mean something more subtle—and infinitely more useful—than turning our own backs into hamburger.

Mortification means disciplining our lives so that they are congruent with the revelation of Reality we have discerned. Once we have seen what is true and what is false in our lives, the next step is to do something about it, to live differently, in a way that honors and conforms to Reality as we now understand it.

Now, this might mean something as dramatic as selling your house, leaving everything behind, and moving to the desert. But more likely it is going to be something more individual, more idiosyncratic. If you are a little girl named Mary, it might mean abandoning your dreams of having a normal, respectable life.

What might it mean for you? When the seed of God is planted in you, when you are given a glimpse of the Real, when you have seen what is essential and what is dross, how will *your* life change?

For now, perhaps it is enough to simply acknowledge that God wants to be born in you, will you consent, knowing that it might require changes you cannot even dream of right now? Will you say "Yes," or will you say, "Are you nuts?" Both are legitimate responses, and both are eminently justifiable. God, after all, is like the camel and the tent. Once the camel gets his nose in the tent, it is soon wearing the tent.

Just so, it's very hard to say "Yes" to God just a little bit. It's hard to say, "Yes, but just this far..." because that probably sounds a lot like "no" to God, who is not famous for His subtlety.

No, this mysticism thing is not safe, it is not something you can do in a controlled fashion. It's kind of an all or nothing thing. So maybe you're not ready yet. That's okay. But maybe you are. Remember that this road to God is not laid out in a straight line. We go through these stages again and again, and each time, God asks us to see as much as we can in the place where we're at, and to change as much as we are able. You may be ready for a lot of change, you may be ready for a little, but the question is, are you ready?

If you have seen that your life is out of sync with the mystical vision you have been given, what are you willing to do about it? You don't have to answer right now.

I remember as a child I used to imagine that God was a friend I could snuggle up to, and I used to scoot far to the edge of my single bed to make room for him. I have a much bigger bed, now, but I would like to think that I still make room for God—that I am willing to change how I live, how I act, even how I sleep, in order to be faithful to the Truth I have received. Not perfectly, of course, not every time, every day, not like Mary would have done, certainly, but sincerely, with all that is in me. Can you do the same?

### **Transition: Dark Night of the Senses**

When I was in my late teens, I experienced a traumatic abuse of power at the hands of my pastors, an experience that has shaped my religious life to the present day. They demanded absolute obedience of myself and my parents, and when my parents refused, my family was excommunicated from the church.

It shook me deeply, and precipitated a crisis of faith that took years to resolve. One of the results of this experience was an uncertainty about my very identity and purpose. My bedrock, after all, had been shattered. My reason for being, for living had been revealed to be untrustworthy, and I had no place to stand. I didn't know who I was or what I was here for. It threw me into a deep depression that reached its apex one night when I stood poised over the bathroom sink, sharp implement in hand, ready to end my own life.

Thank god some part of me heard wisdom, and convinced me to simply slink off to bed. But I still quiver when I think of how close I came to the brink that night. Fortunately, I was able to tell my parents about it, and they got me professional help

immediately. That truly saved my life, and I am grateful for the miracle of modern psychopharmacology. It might have permanently crippled my liver, but it saved my life, and that's the important thing. It certainly got me through this very early crisis. I described it at the time as a "dark night of the soul." I have had other difficult patches in my life, but as I look back on it now, this particular time was probably the worst I have ever experienced. I have certainly never felt lower than that, and have never been as close to ending it all.

I was clueless at the time, but the experience was lined with grace. It has given me a great deal of compassion towards others when they were in the midst of their own "dark nights." Anyone can say, "I've been there," but when you really have, it makes a difference. It's not something you can put on your pastor's resume, but it ought to be, because being present with people who are going through their own crises is an important part of what we do.

And there's a good deal of call for it. When we are in crisis, we tend to think that we are somehow unique, that no one has it as bad as we do. But the truth is, everyone in this room has been through their own dark nights. Sure, some of us have had a tougher time than others, but it doesn't help to compare whose is worst, like old Veterans on a Friday night at the VFW hall boasting of their war wounds. The fact is that pain and darkness and disillusionment is a part of everyone's life. It's no good pretending we aren't touched by it, but it is important how we cope with it.

Even Jesus wasn't immune. In his baptism, he underwent a horrific crisis of identity. Jesus comes to the Jordan river to be baptized, and what happens? A theophany happens. The heavens break open, the voice of God booms loud enough to cause avalanches in the Judaen hills, strange, luminous birds alight upon your head and everyone stares at you like you're from freakin' Mars. It's surreal. It's upsetting. And what's more, if you didn't already think you were some kind of supernatural freak, it could really mess with your sense of self.

Jesus is so shook by the experience that he high-tails it for solitude in the desert, and who can blame him? The Desert is another metaphor for the rough patches in our lives, and just as evocative in its way as the Dark Night.

I wouldn't be at all surprised to hear that you, too, have a similar story to tell. Most of us have had such difficult times in our lives. We often refer to them as Dark Nights of the Soul, as it is a term that has passed into common usage. It comes from St. John of the Cross, who was a Roman Catholic Carmelite monk in the 16th century in Spain. Thrown in prison for trying to reform the Carmelite order, he experienced his own significant Dark Night. And he wrote about it. His poem and commentary, *The Ascent of Mt. Carmel* is one of the great works of Christian mysticism (more about him, later).

It was in this poem that he first coined the term "the Dark Night of the Soul." In our culture it has come to mean any time of soul-searching trial, but St. John actually

meant something very specific by it. He talked of two distinct and very singular experiences, known as the Dark Night of the Senses and the Dark Night of the Spirit. Before we explore these very specific terms, I think it is important to acknowledge what the catch-all term, the "Dark Night of the Soul" has come to mean to us culturally, in common usage.

We are not here speaking of the technical term that St. John uses with surgical precision in his texts, but that doesn't mean that it isn't important. We tend to save this term for the worst of the worst, to describe those times that doesn't just upset us, but shakes us to our core, that makes us confront hard questions about our purpose and our identity. And even if they are not mystical experiences per se, such Dark Nights can act as a catalyst to move us closer to or further away from God.

And that is the thing to pay attention to, I think. When we are experiencing our Dark Nights, where does it leave us on the other side of these events? Leaning on God like never before, or with a sense of isolation and estrangement? A lot of it has to do with the degree of hopelessness we feel. For where we feel no hope, it is hard to muster any degree of faith.

When I am going through rough patches these days, it's easier to have hope if I can see an end to it. If I can just remember that the feelings I am having are not permanent, that feelings rise and fall, and that there is an end to them, it helps. Which is not to say that I shouldn't be feeling them. Or that you shouldn't. Or that anyone shouldn't.

We have this idea in our culture that difficult feelings are bad and that we shouldn't feel them, but I don't think that is true at all. Negative feelings are useful and important. It was a good and helpful thing for Jesus to go off into the Desert. In fact, he didn't just do it once, he was always taking off for some alone time in the hills. When bad things happen, it is only human, it is only right, it is only *good* to feel bad.

Especially when we have experienced crisis or loss. When someone you love dies, or perhaps when your own identity and sense of purpose or self has died, a little Desert time, a passage through the Dark Night is the most appropriate thing. But it's important to remember that we are only visiting, we are not there to stay. The Dark Night gives way to morning, the Desert eventually finds the sea. When we find ourselves in these place, the most important thing to do is to be in them as fully and completely as we can. When something we loved or trusted has died, the best thing we can possibly do is to grieve.

Grief is prolonged only if we seek to avoid it, or to push it out of consciousness. If we do that, it can dog us for the rest of our lives, and the Dark Night may never end. But if we can grieve consciously, deeply, and well, the Desert can do its work, the Dark Night can purify us in a way that is mysterious and profound.

Although we all have "Dark Night of the Soul" experiences, very few of us, unless we are serious about the mystical path, will experience the specific states for which St. John of the Cross invented the name. The first of these that we will encounter specifically as part of the mystical process is the Dark Night of the Senses.

### **The Dark Night of the Senses**

Long before the Jewish mystical system of Kabbalah was conceived, Jewish mystics practiced something called Merkobah mysticism. "Merkobah" is the Hebrew word for "chariot," and Jews of a mystical bent in the early centuries of the common era loved to speculate on the great chariot of God, symbolized by the sun. More than this, they believed that by hard work at specific mystical disciplines, they could gain access to the chariot, which would carry them into the heavens, reveal to them the secrets of the universe, and even usher them into the gates of paradise.

The most famous of the Merkobah mystics is Rabbi Akiva, and there is a tale told about him and three other rabbis that were attempting to storm the gates of heaven. All four of them were successful, but unfortunately, only Rabbi Akiva returned to tell the tale.

What happened to the other three, you might ask? One's mind snapped and he went stark raving mad, spending the rest of his life in restraints in a cell. Another of them, having accessed the throne room of God, beheld not one God, but two! Upon his return he was exiled as a heretic.

