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SUMMER 2000-2001 ISSUE:

The Presence of God:

The Presence of Absence

Summer 2000-2001 issue
of Spiritual Growth Ministries Newsletter:
"The Presence of God - the Presence of Absence"

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*"I will give you
the treasures of darkness,
and riches hidden
in secret places,
so that you may know
that it is I,
the Lord,
the God of Israel,
who calls you
by your name."
- Isaiah 45:3 -*

by Andrew Dunn

The wall poster *If You Feel Far From God Guess Who Moved!* caught my attention years ago – and made me feel guilty. Many repentings and confessings didn't bring any lessening of the distance. Slowly it began to dawn on me that it wasn't I who had moved! The truth is that God does move - on, away, forward, out or whatever.

The tide ebbs as well as flows. The clouds come and blot out the journey ahead and behind. The wind can stop blowing. Wells dry up. Streams disappear. The desert can encroach into anyone's life. The light can disappear and darkness descend upon the most devout and obedient soul. We have many ways of describing the sense of absence that is part of every pilgrim's journey.

Christian spirituality has been conscious of these things from its earliest roots, and pray-ers and writers of most eras of the faith have wrestled, reflected and written about this paradox – how in companionship with the Living One, with I AM, with the covenant-keeping God many are taken into the stretching, troubling and freeing place of the absence of our greatest spiritual treasures – the sense of the presence of God, the companionship of Jesus our brother, the warming fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

In this issue we continue our exploration of our mystical traditions. In particular we look at the *apophatic way*, the journey without the richness of symbol, words and feeling, a very rich strand of Christian spirituality. We also offer a series of articles on mystics over the centuries – Clare of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich's showings, Marcus Borg and the modern American mystical writer Annie Dillard. Poems and book reviews add more illustrations of the way of darkness. Other helpful material expands a very full issue.

God bless your explorings and discoverings.

FEATURE ARTICLES

The Presence of Absence by Andrew Dunn

There are two ways of overcoming the dilemma of trying to describe God and spiritual experiences that have become known as "the two classic, interrelated Christian spiritual paths: the kataphatic and the apophatic" (Tilden Edwards. *Spiritual Friend*. 4.)

As we saw in the last issue of this Newsletter (Winter 2000) the kataphatic way describes God in positive images – the *via affirmativa* (or *via positiva*) which "underscores the human capacity to reach God through creatures, images and symbols" (Edwards). Examples of these are, God is a roaring lion, a rock or a consuming fire. Jesus is a friend, bread, or light for the world. The Holy Spirit is like a dove, flame, or wind. This, by the way, is the dominant way of Western Christianity both Roman Catholic and Protestant. Indeed, most modern spiritual language whether conservative, liberal, or radical, modern or post modern, and most movements whether evangelical, charismatic, social justice or renewal work in this way.

The second, the apophatic way, is the *via negativa* which regards all expressions about God as completely inadequate in describing the reality of who God is and what God is like. Such writers often talk about what God is not. "God is best known in obscure awareness", is Tilden Edwards' expression. Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian of last century is very clear that any images of God are inadequate and can lead to idolatry at worst and pale expressions of ourselves at best!

Historically there is a strong tradition of the apophatic way. Earliest thorough discussion of it is found in the writing of Denys the Areopagite, 410-485AD. Yet back in Israel's life and the struggles of exile and return Isaiah spoke profoundly of darkness and its treasures – 45.3. Meister Eckhart, the Dominican theologian of the 13th century is a mystical writer for whom the only adequate way to talk about God was in paradox. "Many Western mystics and their more dominant counterparts in Eastern Orthodoxy and Asian religions are classic examples of this path (Edwards. 4-5).

The apophatic way seeks to speak of the unspeakable, to describe the indescribable. In order to do this one has to slip into a third way of thinking and speaking about God – the *via analogia*, "which identifies and enlivens spiritual life with metaphors, analogies, approximations" (Edwards. 5).

Hence the apophatic way "though stripping away what God is not, nonetheless will use positive names for God, such as *Light* or *the Holy One*" (Edwards .5) as simple, clear ways are found to elucidate what it is that we see, meet, intuit and know.

All of this has great significance for today as Christians get to grips with the increasing spiritual poverty of our churches and the age we live in. Edwards again: "The apophatic way is currently undergoing something of a renaissance in the West, perhaps in reaction to the glibness, the over familiarity with which the names of God have been bandied about and sold in our slick, hungry, commercial culture. At the same time, perhaps, the re-emergence of this path is a reaction to the sceptical or cynical philosophical alternative that assumes no ultimate reality behind any religious language" (Edwards.5). I wonder sometimes if our age will be described in hindsight as an apophatic age brought about by the spiritual poverty of our modern era and the narrow confines of our scientific thinking and views of reality.

Apophatic Spirituality

This has great importance for discipleship and relationship with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For not only is the stripping a matter of how we speak of God but also of the ways in which we experience God. For many people of faith there comes a dawning

realisation that things are not as they were when first the journey began. God has moved, darkness has descended, the water is no longer "on tap", the spiritual terrain has altered unrecognisably, a sense of absence develops.

For some this is an experience of a few weeks or months before the water returns. For others the dryness or darkness lasts much longer. For some it is like shifting into a different landscape permanently – or, more correctly, into no landscape at all!