But the fourth rabbi is the one that we are most concerned with here. This rabbi gained entrance to paradise, and when he came back he simply lost all interest in anything else. Food had lost its flavor, study seemed empty, worship seemed rote. Even sex caused him to shrug his shoulders and go "eh..." which could not have pleased his wife. Nothing on this earthly plane could in any way compare to the glorious vision he beheld, and so he simply gave up on life. He stopped eating altogether, and eventually, he just wasted away and died.

What this unnamed Rabbi experienced was very similar to what St. John of the Cross in the Christian mystical tradition refers to as the Dark Night of the Senses.

The Dark Nights are kind of the wild cards of the mystical path. You never know when they're going to hit, or when they will lift. They are trickster stages, because they offer one thing on the surface, but actually impart something completely different. They are painful and hard, but the gifts they bring are pure grace. They're kind of like grape nuts—you don't really like it, but you have to eat it because it's good for you.

The Dark Night of the Senses usually hits around the time of a mystic's transition from Purgation to Illumination. Purgation, as we've discovered, can be really tough. But here's where the gift of the Dark Night of the Senses comes in. Here we are, knuckled under, working really hard to battle all of our temptations and stay on the



straight and narrow. And then, all of the sudden, *boom!* The Dark Night of the Senses descends upon us, and it is both a burden and a grace. It's a burden because, in this particular Dark Night, we, like Rabbi Akiva's companion, lose all interest in the things of this world. M&M's, who needs 'em? Steak? No, thanks. "Buffy the Vampire Slayer"? Nah...another time. Sex? Not in the mood, really. In fact, in the Dark Night of the Senses, *nothing* holds any appeal except prayer and maybe going to church.

It's kind of an extreme version of what Jesus is referring to when he says, "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will save it." The person who has seriously set out on the mystical path is ready and willing to make that exchange, even if it hasn't happened yet. The Dark Night of the Senses is the moment of surrender, when the old life we know is let go of, is lost, and the mystic is ushered into a new life, where the only thing that truly matters is God.

And that is why it is a grace. Because up to that point, it has been a struggle to let go of those sensuous things that we so much enjoy. But when the Dark Night hits, it eradicates every shred of temptation. It takes with it all of our craving. It is a grace because the struggle is suddenly gone. We are simply left face to face with God, and wanting nothing, nothing, nothing but that.

Even though it may come as a relief to someone who is seriously walking the mystics path, the Dark Night of the Senses is never a pleasant experience. *Apathia*, as it was sometimes called, is a diagnosable mental disorder, and we should be wary and concerned when it hits lest, like Rabbi Akiva's companion, we shrivel up and blow away.

### **ILLUMINATION**

In the short story, "The Shoddy Lands," C.S. Lewis plays himself—an English professor. A former student stops by his office to say hello, with his girlfriend in tow. While they are talking, Lewis drifts off momentarily, and finds himself in a very strange place—a very *shoddy* place, actually. The sky is gray, the streets are nondescript, and the shops are indistinct.

It looks very much like an impressionist painting rendered entirely void of color. And yet, much to his surprise, he is drawn to a patch of color. As he gets closer, he discovers it is a women's clothing store, where everything is bright, in crisp focus—a startling contrast to everything else in this shoddy world.

Then he sees *her*, the girlfriend. He recognizes her as *her*, but she's different. She's idealized, as if you crossed the real her with a fashion model. And she is, of course, full of color and detail.

With a start, Lewis is jolted back to his own world and realizes that, for just a second, he had fallen into his student's girlfriend's head, her consciousness, and saw

the world as she sees it. And he is—as indeed, we are supposed to be—appalled by the vanity and the superficiality, indeed, the *shoddiness* of her little world.

Ursula LeGuin has accused Lewis of being misogynistic in this tale—and even though it is true that Lewis has his misogynistic tendencies, I'm not sure that is a fair assessment of this story, because Lewis isn't making a statement about women with this story, but about people in general—indeed, about himself. We all have our shoddy lands. We all have interior worlds in which those things for which we have no interest are simply a blur. If you were able to drop into any one of our heads in a shopping mall, I wonder how many shops would be intelligible? Fewer than most of us would like to imagine, I'm sure.

But Lewis isn't just making a statement about human blinders, either. As always, he is concerned with issues of ultimate value. He is using a fictional analogy to point out to us how human limitation and human sin blind us to the brightness, the beauty, and the reality of the world as it appears to God.

This is the task of Christian mysticism—to point out to us how our view of the world is limited, and then to assist us in overcoming this limitation so that we might see the world as God sees it—including ourselves.

In the story of the Transfiguration, the disciples have the unnerving experience of having the veils pulled from their eyes, and beholding the glory-filled universe as it is. They see Jesus in his true glory, they see the mountain shining with the reflected glory of God, they see Moses and Elijah testifying about Jesus' ministry.

These are Jesus' closest disciples, who have already left everything behind to follow their Lord. They have worked hard to strip away their illusions and false conceptions. They have come to the top of Mt. Tabor to pray, and in the silence, the glory of the world is revealed to them.

This is the third step in our spiritual journey, Illumination, in which we are graced with increasingly longer glimpses of the World-As-It-Is, the world as God beholds it. The world that the disciples behold is the same one we are living in now. It is a transfigured world, shining with glory, brimming with divinity, touching, fulfilling, sustaining and loving all things. The only problem is, we don't see it. And the reason we don't see it is that we are living in our own Shoddy Lands.

And yet, we do not have to stay there. Indeed, the call of God is that we all go to the Mt. Tabor, we would all commit to the arduous process of Purgation, that we would all cleanse the doors of our perception, as Aldus Huxley phrased it.

What would we find if we did? Unfortunately, this is ineffable. Words cannot begin to describe the spiritual reality that is shining through the most mundane objects at every moment. Fortunately for us, that didn't stop the mystics from trying. It is the

Illuminative state that the mystics spend most of their time, and waste most of their ink, trying to describe.

We'll go into more detail about how Illumination manifests itself later, but for now, let us simply say that the dualism that seems to drive our world—the distinctions between us and them, you and me, matter and spirit—are, in the Illuminated state, revealed to be the illusions that they are. All things are revealed to be pulsing with the life that fires the stars. All people are revealed to be the lovers, the spouses, the sweethearts of God. We ourselves are revealed to be worthy of more love than we dare ever to hope for ourselves.

### **Step One: Beholding the Illuminated World**

The disciples did not seek Jesus out. Instead, he went out to find *them*. And Jesus doesn't meet the disciples in holy, rarified places like the desert. He meets them at work, in the midst of their daily lives. He meets them while they are casting their nets, sorting their fish, resting under fig trees. He meets them not in the temple, but in the most ordinary surroundings.

The Good News of Jesus is that God is not aloof. God is not only to be found on the mountaintop or in the cathedral. In Jesus we meet Emmanuel, the God-who-is-with-us, in the warp and woof of our ordinary, everyday lives. It is only to those who have never experienced it that mysticism seems a rare and exotic kind of spirituality, full of occult mystery, dependent upon secret initiations in consecrated sanctuaries.

True mystics know that just the opposite is the case, that, as Mohammad revealed in the Koran, God is closer to us than the vein of our own neck; that it is not only in the temples and the sanctuaries that God becomes present to us, but in the rearing of children, in the commute to work, in the washing of dishes, in the cuddling of spouses. For if God is not real to us in our actual lives, where we actually live, then what good is God to us?

The choice before us is not one of vocation, of choosing to be a monk or a nun, or some other kind of religious professional who lives in the temple or the sanctuary in order to be close to God, but whether we will make the effort, in the midst of our busy, conflicted, confusing lives to notice that God is there, too.

And it *is* effort. All real spiritual endeavors require something of us. But the returns are enormous, giving us back far more than we put into it. This is where Brother Lawrence's example is so helpful. For he isn't advocating some strenuous method of meditation, or some subtle and incomprehensible system of spiritual correspondences as occult traditions so often do. He is recommending something much simpler, much more reliable, something that you don't need to be a full-timer or need a PhD in philosophy to grasp.

He says this: Pretend like God is there, and God will show up. Whatever you're doing, stop and notice that you are not alone. Talk to God about how you are feeling,

even if you're feeling lousy, and not in churchy, prayer-ific language—nobody talks like that. Just talk, as if you were griping to your sister about something. Lawrence says that something amazing will happen if you do.

God will show up. And the more you are able to do this, the *more* God will show up, until you are aware of God's presence in every moment, in every activity—shining forth from the person you just said "hi" to, radiating from the table you are sitting at, filling that donut you're noshing like divinity jelly.

You will not just become aware of God sometimes, in some things, but you will become aware that God is present at *all* times, shining forth from *all* things, filling every moment, every person, every place you happen to be in. You will see the world as it actually is, "charged with the grandeur of God," as Gerard Manly Hopkins put it.

The more we can do this, the more our lives will be transformed, because the illusion that we are separate beings, that God is away out there somewhere, that life is a meaningless succession of disconnected events will be increasingly shattered as we experience first hand, for ourselves, that our life is God's life, that our work is God's work, that the people we love reflect back to us the very love of God, not just sometimes, but all the time, not just in some places but in all places, not just some people but *all* people.

We are constantly seduced in our culture, by the media, to be drawn to glamorous surroundings, model-beautiful people, and high-powered jobs, but this is the very illusion that needs shattering if we are ever to progress on the mystical path. We could do a lot worse than simply doing the dishes. Because if we do it right, if we do it with prayer, if we do it with intention, we will not be able to contain the power and the glory that will fill us.

### **The Practice of Quiet & Depravation**

As I was researching this section, I dimly remembered a story from *The Phantom Tollbooth*, the marvelous children's book by Norton Juster. As I remembered it, the boy Milo and the watchdog Tock were sitting in Milo's toy car, all ready to go, but the car wasn't moving. The boy and the dog discussed the car's lifelessness, but neither of them could think of a way to make it go. Having exhausted all of the possibilities they fell silent, and only then did the car begin to move. "Of course," Tock exclaimed, "it goes without saying."

Our spiritual lives are very much the same. The state of Illumination is certainly reachable by anyone who sets their mind to it and is sincere. But it's not as simple as just *wanting* to. Purgation, if you recall, was a lot of work, and reaching Illumination is no piece of cake, either, but it requires a very different kind of effort.

The discipline involved in Purgation was a moral discipline—eliminating those behaviors and possessions from our lives that were not congruent with the Real. In

Illumination, we achieve the first stage by eliminating something else—all of those *thoughts* that are not congruent with the Real. And since all thoughts, and language-making in general, are products of the illusion of our separateness, this means that what has to go is *thought itself*.

The discipline by which we approach the Illuminated World is called by the mystics "Quiet," and we'll spend the next few pages exploring its implications and sub-stages. The important thing for us to remember right now, however, is that no awareness of God in All Things is likely to occur to us unless we can become quiet enough to notice it.

This is a profoundly counter-cultural act. Quiet is hard for us. Most of us fight tooth and nail to avoid it. We have the radio on in the car, the stereo on in the house, or the television, or the internet. We find the silences between people almost unbearable and we feel impelled to make inane small talk rather than endure it. We are assaulted by the media with flashy images and noise in an incessant barrage that succeeds in distracting us in an obsessive, constant stream of information overload. And if the media isn't chattering away at us, if our neighbor isn't chatting away at us, then our own brains are chattering away at us with an incessant stream of judgment and commentary.

Which is fine, except that it *is* incessant. I mean, I love a good action movie as much as the next red-blooded American guy, and I don't see anything wrong with loud music or MTV, or, for heaven's sake, critical thinking. *But*, there is that little thing called "moderation" to take into account, and that is something our culture has trouble with—and consequently many of us have trouble with it, too.

As a matter of fact, when I went back to *The Phantom Tollbooth* to look up the story that I remembered, I was horrified to find that it wasn't there. Instead, the car refused to move because Milo *wasn't thinking*. And as soon as he started thinking, the car started on down the road. Which is a fine metaphor all by itself, but I thought it particularly poignant in contrast to the way I had remembered it, and I realized that my false memory held more wisdom for me than the actual story. *Thinking* I do well enough, and more than enough of. What I *need* is to take a break from it, now and then.

Because as long as I am *thinking*, as long as my brain is chattering away at me, or someone else is chattering away at me, or the media is chattering away at me, I am *not present* to what is actually happening around me. Most importantly, I am not aware that *God is present*.

God's presence is a subtle thing—it is real and profound, but it requires silence in order to discern. The reason most of us are not aware of God in our everyday lives is that we have made no room for him. If there is always a loud voice chattering away at us, we cannot hear the still, small voice that whispers to us, "I am here. You are

loved. All is well." And I'm sure you don't need me to tell you how wonderful it would be to hear those words now and again.

In our scripture reading today, the Psalmist knows this truth. "For God alone my soul waits in silence." That's the way you do it. That is how all of the great mystics became aware of God's unfailing presence. For when the Psalmist achieves this quiet, when he becomes aware of the Holy One, look at what he says about the experience. He perceives God as his rock, his salvation, his fortress, which will make him unshakable.

That is the language of certainty, and it does not come through speculation or blind faith. It comes from a real and direct experience of the Holy, achieved only through the willingness and the ability to shut up long enough to notice that that Rock is even there.

This is a tough one even for those studying to be spiritual directors to get. When I am teaching spiritual direction classes I am constantly reminding my students that they must not go into a session with a plan, with any idea of what they are going to do, or they are likely to upset what God actually *is* trying to do.

"But," they complain, "what if the client doesn't say anything?"

"Then you sit in silence," I tell them, at which point they look at me like I have completely lost my mind.

"But if we're just sitting in silence, I'm not doing anything!" They say.

"Exactly," I reply. "God is doing the work, here. You're just holding space." I then explain to them that silence may be exactly the thing their client most needs. As I said, our culture doesn't encourage silence. To sit with another soul, giving them permission to simply sit in silence isn't irresponsible, as my students fear, it is, in fact, *ministry*.

People often come to spiritual direction because they are having trouble connecting to God. Usually people have trouble connecting to God because they do not take space in their lives for Quiet, the quiet needed to even notice God. So, when they come for spiritual direction, sometimes we just sit in silence. And there, in the presence of another person, they feel they have permission to just do nothing, to discern, to observe their own soul, to hear the subtle whisper of the Holy Spirit.

I experienced this myself recently. This past week it seemed that everything that could go wrong did go wrong. My internet connection went down, we're having a flea infestation at my house, my laptop battery keeps dying, none of which is insurmountable. But add to this a full week of pastoral visits and spiritual direction, a reading load from the new semester starting up, preparing for two classes this

week, clients standing me up, and a backup of writing and editing projects, and you can see how I might start to buckle under the overwhelm.

I was laying in the bathtub whimpering about it all, in fact, when it occurred to me that I felt utterly alone in the face of this insurmountable load. I felt like someone cut a hole in the sky and sucked God and everything sacred right out of the world. Once I was able to articulate that, I realized that God had not, in fact, been vacuumed out of the universe, thank goodness. I was just too busy to notice that He was there.

I felt my whole body relax at this realization. I realized that I didn't have too much to do—I always have a lot of projects going. The problem was I was *too busy*, which is a different thing altogether. Once I realized that if I just stopped and noticed, made some room for Quiet, for God, that everything shifted. As I relaxed, as I sank into Quiet, God showed up again. "For God alone my soul waits in silence," and the Lord was there. And then everything else seemed to fall into place, too. My overwhelm subsided, and my calm returned. There was still a lot to do, but I no longer felt hopeless. There was, after all, still hope and love in the world.

The mystics call this stage of Quiet "Depravation," and they describe it as a kind of death. And it is. It is death to the constant, obsessive busy-ness our culture insists upon. It is death to the illusion of the solitary soul. For when we wait in silence upon God, no matter how bad things seem, no matter how far away God seems to be, no matter how devoid of anything even remotely sacred the world seems, this silence brings with it a healing balm, an awareness of the "goodness, deep down things," as Hopkins put it, an awareness of the presence of the Holy, whispering to us, if only we will listen, that "all is well, all is well, and every manner of thing will be well."

### **Step Two: Beholding the World-in-God**

At dinner the other night, a friend remarked disparagingly, "That Elaine Pagels seems to think that the Gnostics were the original Christians!" I instantly rose to her defense, because, well, the truth is, I've had a crush on her since I was in High School. Elaine Pagels is, as many of you know, professor of Religion at Princeton University and the author of the best-selling *The Gnostic Gospels*.

Which isn't to say I have no critiques of Elly, as I like to call her, in my boyish fantasies. She presents the Gnostics as the warm and fuzzy, misunderstood underdogs of the early Christian era, which might be great for book sales, but doesn't really accurately reflect the nature of Gnostic Christianity. Christian Gnosticism, in fact, presents a vision of an extremely dualistic universe in which God is evil, the flesh is corrupt, and the world is a dark and dangerous place. Only the spiritual world has any value and the best we can hope for is to get free of these mortal bonds and escape into the Mystic, as Van Morrison put it.

In their system, humans are the creation of an inept and, in some writings, horribly malevolent deity, who creates the world, and then fashions Adam and Eve, bringing them to life for the sole purpose of keeping them imprisoned on this earth for

countless rounds of reincarnation and servitude. His mother—yes, the Creator has a mommy in this story, so it *does* get better—takes pity on Adam and Eve and places within them a spark of true divinity. It is this spark that has its home in the pure, spiritual world, and it is this spark that longs so desperately to escape the world, and the flesh.