While each of these experiences has its invitation from God, there are, particularly in the shorter term encounters with the apophatic, **causes** that we need to note. Personal issues such as over work, burnout, the pressures of life, loss of personal space, work or significant relationships can be accompanied by dryness and distance from God. Abuse, whether emotional, spiritual or sexual, can do it. Transition times in life or work and the huge adjustments of midlife often produce a deep sense of distance from God's love.

Yet, strangely perhaps, whatever the cause or the trigger we come to see that God is in these times of darkness. So they become invitations for working with faith journey issues – cleansing, simplifying, clarifying, purifying motives, and above all of being loved outside the square, as it were. We discover that our understanding of God and grace and Trinity and faith and prayer is being stretched and expanded beyond anything we've known when they were all "on tap" all the time. Our relationship with God begins to deepen. Faith alone starts to take on new meaning. Trusting anyway becomes central, and there's a new expansion of our understanding.

For some this journey has no return ticket. Whatever the triggers may have been the shift from the life of faith full of images and rich words and experiences comes to stay. It becomes a permanent way of way of life.

Impact

The initial affects as these discoveries unfold include:

- a sense of losing control – how else could one respond to the loss of life-long familiar ways?
- fear (sometimes deep) of the unknown – how else can one respond to the glimpses over the edge into the darkness, emptiness?
- a sense of vulnerability and exposure.
- an overwhelming sense of the darkness pervading.
- a profound, vast silence that sharpens every sense and attunes all our antenna to the stillness of eternity (*nunc stans* – standing still).

As the movement proceeds (the speed varies from person to person) it becomes clear that *darkness* is a misnomer – it feels very dark when compared with what one has lost. In fact it's another kind of seeing. Some writers describe it as translucence. Whatever it is, there comes another way of seeing which doesn't depend upon the old images, words or concepts. When we ask "How dark is dark?" we realise that what initially seemed a dark void is actually a close presence that can't be described in words or images but which is close, enfolding in its gentleness and very, very real. Similarly, the profound silence becomes for some a deeper, clearer way of hearing.

Clarity

A new sense of clarity may begin to appear with a diminishing of the fear as fresh, delicate in-sights and out-sights arrive. They often introduce experiences of exquisite love that permeate everything in creation. For others the silence alone is sufficient – how better to face I AM? God's presence and immanence are no longer an idea or doctrine. The *open clearness* (my term) gives insight into the most complex truths of theology, creation, the universe, even redemption itself. – often with a simplifying impact. The delicate, tender love of God flowing from the Trinity and from the cross of Jesus is seen simply and purely in everything. He died (and rose) for all, for everything, so even creation itself waits its redemption (Romans 8:18ff).

Struggle

However, there continues a struggle.

First, the conceptual struggle of coping with this unity of everything when we live in an age that divides everything up to understand it. It's hard work living in the unity while working in the fragmented world. It can be exhausting!

Second, there's the struggle between the minutiae of the moment, the things of daily life and living on the one hand, and the vastness of eternity and the love that spans them both.

Third, there's the difficulty of being in a church that focuses on the early stages of faith and doesn't know about or teach and nurture those who move beyond them. It feels like pattering around in the shallows when the free diving is so close to hand. Unsatisfying worship creates a sadness, even anger, and makes one wonder if it's possible to find a way of worship that understands the loving and the seeing. It's difficult to come away from worship services "not unduly depressed" (R.L. Stevenson). Churches have a huge challenge here.

"What language shall I borrow?"

The hymn writer (Paul Gerhardt) knows the major challenge: how does one talk about all this, how describe it? Often by hand signs! "It's so huge!" "It's so close!" "It's beyond words!" And it is. Nevertheless words must be used as the vehicle of communication. Artists can use their art, musicians their music. Most of us, however, have to use language – often the language of our senses. Thus mystics freely use language of touch, smell, sight, hearing, taste, movement and embrace. "O taste the hidden sweetness that lies within your heart" wrote Clare of Assisi to her friend Agnes in Prague. Teresa of Avila talks so tenderly about the Lord's gentle caress of her heart and of his perfume. The language of the lover is a rich source of feeling and insight for the mystic – cf. the Song of Songs. Julian of Norwich senses God's enfolding. Jackie Sturm (Maori mystic and poet) uses touch: "you came one night and cradled me in your iron arms ... O faceless one of a thousand names (*Dedications*. P.61 1996). For some it is the language of action, as with Dag Hammarskjöld's sense of "a freedom in the midst of action, a stillness in the midst of other human beings" (*Markings*. 1964 p.155). All this suggests that the rich language of metaphor and simile is to be learned as one attempts to describe the hidden delights – *via analogia*! Moreover, it's language that each must learn for oneself for that is the only satisfying way to describe our own seeings and understanding. It's important not to use the language of others whether recent, traditional or biblical. Yes, they can inform us, they are important guides of the way but, as their experiences of God were unique and special to them and their era, so are ours for us and our time.

Maintaining the disciplines

Whatever happens in the deepening journey of faith it is an important rule to maintain the spiritual disciplines come what may. What are they? Scripture reading and meditation, contemplation (gazing in awe and wonder), prayer (adoration, repentance, confession, thanksgiving, intercession), adequate worship including the sacrament of Holy Communion and spiritual reading. Taize and Celtic worship and suitable liturgy nourish many when there's not much else offering, as do retreats and quiet days.

The fruits of darkness

I'm cautious of the utilitarian demands of today which always ask "And what does it produce?" as if there has to be something measurable for church growth, evangelism, social justice, parish development and so on! It's not about doing! It's not about producing anything! It's about seeing more deeply with new sight. It's about glimpsing the vastness of God. It's discovering Jesus the energy of the universe. It's sampling grace. It embracing the notion of being. To explore all this in prayer takes time, and mystics have to take more and more time - for time is God's great gift to be received, savoured and enjoyed (Cf A. Heschel – *The Sabbath*). Life can't be lived at the old frenetic pace.

So a word of caution. Mysticism, experiences of the presence of God, is not about getting something extra in order to do things better, more fruitfully or successfully. They are sufficient in themselves and in the fruit they bring in deepening relationship with God.

There's always a call to simplicity, to greater loving – for some even a call to poverty. When consciousness is expanded new seeing raises to view many issues that cry out for attention. There's always a clearer, simpler, deeper commitment to the Gospel and its mission. Fresh creativity breaks forth. Empty shells from the past are discarded. Out-of-kilteredness is realigned and brought into kilter. Belief and faith in God sharpen and deepen. Paradox and mystery can be openly embraced. Clarity enables **bold** challenges to injustice and shonky thinking. Mystics can be a pain to have around! They see so clearly, they challenge shallowness and the status quo, and all for the love of God and people and creation, even "a passionate affinity" for it all (Faulks. *Birdsong*. 1963. 362). Nourishment strengthens and emboldens.

"The mystic *feels* the presence of God" (McNamara xi). This presence and its absence impact on every moment and every activity and inactivity!

MEDITATION from The Cloud of Unknowing

If you want to gather all your desire into one simple word that the mind can retain, choose a short word rather than a long one. A one-syllable word such as God or love is best. But choose one that is meaningful to you. Then fix it in your mind so that it will remain there come what may. This word will be your defence in conflict and in peace. Use it to beat upon the cloud of darkness above and subdue all the distractions consigning them to the cloud of forgetting beneath you. Should some thought go on annoying you, demanding to know what you are doing, answer with this one word alone. If your mind begins to intellectualise over the meaning and connotations of this little word, remind yourself that its value lies in its simplicity. Do this and I assure you these thoughts will vanish. Why? Because you have refused to develop them with arguing.

POEMS

ON THE ROAD

Please, slow down
and walk with me.
Be my companion for a mile or two

and tell me your story,
For I have much to learn
and every pilgrim's story
enhances my own.
Speak to me of yearnings
beyond people and things
and show me the leaning
of your heart like a needle
towards true North.
It does not matter
that we borrow
from different books
or use different words
to describe the journey.
We are on the same path
whatever shoes we wear.

- Joy Cowley -

* * * * *

IMAGINE THIS

Imagine for a moment - God within me
Coursing through my veins
Bursting out through the seams
-frustrated
-restless
- waiting and wanting
- to live with reckless abandon
-within me.

And imagine - just imagine
- if I let Him
- have His way
- burst my seams
- take the wheel

I'd lose control
Lose myself
Learn to dance
Feel the pulse
Burst apart!

- Ngaire Gee -

* * * * *

HARD INVITATION

You invite me
to a richer living
by dying.
You place me in the
furnace to refine
my loving.
You call me
to a deeper knowing
by faith alone.

You take me
through the desert
where I am stripped.

You ask me
to serve and
I am emptied.

You challenge me
with the dark
to focus me.

What then,
ego dead,
stripped, emptied?
Transformed
into focused loving.

- Margaret Dunn -

* * * * *

Mudflats; Silent bleakness,
Wondering
Encountering;
Knowing beyond knowledge,
Peace beyond certainty,
Assurance beyond beliefs,
Living presence in emptiness,
Throbbing with life concealed,
Love unseen,
Emanating.

- Elizabeth Rhodes, Meadowbank -

* * * * *

SPACE WALK

They're selling moonboots
at the Warehouse
I think I need a pair right now.
I am to make a giant leap
far greater than the step
made by Neil Armstrong
... and with much more weight.
A step of faith
Opening up my Godspace
to so many new people.
This is a tandem leap, God
Hold on tight!

- Sheila McGrath -

WE DO NOT KNOW HOW TO PRAY AS WE OUGHT... by Ross Miller

Diligently persevere until you feel the joy in this work. In the beginning, it is usual to feel nothing but a kind of darkness about your mind – like a cloud of unknowing. You seem to know and feel nothing – except a

loving intent toward God from the depths of your being. This dark cloud will remain between you and God. You will feel frustrated – your mind will be unable to grasp God. Learn to be with God in this darkness. Return to it as often as you can. To see and feel God as God is in this life must be done from within this dark cloud.

(The Cloud of unknowing Ch. 3)

Biblical, classical and contemporary writers on contemplative prayer and life teach that we do not actually pray, however much we may imagine we do. The Spirit prays in us. In contemplative prayer we join, as part of his body, the ceaseless prayer in which the resurrected Son lives and makes intercession for the world, to the Father/Creator, by the Spirit.¹ In love - that is, in the ineffable bonds of the Trinity - we sinners are brought near, known and named, and embraced unconditionally.