It's a bleak picture, mitigated only by the fact that there is this bit of a more True and Holy God residing in all of us, spurring us to be more spiritual and less worldly. Unfortunately, many aspects of this curious theology actually infected the church, largely through the teaching of St. Augustine who spent eleven years as a Gnostic before becoming a Catholic Christian. It is from this Gnostic stream of thought that we get these crazy dualistic notions that the spirit is better than the body, heaven more important than the earth, men superior to women. In fact, I would venture to say that most of the things that drive us crazy about Christianity today have their origin, not in the teachings of Jesus, but in the philosophy of the Gnostics.

But then comes the Valentinians to be the exceptions that prove the rule. If Elly were just writing about the Valentinians, she'd be spot on. The Valentinian Gnostics were those who followed the third-century teacher Valentinus, who put a major twist on the whole Gnostic cosmology. He taught that, far from the world being a separate, dualistic, misbegotten place, it, too, was enveloped within the One Who Is, the True God in whom all things live and move and have their being.

The Valentinian system was a unitive mystical cosmology, in which there was only one thing in the universe, which is, of course, God, and that all that exists within the womblike embrace of that One. And this universe? Valentinus taught that the Creator God was indeed misguided, and that his misguided actions had resulted in a seeming pocket of duality within the True God. But this pocket is just an illusion, and anyone who sees through the illusion would be free of its power. Not a bad twist, eh? Valentinus came this close to becoming Pope—wouldn't *that* have sent the Christian church off on a different trajectory?

So which is it? Is this world separate from God, a place into which God shows up as an interloper, as sparks inhabiting otherwise worthless bits of matter? Or are all things, in fact, bits of God, floating about in an ocean of divinity? These two conflicting worldviews, as evidenced by these two different kinds of Gnostics, keep showing up in mystical thought.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus frequently walks *into* a scene, works his healing magic, and then leaves. He is the image of God, like a spark of divinity, entering into a sick and dark place and bringing a bit of light and healing. But in the story of the paralyzed man, we see a symbol of something much more profound. Jesus is filling a house with his teaching, and several men, moved by their faith and love of their paralyzed friend, cut a hole in the roof and lower their friend into the space where Jesus is holding forth. The paralytic man is like the world, not separate from the



sacred place, but waking up to find himself within it, part of it, enveloped by it, and this very realization brings with it healing and salvation.

This is the very shift that awaits us in the last stage of mystical attainment of the Illuminative Way. We have worked hard to cleanse ourselves of all that is unreal in the Purgative Stages, and in the Illuminative Stages we have opened ourselves to increasing awareness of God's Presence in the world. Through the practice of Quiet we have experienced the Depravation of the Senses, becoming still enough to notice that God is there. And as we continued in this practice we experienced an acquisition: the Birth of the Word in the Soul.

This birth ushers us into a new plane of perception, in which everything we have known is turned inside out. For it is in this final stage of Illumination that we realize that God is not in the world, but that the world is *in God*. Divinity does not come into some dark and dire place as an interloper, but reveals to us that, in fact, there are no dark and dire places. All appearances to the contrary, in this stage we finally break through these illusions of separateness, and see that there are no places, no creatures, no people that are separate from God. All is enveloped in God, all are swimming in God, just as fish are swimming in the ocean.

This awareness has profound implications. As Mechtilde of Magdeburg said, "the day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw—and knew that I saw—all things in God and God in all things." Awakening to this reality can have powerful consequences. If all things are in God, then is anyone truly beyond redemption? If all things are in God, can anything truly be said to be unclean? If all things are in God, are there any truly evil people? If all things are in God, can suffering or hypocrisy or cruelty or illness every truly prevail?

Consider the story of the paralyzed man from the Gospel of Mark: *Then some people\* came, bringing to him a paralysed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" At once Jesus...said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? ...He said to the paralytic, "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"—Mark 2:3-12*

In this story, Jesus is not the interloper, entering a sin-sick world and forgiving a man here, a woman there in piecemeal fashion. The way I read this passage, Jesus isn't forgiving anyone anything. He is simply telling the man the truth: "Your sins are forgiven you." God holds nothing against you, never has, never will. God doesn't hold

anything against anybody. Never has, never will. The only one keeping you on that mat of yours is *you*. Healing, forgiveness and grace are not precious commodities handed out sparingly to the worthy. They are as plentiful as the water in the ocean. They are the very waves in the ocean of God that we swim in. If you were but aware of it, and if you aren't careful, you could drown in grace. It's that plentiful. It's that free.

*That's* the Good News. Nothing short of that is. But knowing that intellectually, and experiencing that for oneself, well that's the hard part. That is the difference between *studying* mysticism, and *being* a mystic. I'm sure it pleases God that we are studying mysticism, but I think it would send him into handstands, into spasms of pleasure of ice-cream magnitude if we actually *tried* it.

Because we *can* begin to see all things in God. But it's not easy to stay in this awareness. The next time we hit our thumb with the hammer, or get jammed up by an erroneous bank statement, or are spoken to rudely by a passing stranger, it serves to jolt us right out of the place of peace we have worked so hard to achieve. But these times of frustration and rage are exactly the times when we need most of all to *see* all things in God. For then their power over us is revealed to be the illusion that it is, and their power to disrupt our peace is undone. Stress and anger can make us lame. But in the Illuminative state we have been lowered into a world filled with God, and Jesus says to us, "Get up and walk." We can, you know.

### **The Practice of Quiet & Acquisition**

On August 29, 1952, pianist David Tudor took the stage at a recital of contemporary piano music. Dressed smartly in a black tuxedo, he opened the keyboard lid, and began...doing nothing. He sat there in complete silence for a minute or so, then closed the piano lid. Then he turned the page on his score, and opened the lid again. Again, he just sat there. After another minute or so he closed the piano lid and turned another page on the score. He opened the piano a third time, and once again, sat quietly, not touching the piano at all, only looking at a stopwatch he was holding in his hand. Finally, he closed the lid, stood to face the audience, bowed, and walked off stage.

The audience was stunned. Some of them spluttered in indignation. Some scoffed. Some laughed nervously. And some of them smiled knowingly. In other words, some of them got it, and some of them didn't.

I am, of course, recounting the story of the first performance of one of the most famous compositions in 20th century experimental music, John Cage's 4'33". The point of the thing, according to those who study such things, is that because the performer is making no sound, the audience becomes aware of the profound *amount* of sound that is always there: the rustling of programs, the whine of wind, the clearing of throats, the creak of chairs--an undiscovered symphony that is always there, is always different, but which is almost always unnoticed. But in the space set

aside for simply listening, these random noises become elevated, for those who have ears to hear, to a work of art in their own right.

Note that the audience has to become quiet to receive the grace of such art, however, and that only some of them are prepared to receive it, and so only some of them even *perceive* it as art. The others laugh, and why not? It *is* kind of silly, and no harm is done by laughing. But for those who are ready for it, a work of art such as this can be life changing, because afterwards no alleged "silence" will ever sound the same again. The transformed listener will forever after be attuned to the serendipitous symphony of every quiet moment.

I'm not sure what the Christian mystics would have made of Cage's premiere, but they certainly do have something to say about the serendipitous grace communicated by silence. In the practice of Depravation (which we just spoke about above) we pursue a strangely paradoxical effort—we are working really hard to do as little as possible. It is an *active* pursuit, made by being assiduously *inactive*.

(A note to the wise: this is religion we are talking about here. Paradox is the norm, and it is always far weirder than the general culture will ever admit. You go forward by going backwards, when you are weak, you are strong, if you want to be straight, you have to let yourself be crooked, and so on and so on. None of it makes any *logical* sense at all, so just give up on that, right now.)

You work really hard at doing nothing to achieve Depravation, and then what? In Depravation, *you* do something, but in the very next step, something happens *to you*.

In fact, the whole model of spiritual growth to this point is kind of like walking up a big, steep hill. It's work all the way, but it is at this point that we reach the tipping point. In some ways, it is all downhill from here. From here on out, mysticism is more of a passive pursuit than an active one. From here on out, things happen *to* you, rather than you *doing* them.

Okay, that's not entirely true, just as it's not entirely true that there are no passive graces to be gained in the first half of our journey. Of course there are, or we would never keep going. Just so, there are efforts to be made on the second half of the journey, but the balance between active and passive pursuit certainly tips at this point. There is, from this point on, far more receiving than working.

And so Depravation gets us to the top of this hill, and give us a little push. What's on the other side? The mystics call it The Birth of the Word in the Soul. And it is as profound as it sounds.

Depravation sets us up to receive this boon by stilling us right to our very core. Just as we discovered that when we are busy in our outer life we are unaware of God's Presence there, we also discover that as we move inward, into more intimate and interior landscapes of our soul, we are unquiet there as well, and just as unable to

notice God. The innermost soul, too, must be quieted. Once that is complete, and only then, is our soul quiet enough to hear the Word that God speaks into our innermost being.