*...we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit...*¹

Thus, true prayer is never actually something I do – however much that insight might alarm good evangelical minds, believing they must be busy for God, and "instant in prayer". Prayer is always a matter of relinquishing that control and need to be "doing", it is a radical letting go, even of our most pious, worthy and evangelical thoughts and intentions. The disciplines of prayer are for setting aside the ego - including the religious and "missionary" ego, and all we have been trained for (or even, for some, especially that!). True prayer is a step out into the abyss of faith.

Silence and stillness then, come to be extremely important. They are probably my sole contribution to prayer. This is the space in which, so far as lies with me, self is set aside. The discipline of being still, wordless, imageless – yet completely alert and present – for even longer and more regularly than I feel comfortable or convenient is the first step in contemplative prayer.

The silent space is not to do me good. It is not to relax me or to calm me down, lower my blood pressure or to be in any way therapeutic; it is not there for me to enjoy. It may do all these things – it may also not! The silent and sacred space is primarily where I leave self behind – or perhaps, more accurately where I make myself, so far as I can, Unconditionally available to God. It is the area where, *my house being now all stilled*,² I allow God to do battle with the False Self, the Ego, over the days and weeks and years. This is not a mere episode or interval, or stage in my spiritual journey.³ Thomas Keating teaches that the silence and the stillness, with (if we choose) the interior repetition of the mantra, the sacred word we may select and remain with, are in fact our deep inward consent to this work by God, and our relinquishing of all else. The concept of "consent" in this regard is fundamental to contemplative teaching.

Seriousness and growing up in prayer mean, therefore, that I take on myself a discipline which is daily, and costly of time and attention – and that I do this irrespective of how I feel about it at the time, or whether it happens to be convenient right now. Thus it means that I accord it first priority and organise the rest of my life and circumstances, professional responsibilities, visitors, phone answering, domestic routines, indeed everything except the house being on fire right now – accordingly.

This is incomprehensible to some people. But others of us have seen our pilgrimage to be along this path – and that being the case, it is certainly helpful if the people we live with understand and accept that.

This is part of the teaching of contemplatives such as John Main, Thomas Keating, Laurence Freeman, Basil Pennington and others,⁴ all a gift to Protestantism, and indeed to the world from the Second Vatican Council, which encouraged the "enclosed" orders to teach what they know, and make it available to those others of us who live in our homes with spouses and children, and have mortgages, and have to drive on the Panmure Roundabout.

Many of us from the Protestant evangelical tradition, then, have to come to terms with the setting aside of feelings. Emotions – and we have plenty – are no longer a determinant of anything much in prayer. The centre of my life is no longer how I feel at this or that time about God or anything else, but the still place in which I am as completely present to God as I know how, despite all the distractions; the space where I am relinquishing all except the need to be present, as I am, and am still, and paying attention.

There is an interesting Internet E-mail list of the World Community for Christian Meditation,⁵ accessed through www.wccm.org. The intention of this list is to encourage people all over the world in the daily practice of Christian meditation, which is what WCCM calls contemplative prayer. But it is fascinating to see how so many people contacting this list have early battles with what we might call the scandal of simplicity. We feel more comfortable if we retain at least some illusion of control. We need to see that we are doing something, or achieving something, or contributing something, getting results. Time and time again, the real teachers on this list have to reiterate John Main's most famous instruction: "Just say your word." That can sound quite offensive to modern evangelical ears!

One person wrote to the list to say that he had been appointed to an aid agency working in Azerbaijan, and that he was frightened as well he might be. He wanted to know how prayer could conquer his fear and make him strong. One response told him, perhaps perfunctorily: "do your daily meditation – it will teach you everything." This of course is a reference to the most famous saying of the Desert fathers, when someone asked the Abba a whole lot of questions, he replied: "Go and sit in your cell; your cell will teach you everything."

Thomas Keating is one contemporary writer on contemplative prayer and life who has paid attention to the psychological implications of it all. He sees silent and still place as the area where I consent, deeply, finally and radically, to God's work in dismantling the False Self, and bringing to birth the True Self. The False Self, he says, is the accumulation of all my infantile strategies for survival and emotional programmes for happiness:

*Our spiritual journey does not start with a clean slate. We carry with us a pre-packaged set of values, and preconceived ideas, which, unless confronted and redirected, will soon scuttle our journey, or else turn it into pharisaism, the occupational hazard of religious and spiritual people.*⁶

This dismantling is not done overnight! It goes on over the months and years, while the True Self,⁷ in whom God abides, slowly emerges from behind all the accretions of false Self. Thus each time of contemplative prayer is "a small death" to the False Self. I deeply consent to this process when I pray, and I sit with empty hands because the process is something I can never do myself. I relinquish my omnipotence and any need to control. This means the courage to stay with both storms of change which may come in my awareness, with exposure of my memories, and inner truths and decrepitude – and with long periods in which nothing may seem to be happening.