And just as God, in Genesis, spoke the universe into being, when we are quiet enough to hear his whisper in our deepest and most inward part, the mystics testify that he will speak a new creation in us. And just as in the beginning the Word of God spoke order into chaos, even so the Spirit of the Living God speaks a new and profound order into us.

For this Word creates in us a new being. We become like Mary, who, in the stillness of her room acquiesced to the Spirit, and the Word of God became incarnate in her. Just so the Seed of God is planted in us and we become a new creature. We are, to use the words of St. John's Gospel, born again. But not in the crass way that we have come to hear those words, but in the most profound way possible, for in that tender moment between our soul and the Spirit of God, Christ is born in us.

And in that moment, we, too, become the mothers of God. In that moment, God unites himself with our souls forever. It's true that we do not yet, at this point, fully understand the implications or the magnitude of such union—that will happen in future stages in our journey—but we do know that some profound shift has occurred, that we do not understand and cannot fully articulate.

Even the mystics struggle with this one. The Birth of the Word in the Soul is a metaphor, of course, but it points to something real—the beginning of a period of spiritual gestation in which the Word of God, Christ himself, begins to grow in us. Like Mary's body during her pregnancy, as her bones and body fat shifted, as her flesh rearranged itself to nurture and protect the new life stirring within her, so will it be with us. The Word of God has been spoken, the Seed of God has been planted, and our lives will inevitably begin to shift to make this birth possible.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. It is enough today to rejoice in this divine fertilization. For when it happens to us, when the Word of God is spoken in the temple of our souls, we cry out like Simeon, "Lord, you now have set your servant free, to go in peace as you have promised, for mine eyes have seen the savior, whom you have prepared for all the world to see."

Profound things happen then. Remember that it was only when Mohammed found his place of quiet meditating in the cave at the top of Mt. Hira that the Word of God was spoken in his soul, a Word that changed the world forever. I'm not saying that if you find your place of Quiet that a Word as influential as the Koran will be born, but you never know, it might. For as some of the listeners to John Cage's experimental piano concerto discovered on one muggy summer night in 1952, there is profound music in silence, for those who have ears to hear it.

**Transition: Dark Night of the Spirit**

*He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. —1 Kings 19:11-12*

In the First Book of Kings we read the story of Elijah and his dramatic contest with the prophets of Baal. If you will recall, Elijah built a pyre and Baal's prophets built a pyre and then they both prayed for fire. Baal's prophets cut themselves and prayed loudly and long, to no effect. Then Elijah stands up, says a short prayer, and fire consumed both his pyre and the one belonging to Baal. Then Elijah went on a murderous rampage and hacked over a hundred of Baal's prophets to bits with his sword.

Now, I'm not sure why 100-plus able-bodied prophets stood by amiably while one elderly lunatic with a scimitar hacked through the lot of them—maybe they were simply paralyzed with shame at having lost the contest, who knows?

What really concerns us is what happened next. Queen Jezebel, having heard that her kingdom was suddenly and inexplicably facing a horrific shortage of clergy, ordered up Elijah's head on a platter. Finally terrified of something, Elijah fled for his life into the wilderness.

It was a very dark time in Elijah's life. The Bible says that he hid out in a cave, when something prompted him to go out and stand on a mountain. While he was standing there, a great wind rushed by, so great that it split the mountains and broke rocks into pieces, but, the scripture says, "God was not in the wind. And after the wind there was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake there was a fire. But God was not in the fire."

Now, most English translations follow the King James and report that after the fire, Elijah heard a still, small voice, but the Hebrew does not actually say that. Probably the Jacobian translators were trying to soften a very grim passage, because what it actually says is "and after the fire there came a sound of sheer silence." It then relates that at the sound of this—or rather, at the absence of any sound—Elijah wrapped his face in his mantle.

It may be that the Jacobian translators considered it pastorally irresponsible for the people to think that God would abandon someone as powerfully connected, spiritually, as Elijah. Hacking away at a hundred prophets of another religion, no problem, but that God might abandon one of his chosen? Surely a little massaging of the text is in order. In the Jacobean reworking, Elijah hides his face in his cloak because he is awed before the Lord. But in the literal rendering, Elijah hides his face out of despair. Powerful people are trying to kill him—not without good reason,

mind you—and God has led him into the wilderness, and abandoned him there. You'd be bummed, too.

I can understand why the Jacobean translators would want to gloss over this. It's a terrible part of the story. It's natural to want to protect people from this kind of despair, to want the scriptures to be "faith-promoting" as the Mormons like to say, not "faith-challenging." But as beautiful as the King James rendering is, it isn't doing anyone any favors, because what happened to Elijah is, in fact, a very, very common occurrence.

Which might prompt you to exclaim, "If this is how God treats his friends, I wonder what happens to his enemies?" At which point I would remind you about the hacking with swords bit. But yes, the point is well taken—so to speak—abandonment *is* how God treats his friends. And not just his acquaintances, this is how he treats his *best* friends.

In our walking the mystics' path, we have been through the trials of Purgation, passed through the ambivalently uncomfortable Dark Night of the Senses, enjoyed the joys and triumphs of Illumination, seeing all things in God and God in all things, but apparently, that is as far as we can go without smacking our noggins on the Dark Night of the Spirit. And this Dark Night is, you guessed it, the place where those of us who have worked the hardest, sacrificed the most, and loved the most passionately, are left utterly alone.

Exactly like some deadbeat Dad who impregnates us with the Word, and then says, "I'm out of here," in the Dark Night of the Spirit, God is just gone. The mystics tell us that in this stage God simply removes himself from the scene. And those who have given up everything for him, who have themselves abandoned all other pleasures, all other means of support, and sometimes even forsaken the love and comfort of other people, are left with what? As scripture tells us, "the sound of sheer silence."

What could possibly be the meaning, the purpose, of such abusive treatment? Why in the world would God string us along so far, demand so much, and then just dump us? Of course, it feels terrible, but it is not as bad as it feels. The mystics tell us that this is a necessary step on the way to full Union. It is a horrendously painful step, yes, but necessary just the same. Why?

Think about it for a moment. So long as I am relating to God as an "other" and someone who I can perceive as "here" or "not here" I am still tied up in an illusion of duality. As long as I can even conceive of "God" then I am still worshipping a metaphor, an idol. God needs to move us beyond images and idols, beyond subject and object, beyond dualities of darkness and light. So in order for that to happen, God winks out of existence, so far as the mystic is concerned.

Now remember, the mystic has worked hard to eradicate everything that is illusory. But no matter how hard he or she has worked, there are still vestiges of it

remaining. The only answer for these remaining bits of *maya* is surgery, and surgery is painful, even when it is the Great Physician doing the cutting.

And like surgery, progress is made by a process of subtraction. By taking things *out*. First, God takes himself out of the picture, which precipitates the Dark Night of the Spirit. The only thing left is the mystic, and his or her broken heart. Both are illusory things. The mystic has a choice at this point, to turn from the path, to give up, to surrender to the hardness of the task and go back to a normal life of relative ease, or...or to follow God into darkness, into nothing, to become nothing him- or herself.

If the mystic chooses the latter, is able to subtract him- or herself from the spiritual equation, if he or she can enter the Zero, then the soul's existence as a seemingly separate entity is extinguished. There, beyond all two-ness, the soul enters into true union with the Divine.

Now, granted, this is a highly rarified and advanced state of spiritual progress and few of us will ever experience this in this lifetime, but most of us have—or will have—the dreadful experience of feeling as if God has abandoned us. Such feelings are always horrific. There are few emotions as desperate and painful as that one. To be left alone, especially by the one that professes to love us so much. How are we to bear it? And why?

Far be it for me to presume to explain the ways of God, but God's logic is, at least, consistent. The Dark Night of the Spirit happens to teach us, painful as that is, and when, in other circumstances it seems that God has left us alone, it is usually for a similar reason. I remember an interview I read once with the Anglican mystic, and singer/songwriter Bruce Cockburn when he said something like, "I used to feel like God was my daddy, and I was toddling along, holding onto his finger. But for the past few years, it feels like God has withdrawn his finger, and I have had to learn to walk by myself."

I read that maybe twenty years ago, and it has stuck with me, and I have remembered it every time I have felt similarly alone. It is scary when Big Daddy removes his finger. My mother tells me that I was doing fine riding my bike so long as I thought Dad was holding onto the back of my banana seat. But when I looked back and realized that he had let go a block ago, I fell straight over.

I hope I have gotten better at this, but I probably haven't. It is small comfort, when I am feeling abandoned and despairing, to try to remember, "this is a learning experience," or worse, "this is for your own good." It may be a teaching tool, but it still seems an unnecessarily uncomfortable and abusive teaching tool. Yet, it does help to remember that these feelings are temporary, that they will pass, that God will come back, and that I will be wiser and stronger when it is over than I was before. This is easier to see as true after the fact than when you are in it, of course, but that, after all, is what *faith* is for.