No one however, learns to pray by reading about it or studying it, or by talking about it. Those who have stayed for a while in a contemplative monastery will have discovered how difficult it is to get one of the monks or nuns to engage in any lengthy conversation. They require, first, that you engage with them in the hours of prayer, which is at another level altogether. They will smile, and make you welcome, and talk about trivialities, and perhaps ask you about yourself... But always, it is back to the Opus, the work of prayer, which is where we are known, and grow.

However, we do have a couple of simple, practical "methods" of Contemplative Prayer – however silly and unnecessary they might have seemed to some of the classical writers. The first is "Centering Prayer".⁸

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle Briefly, and silently introduce the sacred word as a symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
3. When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

And the other is the (now almost classic) John Main teaching:⁹

Meditate for Thirty Minutes

Sit down.
Sit still and upright.

Close your eyes lightly.
 Sit relaxed but alert.
 Silently, interiorly, begin to say a single word.
 We recommend the prayer-phrase "Maranatha"
 Recite it as four syllables of equal length.
 Listen to it as you say it, gently, but continuously.
 Do not think or imagine anything – spiritual or otherwise.
 Thoughts and images will likely come, but let them pass.
 Just keep returning your attention – with humility and simplicity –
 to saying your word of faith, from the beginning
 to the end of your meditation.

Laurence Freeman adds some essential provisos:

- Do not try to assess your "progress".
- If you have to look for results, look for them in your life and relationships – how much more loving you are becoming – NOT in any "experiences" in your meditation.
- If you stop meditating for a day, a week, or a year simply return to it again.

All of this is serious attention to Christ – Main, Freeman, Keating – would agree that, to be accurate, what they are encouraging is a preparation for contemplative prayer. It is the making of ourselves available, present, and fully consenting. Everything about true prayer is a gift. It does not come from within ourselves. God may one day take away from us even the sacred word, the mantra, and we will be simply, "unknowingly", in God's presence, as if it were our true habitat, for which we have been created in love.

Postscript – People with busy, active lives.

Quite recently, in a seminar I was leading, I felt constrained to say that it was all very well for me, a retired minister with freedom to organise my own agenda and everything around me. I did not see how people living the kind of life I used to live, 10 to 20 years ago, could manage a discipline of 20-30 minutes prayer, twice a day, if it needed silence and stillness and solitude. I could not see how a parent with a baby, and/or pre-schoolers in the house could do much of this.

Well!! There was no way the group would accept that. The discipline is never likely to be easy, they informed me. But something is the matter with a household which cannot accept or understand that Mum or Dad or whoever may require an uninterrupted space for themselves twice a day – and that they would be unavailable for relatives, friends or telephone. Jesus said we should go into our room and shut the door. Modern telephones can be linked with answerphones, and can also have their rings disabled and their volume function turned right down. The front doorbell can be disabled – or someone can monitor the door. Atheists in a loving family would go along with that, I was instructed.

I was peremptorily informed that nursing mothers, or mothers with toddlers or pre-schoolers, above all, should be able to ask their home to allow space for them, twice a day, to be in solitude and stillness and silence. So, I guess that must be right. Another good reason for a well-functioning family.

So I agree. The inhabitants of any busy home, given sensitivity and understanding could contract with each other that those who wished could have one hour a day for prayer.

Endnotes

1. Romans 8:26; Ephesians 6:18; Hebrews 7:25
2. St John of the Cross, *The Dark Night Stanza 1* – The Collected Works, tr Kavanaugh and Rodriguez (ICS Publications, 1979) p.295
3. All the contemporary writers teach, one does not try a little bit of contemplative prayer!

4. ...such as Ruth Burrows, Norvene Vest, Joan Chittister, Esther de Waal, Frank Tuoti... John Main, Laurence Freeman and Joan Chittister are/were Benedictines; Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington are Cistercian (Trappist) monks. Ruth Burrows is a Carmelite
5. WCCM is what has flowed from the teaching of John Main. Laurence Freeman now leads WCCM
6. Thomas Keating: *Invitation to Love* (New York: Continuum, 1998), P5
7. All this has obvious affinities with the teachings of St Paul on flesh and spirit, e.g. In the letters to the Romans.
8. From *Centering Prayer in Daily Life and Ministry* (ed. Gustave Reininger – New York: Continuum, 1998), P.130 This is a Thomas Keating teaching.
9. In pretty well all writings from John Main and Laurence Freeman, and the WCCM

MYSTICISM, JESUS AND MARCUS BORG by Clarice Greenslade

Marcus Borg is a well-known American theologian, Hundere Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University, author of a number of books and a member of "The Jesus Seminar".

As a young student at seminary Borg became captivated by the question of Jesus, and has been involved in the scholarly quest for the historical Jesus ever since. He tended to limit his work to the prophetic aspect of Jesus' ministry, his involvement with the social and political issues of his day. He explains,

"I studied those parts of the tradition that made sense apart from the God question. Then in my mid-thirties I had a number of experiences of what I now recognise as "nature mysticism". They fundamentally changed my understanding of God, Jesus, religion and Christianity.

The experiences were marked by what the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel called "radical amazement", moments of transformed perception in which the earth is seen as "filled with the glory of God," shining with a radiant presence. They were also moments of connectedness in which I felt my linkage to what is.

They seemed similar to the experiences of Rudolf Otto described as experiences of the "numinous," the awe-inspiring and wonder-evoking "holy," the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (the tremendous, overwhelming mystery that elicits trembling even as it also attracts us in a compelling way). They involved a rediscovery of mystery – not an intellectual paradox, but an experience of sacred mystery.

These experiences, besides being ecstatic, were for me *aha!* moments. They gave me a new understanding of the word *God*. I realised that *God* does not refer to a super-natural being "out there" (which is where I had put God ever since my childhood musings about God "up in heaven"). Rather I began to see, the word *God* refers to the sacred at the centre of existence, the holy mystery that is all around us and within us. God is the nonmaterial ground and source and presence in which "we live and move and have our being".

Thus I began also to understand what it means to say that God is both everywhere present and "up in heaven" – both immanent and transcendent, as traditional Christian theology puts it. As immanent (the root means "to dwell within"), God is not somewhere else, but right here and everywhere. To speak of God as being "up in heaven" – that is transcendent – means that God is not to be identified with any particular thing, not even with the total sum of things.

God is more than everything, and yet everything is in God. Being a thinking type, I began studying experiences of God in both mystical and non-mystical forms. I learned that even though these experiences are extraordinary, they are also quite common, known across cultures, throughout history, and into the present time. Gradually it became obvious to me that God – the sacred, the holy, the numinous – was "real". God was no longer a concept or an article of belief, but had become an element of experience.

This transformation in my understanding of God began to affect my understanding of Jesus. I now was able to see the centrality of God (or "the Spirit" to say the same thing) in Jesus' own life. I began to see Jesus as one whose spirituality – his experiential awareness of the Spirit – was foundational for his life. This perception became the vantage point for what I have since come to understand as the key truth about Jesus: that in addition to being deeply involved in the social world of the everyday, he was also grounded in the world of the Spirit. Jesus' relationship to the Spirit was the source of everything he was".

Borg speaks of the "stream" of such "Spirit persons" who are the central figures in the Biblical tradition – Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Elijah. He then goes on:

"Closer to the time of Jesus there were a number of Jewish holy men or spirit persons. Best known are Honi the Circle-Drawer and Hanina ben Dosa, both of whom were famed for their contemplative prayer and their ability as "miracle-workers"..."

It seems to me that, given that there really are spirit persons and that the Jewish tradition included many such figures, Jesus was clearly a spirit person. The stories of his life in the gospels make this very clear. He had visions, including a vision at his baptism in which, like Ezekiel, he "saw the heavens opened" and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove. That vision was followed by a series of visions in the wilderness in what we typically call the temptation narrative, but which a cultural anthropologist would recognise immediately as a wilderness ordeal or vision quest, characteristic of spirit persons.

Jesus used spiritual practices, including both fasting and prayer. We are told that he prayed for hours at a time, sometimes all night long, and presumably not because his prayer list had gotten exceptionally long. Rather, it seems more likely that he practiced a form of contemplation or meditation similar to that of Hanina ben Dosa and Honi the Circle-Drawer. About them it is said in the Jewish tradition that they would still their hearts before God before they would heal. The practice of wordless meditation is not simply an eastern tradition, but is central to the Jewish-Christian tradition as well."

A FAINT TRACING ON THE SURFACE OF MYSTERY

Annie Dillard: explorer and stalker by Warren Deason

"When you pry open the landscape you find wonders" writes Annie Dillard in her account of her childhood. (AAC) The levers she uses for her exploration are words. Where many mystics might draw back from describing their experience and bemoan the limitation of language, poking at their experience hesitantly with words and stuttering out a sentence, Annie Dillard plunges confidently and deep.

"When you write you lay out a line of words...you make a path boldly and follow it fearfully". (TWL)

For this is exploration and discovery, sometimes you will encounter a dead end and you will have to retrace your steps and start all over. But when the writing gains momentum it gathers a life all its own and threatens its author. "It is a lion you cage in your study". (TWL)

This mixture of awe and apprehension is a feature of her work, and her remarkable "prying open of the landscape" has led many to call her a "modern nature mystic." Though the word mystic would apply, she is suspicious of how it might be understood, as she clearly indicated in an interview she gave to journalist Michael Gross on the release of her latest book, *For the time being*:

"I'm trying to get rid of the idle reader who thinks of me as this little mystic nature writer. That's why I make the beginnings of my books tougher and tougher: if you can't stand this, would you please put this book down. Don't buy it, don't write me a letter, don't complain".

And tough it is. This lion she has found in her study sometimes mauls you. Not more than half a dozen pages into *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* we meet her account of the frog deflating like a sad balloon, its guts sucked out by a giant water bug. Her latest book, *For the time being*, opens with a description of one of the more bizarre human birth abnormalities: what she calls the bird-headed dwarves. Then there is her agonising description of the burns suffered by the seven year old child she christened Julie Norwich in her work *Holy the Firm*.

Nature mystic might make you think of someone rhapsodising over the wonder and beauty of it all: sunshine, bird song and soaring trees, an exercise in the appreciation of nature. Not so for Annie Dillard. It is the bizarre, the seemingly cruel, and the inexplicable pain that nestles up against the achingly beautiful that both attracts and repels her, with which she often wrestles and in which yet she finds reason to say both "Why for God's sake?" and "Thank you!"