## UNION

As I write this, there's been a lot of hullabaloo in the press around the fiftieth anniversary of Disney's film, *Pinocchio*. But a report on NPR on the differences between Disney's version and the original novel intrigued me. Disney's version, not surprisingly, is pretty tame, pretty linear, a neat little story altogether. Not so, the book. Even the *Cliff's Notes* version I read had my head spinning, since it can only be said to be a mess of a narrative. There is no discernable plot, just a seemingly endless parade of episodes in which Pinocchio gets into trouble, and, usually miraculously, out of it again.

Not only is it non-linear, the characters are kind of mean. I mean, for heaven's sake, Pinocchio actually kills Jiminy Cricket with a frying pan pretty early on. He also bites the paw off of a cat—now granted the cat *was* trying to defraud him, but that's quibbling. The story even features a heroic tuna, which sadly, never made the Disney version, nor the wonderful story of the snail who tells Pinocchio he will let him into his house for the night, but morning breaks before the hospitable snail ever reaches the door.

But the basic pathos of the Pinocchio story survives in Disney's version. It is still the story of a wooden puppet that desperately longs to be a real boy. In the book, Pinocchio finally achieves his aspiration when, walking into town to buy himself a new suit of clothes, he hears from his friend the snail that the Turquoise Fairy is on her deathbed. He has come to love the Turquoise Fairy like his own mother, so he forks over all the money he has in the world to assist her.

That night the Turquoise Fairy visits him in his dreams, and kisses him. When he wakes up, he is a real boy, and the fifty copper pennies he gave the snail for the Fairy have been replaced by fifty gold coins. And yada yada, happily ever after. Amen.

The Pinocchio story, despite a rocky literary beginning, has enjoyed quite a lively popularity, and it makes me wonder—why? What does Pinocchio's desire to be *real* symbolize for most of us? It doesn't seem like a political aspiration, nor even a developmental one. It could be about psychological integrity, but that lacks the pain and longing that so powerfully permeates this story.

My theory is that it is a spiritual metaphor—that in a world full of charlatan cats and the fame obsessed, and layabout donkey-boys (because who hasn't known a few?) there is a desperate desire not to end up as one of those, as either the fooled or those doing the fooling. There is in all of us, a desire to see through the glamour of the world, to find an authentic self that can apprehend reality as it is, that can, in fact, be *real*.

Certainly the mystics of the Christian tradition have employed precisely this kind of language, and it is this kind of authenticity, this kind of Reality that they, in their writings and in the example of their lives, call us to.



In our exploration thus far, we have been on quite a journey: we have been through the fires of Purgation—the stripping away of all that is not real; and we have enjoyed the pleasures of Illumination—seeing God in all things, and all things in God. It is here, then, that the mystic, if he or she can remain faithful and endure, finally, mercifully, enters into that blissful state of Union that is the goal of all mystical endeavor.

The problem for us, now, is that it is impossible to describe what that experience must be like. Very few people ever achieve it, and those that do aren't that interested in such mundane activities as writing. From those sources that we do have, it is clear that this experience is like no other, because the imaginal wall between me and you, between creature and creator, between time and eternity is dissolved—and all that is, is *you*. The only time, is *now*. And every image you have ever had of who God is has gone utterly up in smoke.

It is impossible for a wooden boy to know what it is like to be a real boy. He can imagine, he can dream, and he can aspire, but the actual experience of it will be like nothing he pondered previously.

Nor can it be for us. We cannot, in our current state of embeddedness in the illusion of the world, imagine what it would be like to be free of that illusion. But the mystics speak of what it is like using two metaphors: Deification and Divine Marriage.

### **Deification**

As we have already discovered, mystics generally come in two types. There are those who follow the negative way (the apophatic mystics), and those that follow the positive way (the kataphatic mystics). (My religion professor's license plate read "apophat" just to show you how geeky *he* was!) The apophats experience their mystical journey as a stripping away of not only everything that is not real about ourselves, but everything that is not real about God. And, when you think about it, there is nothing you can say about God that is actually accurate. Since God is all that is, any image, any description, any idea you may have of God is so incomplete as to be utterly false, and so that apophatic way is the way *without* images.

Apophatic mystics find God in nothingness. As Meister Eckhart—one of the greatest mystics of the negative way—once said, "God is nothing. God is no-thing" (??). And it is in the void, in the emptiness that they find God most powerfully and profoundly present.

And it is also in this emptiness that they find themselves transformed. For when you subtract everything that is not real from God, you end up with nothing. And when you subtract everything that is not real from ourselves, you end up, once again, with nothing. And the insight for the negative mystics is this: *it is the same nothing*. So when we find ourselves nowhere with nobody—in other words, with God—a transformation occurs. (Granted it is a transformation of nothing into nothing, but these are metaphors, so work with me, here).

What the mystics intuit is that when they meet God in the nothing, when they experience the *nothing that they are* and the *nothing that God is* as the same nothing, they are transformed into God.

It is this transformation of the human into the divine that is meant by *deification*, and there's rather a lot of evidence for it in patristic sources. St. Athanasius wrote in his interminable creed that, "God became human so that we might become God." And indeed, Eckhart states this even more forcefully when he states, "Our Lord says to every living soul, 'I became human for you. If you do not become God for me, you do me wrong.'"<sup>1</sup>

We have fine image of what this is like in the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus the man endures the great nothing of the grave, the ultimate Dark Night of the Spirit, and he emerges on the other side transformed into divinity. If we aspire to follow him, is this not our path as well? After all, he says that we all must take up our crosses, we all must lose our lives if we want to save them. What is he talking about, if not the mystical path, the journey from illusion into Reality?

When Jesus appeared to the disciples after his resurrection, he wasn't the only one who had had a rough weekend. The disciples had also been through the wringer. They, too, had gone through a difficult time, when all their ideas about who Jesus was were stripped away and they were left with nothing. But then he comes to them, and he breathes on them. (He needs an Altoid after three days in the grave, but nobody's complaining.) He infuses them with the Holy Spirit, as fine an image of Deification as we are ever likely to get. As the Spirit is breathed into them, they share in his divine life, they become *enGodded* as the German mystics put it.

St. Luke makes everyone wait for Pentecost for this moment, but John places this immediately after the resurrection, no doubt to draw a parallel between Jesus' mystical transformation and ours. Because *he* has been deified, we can be deified, for he promises that we will do greater things than even he accomplished in his time here on earth. It is no vain hope. It *is* possible for us to see through the veils of illusion that trap us, it *is* possible for us to wake up to our true nature, it *is* possible for us to experience our oneness with God and with all things. It *is* possible for us to be transformed from our small, separate, limited selves into divinity which is at once all things and no-thing.

This scene is never-ending, new characters have come and gone, but we are still in the upper room. Only now, *we* are the disciples—you and me. Jesus is still breathing on us, the Holy Spirit is still at work in us, nudging us, prodding us, loving us towards a wholeness that we cannot even imagine. But if we remain faithful, we might find ourselves kissed while we sleep, to awaken in the morning to discover that we have been made real—that indeed, we always had been.

## **Divine Marriage**

Not long ago, I was privileged to perform a wedding at the historic Morris chapel at the University of the Pacific in beautiful downtown Stockton. The bride and groom were a friendly, lovely young couple, and it was entertaining watching the testy familial relations between his Chinese relatives and her Filipino clan.

The rehearsal was more fun than they usually are. I asked them to practice their vows, and coached them on speaking louder so that those in the back row could hear them. "C'mon, Jeremy," I coaxed, "These folks have come a long way to hear these words." He tried again, and burst out laughing. Finally, he got the right volume, but I had to instruct him further. "Jeremy, look at *her* when you're saying this. If you're not careful you'll end up married to the flower display."

The next time he tried it they both burst out laughing. We got through it. But then the day of the wedding arrived. The bride walked down the aisle, as radiant as any I have ever seen. He met her at the stairs and led her to her place. We stood during the readings. Thankfully, no one fainted in the heat. And when we came to the vows, I turned to Jeremy and said, "Repeat after me."

He nodded, dutifully looked at his bride and in a loud even voice, began to repeat my words: "I, Jeremy, take you, Kristine, to be my wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer...."

He was doing fine. Except that he wasn't. Watching his eyes, I saw that what was just a form to be practiced yesterday, he was saying for real, now. The words were registering. Too late, perhaps, he was actually conscious of what he was saying, and I could read the panic and the promise as it played out upon his face.

"...in sickness and health, until death do us part. This is my solemn vow."

I watched him warily as he teetered back and forth for a moment, as the finality of what he had just done washed over him. He had *married* himself to this woman, and she to him. They had made a sacred vow to one another in the presence of everyone they held dear, and if he didn't get that before, it was evident he was getting it then, in the moment he was doing it.