"Then we can at least wail the right question into the swaddling band of darkness or if it comes to that, choir the proper praise." (PTC)

But before the question and the acclaim comes the work of exploration, if we are up to it.

"The universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest. By a power that is unfathomably secret and holy and fleet. There is nothing to be done about it, but ignore it, or see." (PTC)

If the contemplative stance to life is about awareness, about really seeing, then it is this observation and description that Annie Dillard does so extraordinarily.

"There are lots of things to see, unwrapped gifts and free surprises. The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand."(PTC)

She compares our unwillingness to really see with our unwillingness to stoop down to pick up mere pennies. We really don't appreciate their value, for some of these pennies exist only momentarily and are soon gone:

"A fish flashes and dissolves in the water before my eyes like so much salt". (PTC)

Developing this contemplative posture is about recognising such a poverty in us that even the smallest discovery will make your day. But you must be open to the experience.

"The secret of seeing is to sail on solar wind. Hone and spread your spirit till you yourself are a sail, whetted, translucent, broadside to the merest puff". (PTC)

Nature mystic might also lead you to think of one who ponders the broad canvas, God's grandeur writ large in creation. Yet Dillard often seeks out the small, the microcosm. Not a sea, a river, even a stream, but a creek: Tinker creek.

"(In creeks) is the mystery of the continuous creation and all that providence implies: the uncertainty of vision, the horror of the fixed, the dissolution of the presence, the intricacy of beauty, the nature of perfection". (PTC)

Annie Dillard is often compared to Thoreau, who spent 2 years at Walden Pond, an area of just 26 hectares in eastern Massachusetts and wrote of this retreat in *Walden; or Life in the woods*. She too is content to limit her world to a year in the life of Tinker Creek. But it's the sheer weight of life in all its forms that populates this small creek. Sometimes it is the whole world in a drop of water.

"The creeks are the world with all its stimulus and beauty..."

What Annie Dillard sees in this world is the work of the free and wild Creator, not the orderly pattern of a draughtsman.

"The whole creation is one lunatic fringe. If creation had been left up to me, I'm sure I wouldn't have had the imagination or courage to do more than shape a single, reasonably sized atom, smooth as a snowball, and let it go at that" (PTC)

Nature is profligate. You only need an area the size of Tinker Creek to be overwhelmed.

"Freedom is the world's water and weather, the world's nourishment freely given, its soil and sap: the creator loves pizzazz" (PTC p137)

Someone once asked a prominent biologist what one might discern about the Creator from the natural world. His reply was that the Creator must be "inordinately fond of beetles". Annie Dillard's answer might be that the Creator is forever free and feral.

"The creator goes off on one wild, specific tangent after another or millions simultaneously, with an exuberance that would seem to be unwarranted, and with an abandoned energy sprung from an unfathomable font" (PTC p137).

But Annie Dillard's landscape can just as easily be vast: not just the natural world, but the whole human condition. In *Teaching a stone to talk* she ranges from the Galapagos Islands to polar expeditions. The latter she juxtaposes with her experience of attending worship in a tiny Catholic Church. She is drawn, like the polar explorers, to pursue what they called the Pole of Relative inaccessibility, except her Pole of Relative inaccessibility is the metaphysical Absolute:

"That point of the spirit farthest from every accessible point of spirit in all directions". (TASTT)

As one would be foolish to undertake a polar expedition alone, so the worshipper needs the community of worshippers "clumped on an ice flow drifting over the black polar sea". C. S. Lewis' powerful lion, Aslan, in

his Narnia Chronicles, was described as good, but not safe. So too is this Absolute, which Annie Dillard meets in the world and worship. She laments the bumbling slapstick nature of the worship, the careless and naive way we frolic between the lion's paws.

"Does anyone have any idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offence, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return". (TASTT)

Yet there is an unmistakable affection for this community, however naively and erratically it reaches for the Absolute, for indeed "We are nearing the Pole".

Annie Dillard poses the question of the agnostic as "Who turned on the lights?" and that of the person of faith as "Whatever for?" As both explorer and stalker she wrestles with this latter question honestly, startlingly, wonderfully and painfully in her writing. She wants to learn as she wrestles with the mystery we call God. She wants to learn as she wrestles with the enigma of our world and ourselves, for "Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery".

Abbreviations:

TASTT - *Teaching a stone to talk: expeditions and encounters*. Harper and Row, New York, 1982.

PATC - *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Harper and Row, New York, 1974.

AAC - *An American childhood*. Harper and Row, New York, 1987.

TWL - *The writing life*. Harper and Row, New York, 1989.

A SELECTION OF GEMS

Oh, you loving God, who could deserve something like this,
if you did not give it from the freedom of love!

- Adelheid, as she rests in the loving of Christ.

* * * * *

I am gradually learning that the call to gratitude asks us to say,
"everything is grace."

When our gratitude for the past is only partial,
our hope for a new future can never be full.

To reclaim our history in its totality means
that we no longer relate to our past as years in which only
good times can be remembered, and bad times need to be forgotten,
but as opportunities for an ongoing conversion of the heart.

If we are to be truly ready to ask for a new task in the service of God,
truly free to be sent into a new mission, our entire past,
gathered into the spaciousness of the converted heart,
must become the energy that moves us toward the future.