His moment of realization brought home to me just what an awesome promise a marriage vow is. In taking his vows, Jeremy was saying "yes" to this person, not in every decision, certainly, but in every day of his life. He was saying yes to waking up with her, to sharing his material wealth with her, to sharing his inner life with her, to sharing his body with her, to sharing his future with her--to sharing all that he has, and all that he is. That is a profound and awesome promise.

It takes a lot of preparation to get to that stage, if it is to be real. It takes a lot of maturity, a lot of compromise to do it well, a willingness to know and be known that doesn't come easy for many people. It requires both strength and vulnerability in equal measure, and a great willingness to make one life out of two.

To be successful, of course, the effort must be made by both parties. Both bride and groom must want this kind of joining, this kind of intimacy, this kind of permanence. But when all these things are present, it is a wondrous thing. A true marriage is always a mystical act. Because in this process—which begins months or years before the marriage, but is sealed and signified in the ceremony itself—two lives combine to create a third. Even if there is no physical offspring, there is always a mystical offspring, for the lives of two people come together and a new life begins—the life of the relationship itself.

For the rest of their marriage, the health of either one of them as individuals will be weighed against the health of this mystical third entity. The needs of either of them will be evaluated, and often sacrificed, in order to make sure this mystical third is fed, loved, cared for, and happy. When couples fight, when relationships end, it is usually because this mystical third person, the relationship itself, has not been nurtured, has not been ministered to, has not been adequately loved.

That marriage is an intrinsically mystical act should be no surprise to us, however. This intuition is so strong that scripture often uses it as a metaphor for Israel and the Church's relationship to God, and to Jesus, respectively, and the mystics of many traditions likewise employ the symbolism of marriage to describe the intimacy between divinity and the human soul.

In our last section we discussed the apophatic mystics—those for whom the experience of God is void of all images—and the metaphor that they most often employ to describe their union with him: Deification. But what about the kataphatic mystics, those for whom God appears employing symbols and images? Overwhelmingly, these mystics speak about their union with God in terms of marriage.

And unlike the apophatic mystics, whose writings are terse and tentative, the kataphatic mystics let it all hang out. They are romantic fools. For them, even though the experience of union is impossible to describe, when they do write about it, it is in the most flowery, romantic, sickeningly sweet terms imaginable. No less a heavyweight than Augustine even waxed treacly when he wrote:

"O Lord, do I love Thee. Thou didst strike on my heart with Thy word and I loved Thee.... But what do I love when I love Thee? Not the beauty of bodies nor the loveliness of seasons, nor the radiance of the light around us, so gladsome to our eyes, nor the sweet melodies of songs of every kind, nor the fragrance of flowers and ointments and spices, nor manna and honey, nor limbs delectable for fleshly embraces. I do not love these things when I love my God. And yet I love a light and a voice and a fragrance and a food and an embrace when I love my God, who is a light, a voice, a fragrance, a food, and an embrace to my inner man.... This it is that I love when I love my God...."<sup>2</sup>

This kind of description is common not only in Christian mysticism, but in Hindu mystics, Sufi mystics, and Jewish mystical writings as well, among others. Rabia is no less eloquent in describing her love for Krishna, when she writes, "My Joy—my Hunger—my Shelter—my Friend—my Food for the journey—my journey's End—You are my breath, my hope, my companion, my craving, my abundant wealth. Without You—my Life, my Love—I would never have wandered across these endless countries. You have poured out so much grace for me, Done me so many favors, given me so many gifts—I look everywhere for Your love—then suddenly I am filled with it. O Captain of my Heart, Radiant Eye of Yearning in my breast, I will never be free from You, as long as I live. Be satisfied with me, Love, and I am satisfied."<sup>3</sup>

Gorgeous stuff, but it is not just beautiful poetry, it is a sincere attempt to communicate something that is essentially ineffable—the union between a soul and her God. Just as a bride and groom surrender themselves to the unknowable in their vows, so too does the mystic surrender him- or herself to mystery in the act of divine union. They leave behind forever their former, separate life, and they, together with God, their beloved, they create a new life—one that they could not even imagine on their own. A new life that is not the product of either spouse alone, but of the joining of these two lives, one that must be nurtured and loved if it is to thrive.

But just as in a human marriage, if it is to work, if it is to thrive, if it is to be permanent, both parties must want it. The testimonies of the mystics and of Jewish and Christian scripture is clear. God desperately desires this kind of relationship with us. God loves us and wants our love in return. God wants to surrender himself to us, and wants us to surrender ourselves to him so that a new, more vibrant, more abundant life can be born.

In training spiritual directors, I hammer home again and again that we are here for one thing and one thing only: to foster intimacy between the client and the divine. It is our job to be matchmakers—to bring the client again and again to the dance so that they can be courted, to identify what resistance they might have to this marriage, to assist them in wooing the divine. Spiritual directors, and ministers in general, are professional busybodies always trying to match you up. We're all Cyrano de Bergerac, helping you find the right words to woo. It's annoying, I know, but we mean well.

Because, really, all the resistance is in us humans, not in God. Scripture and the mystics clearly tell us that God already has on his tuxedo and his bootieer. We might be having cold feet, but God is ready for the wedding. As an officiant, I usually have the best man and maid of honor sign the wedding certificates *before* the ceremony, rather than after, because, you know, things are crazy after a wedding and people want to drink, not do paperwork. So once I have their signatures, I usually nudge the groom conspiratorially, saying, "Dude, the paperwork is all done. You're legally married. You don't actually *have* to go through with the ceremony."

Because typically, you know, men, being men, can take or leave the ritual stuff. But God isn't your ordinary guy. He *wants* to get married. And, annoyingly, he is popping the question *all the time*. We're just too busy with our nails and our shopping to notice.

I'm being silly of course. Even the mystics will admit that these are metaphors. But this metaphor—marriage—is the closest we humans ever get to what God wants with us. He wants to promise himself to us forever. He wants to say yes to us forever. He wants to merge his life with ours, to create a new life that simply wasn't possible before. *That's* what God wants.

It's a big commitment, it means your whole life has to change. But I'll tell you, when you read the mystics, there's no question—they feel loved. And isn't that what we want more than anything? It's what God wants more than anything, too.

### **Union & Action**

One of our most dedicated laypeople at our church is Phyllis. We would not have survived the last fifteen years without her. She has kept the books, managed the building, kept the clergy in line, and generally made sure that everything and everyone were exactly where they were supposed to be. One of Phyllis' favorite Bible stories is the story of Mary and Martha, because she sees a lot of herself in Martha.

You remember the story: Jesus travels to Bethesda and stays with his friends, Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus. Jesus and the disciples—the menfolk, basically, and reclining in the living room, discussing the mysteries of the universe, and Martha is in the kitchen making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches—a lot of them, because, you know, men—who have been walking for twenty miles.

Martha is perfectly okay with this sexist arrangement, except for one thing—her sister Mary is not playing by the rules. Mary is sitting with the menfolk, gazing moonfaced up at Jesus, drinking up his every word. "Get a grip," she says to her sister, "and give me a hand, here." But Mary refuses. So Martha goes over her head. She says to Jesus, "Will you please tell her to resume a gender-appropriate role and give me a hand in the kitchen?"

But to Martha's horror, Jesus sides with Mary. "Mary is choosing the better part," he tells her, "listening to the Good News is much more important than making sandwiches." And you can just see Martha's mouth hanging open in disbelief.

Jesus tries to tell her that if she opens her trap any wider raccoons will wander in there and try to nest, but she doesn't hear him, she just stands there with her mouth open, feeling betrayed and hurt.

And well she should! Where would any spiritual community be without its Martha's? Where would we be without Phyllis? Where would any spiritual

community be without those people who tirelessly and selflessly give of their time, their sweat, their kindness, and their care?

We would be nowhere, meaning, our communities would not exist. So is Jesus wrong? Well, in one way maybe no, in another way, maybe yes. He's certainly not wrong that listening to spellbinding theological discourse is a heck of a lot more fun than making dinner—although perhaps I am simply revealing my geeky proclivities, here. (Indulge me that one, won't you?) For some people, at least—the kind of people who read St. Augustine for fun—listening to Jesus riff is more fun than making sandwiches. I imagine Jesus to be precisely that species of geek, so perhaps it's safe to assume that he thought so, too. So in that way, yeah, it's the better part.

But the mystics would disagree that it is, necessarily, the more *advanced* part, or the *morally* best part. What they tell us is that, after all this work— after the trials of Purgation, after the ecstasy of Illumination, after the terrors of the Dark Nights, after the bliss of Deification or Divine Marriage—there is, *what?* Well, I hate to break it to you, friends, but there's...more *work*.

It's *different* work, though. It's no longer the ego-slaughtering work of seeing through your illusions, or the countless hours of focused concentration in meditation. At the end of Union, there is a different kind of work: the kind that you don't mind doing, the kind that you can't help doing, the kind that is nothing but joy to do.

And what kind of work is that? It is *selfless action on behalf of others*. The way the mystics describe it is this: once you have achieved Union, once your life and God's life have merged so completely that there is no distinction between you, when your will is knit so finely to the divine will that what God wants *is* what you want, then you cannot help but to direct your every step out of love and compassion for others, for that is what God does.

The mystics in Union has surrendered their wills, their minds, their bodies, wholly and completely to God, and when God is moved to compassion, the mystics are moved to compassion, and when God desires to save, to help, to love, the mystics desire the same, and act. When St. Therese of Lisieux said that, "Jesus has no hands on earth but ours" she was speaking specifically of this kind of "holy possession," where, in Union with the Divine, our bodies become the body of God, acting for the healing and the comfort of the world.

Scripture says, "By their fruits shall you know them," and indeed, you can tell if a mystic is blowing smoke or whether he or she has actually "made it" by this one test—does the mystic act out of self-interest in any way, or has he or she utterly abandoned herself to the service of the hurting? Just as the image of Jesus sacrificed on the cross shows us a symbolic snapshot of a God who refuses to turn his back on us, who remains in union with flesh not out of necessity but out of love, so the mystic allows him or herself to be sacrificed for the healing and the benefit of others.

In St. John's Gospel Jesus says, "Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty"—another symbolic image of what we are talking about. The true mystic, the one who is truly remaining in Christ, with Christ in her or him, the holy marriage complete, *will* bring forth fruit.

Not because it is a good thing to do, not out of obedience, not even out of pity, but because God's will and our will have become one will, and God, moved to compassion, desires to reach out in love to his creation, and so does it through our hands, speaking with our voice, carried by our feet, comforting by our presence, healing by our touch.

*This* is the end of mysticism—not warm and fuzzy feelings, not an emotional opiate, not being lost in bliss, not obedience, not even a love relationship between me and God, because it does not end there. Mary was right, the love relationship between her and Jesus is a good thing, but Martha is even more correct—if this love does not reach beyond itself, if it is not moved to compassionate action on behalf of others, it is an aborted love.

If love does not see beyond the immediate couple involved, if it does not see the hurt and the need that surrounds us, then it is a narcissistic, self-involved kind of love. It is, in fact, yet another illusion. The God that calls us beyond illusion, beyond narcissism, beyond a narrow concern for me and mine, ultimately, at the end of all this spirituality and religion stuff, calls us to serve one another, to love one another, to give ourselves on behalf of others.

One night, early in his ministry, Saint Francis realized he was being followed. He looked back and saw that there was a man there. As he looked at the man's face, he recoiled in horror as he realized the man was a leper. At first he was angry because lepers are supposed to carry bells to warn people of their presence, so that healthy people can avoid the risk of contact with the dreaded disease. But then he was moved to pity for the disfigured man. He took the few pennies he had begged that day, and careful not to actually touch the man's skin, dropped them into the leper's hand. He then turned away, but the Spirit tugged at his heart. He knew he wasn't done.

Francis pulled the woolen blanket he had draped over his shoulders and placed it over the shoulders of the leper. He patted the man on the back, touching only the blanket, of course, and told him to go with God. But the Spirit wasn't done with him yet.

A terrible thought crossed Francis' mind. It was suicide, surely, yet, it seemed to be what God demanded. Once again, Francis approached the leper, and taking the man's face, covered with sores between his palms, he drew the man's face to his own and kissed him on the lips with real tenderness and affection.



And to his great surprise, the leper vanished. And Francis realized that the leper was Christ himself, and he also knew from that moment what he should do. Never again would he be afraid to touch lepers, never again would he hesitate to risk himself on behalf of others, never again would he put his own interests above another's. In that moment, the last vestiges of his separation from the world, of self-preservation, of holding back from God were broken through, and Francis began to bear the kind of fruit that God worked so hard to plant in him.

Of course, God wants to plant that kind of fruit in us, too. For this is the true end of mysticism, this is the true end of all genuine religion, of all authentic spirituality--that we reach out in love to those who need us. That we allow our hands to be God's hands, that we let go of our selfishness and pride and begin to desire what God desires, which is only and everywhere to love, to heal, to comfort, to bring joy and justice and faith and hope and, yes, the greatest of these, love.

For if this is not our end, if all of our spiritual pursuits do not culminate in this, then we have just been chasing another illusion. And if we have learned one thing in this study, it is that of illusions, we have enough. It is reality that we seek, and the reality is that this is a broken world, with people hurting everywhere we turn. There is more ministry to do here than we can ever accomplish, there is more hunger, more injustice, more hatred than we can ever heal by ourselves.

And if we did it by ourselves, it would be a useless endeavor. But we do not do it alone. We abide not alone, but in God, and God in us. And if we can truly do this, if we can truly marry our life with God's, then there is no end to what we can do. Francis, as one man, could do little, and yet, abiding in God, he rebuilt the church.

And the mystics are clear on this, that when God truly lives in us, we can do much more than we ever could on our own. For it isn't we who are bringing forth all this fruit. If we can just get ourselves--our fears, our illusions, our desires--out of the way, God will do it all. It is God who brings forth this fruit. Not us. All we have to do is give our permission, cooperate, and, as I said, get out of the way. That's good news for people who are already run ragged, who are already tired. All we have to do is say, "Yes." God will do the rest.

## **Conclusion**

The Christian mystical tradition is not the sole possession of whispering saints of yore, nor only of those possessed of arcane knowledge. If you follow Jesus, this tradition belongs to *you*. It does not belong to some church hierarchy, or to any particular denomination. It belongs to *you*. It is yours to do with what you will. If you just want to dabble, feel free—you will go as far as you desire to go. If you want to dive in head first and achieve Union with God, you can. But you won't do it because any outside authority says it's okay. You'll do it because you had an affair with God, just the two of you—you fell in love and got married (or you were deified, or were impregnated with the Word—take your pick of metaphors).

That being said, just as a human marriage does not take place in a vacuum, but in the context of supportive friends and relatives, the spiritual journey, too, is a corporate one—meaning that it takes place in the context of a wider human community. In the Introduction we talked about the importance of having a good spiritual director. This is essential to avoiding the pitfalls of this path.

Just as important is a church community. Not because you need anyone’s permission, or that you need to be connected to some apostolic succession, but because the Christian life is one that is ideally lived out amongst others. There are no successful Christian Lone Rangers. Even the medieval Christian mystics were held and supported by their communities—usually their fellow monks and nuns. Even Julian of Norwich had regular visitors who came to her window to fellowship with her and to receive spiritual direction from her.

You’ll instantly find things you don’t like—things about the people, about the liturgy, about the politics of the place. Don’t run. *This is where the gold is.* Stay put and let it work on you, even as you work the practices and stages in this book. You will find that all these pieces form a coherent whole that will work on your soul and grow it into Divinity, amazingly and inexplicably. Not only that, but along the way you will find people too precious for words, lifelong friends that will support your spiritual journey and uphold you in good times and bad.

A final bit of advice: Don’t expect to walk up these stages like a ladder. Earlier writers have depicted them this way, and it is not particularly helpful. The way people actually develop, spiritually, is much more circular. You swoop up, then dive down, and the next time perhaps you swoop up a little higher. Instead of a ladder, it’s more like a spiral, where you revisit each of the stages in a circular fashion, each time with more awareness and depth.

And remember, *God wants you!* This is vitally important because it is easy to get discouraged, and to feel as if we are not making as much progress as we would like. But keep in mind that two step forward, one step back is still progress. It is also the way that human beings actually grow—not perfectly, not reliably, but irregularly, in fits and starts. Cut yourself some slack, and lovingly hold your imperfections, your regress as well as your progress, your mistakes as well as your triumphs—just as God does.

Keep in mind that God never called any perfect people—because there *aren’t* any perfect people. God only ever calls flawed, wounded, limited, scared, imperfect people, because that’s the only kind there are. So don’t be discouraged—you’re actually in pretty good company.

God doesn’t call accountants, after all, who must have everything in perfect order. God calls *lovers*. This is what God is calling you to: not perfection, not sainthood, but to *lovemaking*, to union. Just as you are, in the midst of all your

messiness and complications. That's part of your charm, you know. You may hate it, but God loves it. *Trust me.*

This is the Good News of Jesus, after all: no matter who you are, no matter what you have done, no matter your background, no matter who you love, no matter what you believe or don't believe, God wants to embrace you and be embraced, to love and be loved, to be wedded, united, made one with you forever. What are you waiting for?

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Underhill, 502.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, X:6.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Upton, editor and translator, *Doorkeeper of the Heart: Versions of Rabiya* (Putney, VT: Threshold Books, 1988).