- Henri Nouwen

* * * * *

The universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest. By a power that is unfathomably secret, and holy, and fleet. There is nothing to be done about it, but to ignore it, or see. And like Billy Bray I go on my way, and my left foot says "Glory," and my right foot says "Amen": in and out of Shadow Creek, upstream and down, exultant, in a daze, dancing to the twin silver trumpets of praise.

- Annie Dillard

* * * * *

... we can at least wail the right question into the swaddling band of darkness, or, if it comes down to that, choir the proper praise.

- Annie Dillard

* * * * *

Learn to be like this before God:
abandoned, surrendered, ready to receive anything
from people and anything from God.

- Anthony Bloom

JULIAN OF NORWICH – ONE OF THE EARLY ENGLISH MYSTICS

by Caroline M. Leys

Julian of Norwich is one of the early English mystics (c1342-1416). Although we know of her as "Julian", in fact that name probably became associated with her because she was a recluse at St. Julian and St. Edward's, Conisford. Her closest English contemporaries were the anonymous author of The Cloud of Unknowing, and Margery Kempe, but the works of these three people illuminate completely different aspects of Christian life for us.

The title given to recluses who formally chose (or were called to) a life of prayer was anchorite. This comes from the Greek word: *anachoreo* - I withdraw.¹ The life of an anchorite was clearly defined and ritually contained. The anchorite was blessed and sanctified with a ceremony of enclosure that contained most of the symbolism of the burial service. The individual had some comfort with several rooms and perhaps a garden, a servant, and a cat to keep rodents out. Once the ceremony of enclosure was complete, leaving the enclosure would result in excommunication for the anchorite. I guess this meant that the conclusion of the vocation was in physical or "metaphysical" death.

Julian is still known to us because of her record of the "Showings". These were 16 visions which Julian experienced whilst close to death at thirty-and-a-half years old. She made a record of these visions shortly after the experience, with a small number of explanatory notes, and then wrote an expanded version of the showings nearly twenty years later. Only one copy of the shorter version exists, in a collection of medieval devotional literature, and there are three manuscripts of the longer version.²

Julian's gift to us is multi-faceted. Her writing provides a wonderful insight into one medieval woman's spiritual journey. She models for us how an initial visionary/ spiritual experience can be built on and developed through life experience, prayer and reflection. Her visions are analysed metaphorically as well as in a matter-of-fact style, and therefore she reminds us that spirituality can be practical as well ephemeral. Julian provides us with some wonderful insights into the passion of Christ, the enveloping presence of God, the appropriate place of sin and forgiveness, the motherhood of Mary and the motherhood of the Christ. Essentially Julian is so sure of the love of God and the love of Christ and the love of the universe for the Creator, that she views all theological assumptions through this filter. Everything is recounted in the same clear, reassuring manner that we may remember our mother using to explain the answer to some complex and troubling childhood question.

The fact that I have had this revelation does not mean that I am good. I am good only in so far as I love God the better: if you love God more than I do then you are by that much better than I. I am not trying to tell the wise something they know well already; but I am seeking to tell the uninstructed, for their great peace and comfort. And of comfort we all have need. It was certainly not shown me because God loved me more than other lowly souls in grace, for I am quite sure that there must be many who have never had any sort of revelation or vision beyond the

ordinary teaching of Holy Church, and who love God better than I. When I look at myself in particular I am obviously of no account, but by and large I am hopeful, for I am united in love with all my fellow Christians.

It is upon this unity that all those of mankind who are to be saved must depend. God, as I see it, is everything that is good; he has made the whole of creation, and loves all that he has made. And whoever loves his fellow Christians for God, loves all there is. For everything is included in the 'mankind who are to be saved': everything, I say, that has been created, and the Maker of all as well!³

Julian describes herself as "unlettered" (Chapter 2), however the translator of my version makes these points:

Her vocabulary is a tolerably wide one, with a certain predilection for words of Latin or French derivation. Her English is a blend of East Anglian and Northern dialects...Theologically, Julian's language and style are accurate and precise, whether she is dealing with dogma or spirituality. There is no sign of her being untutored here.⁴

I wonder if Julian used the description of herself as being unlettered, because her experience was that many supposedly "well lettered" colleagues held clearly divergent positions on forgiveness and the "loving-abandonedness" of God. Actually in Julian's simplicity, clarity and sureness, I am reminded of written accounts and video interviews of those who have survived near-death experiences. Many of these people describe a complete and life-changing assurance of awesome love and peace, and they live on determined to express this assurance to those around them.⁵ Rather as Mary is said to have "treasured these things and pondered them in her heart"(Luke 2:19), Julian seems to have made sure that her visions were accurately captured and then stepped aside from the pressures of everyday life in order to develop her understanding of their application.

Julian's sixteen visions were a series of pictorial, physical, metaphorical and intellectual experiences whilst she was close to death. In her account she usually describes the image, then develops the metaphorical content of the colours and persons in the scene, finally she explains what the visionary and metaphorical content means practically and theologically. Whilst she does question her own education, Julian doesn't question the accuracy of her experience or her interpretation. However she makes it clear that her understanding is always subject to the judgement of the Church.

This offers some interesting insights for those of us who companion others on their spiritual journey. Firstly that we need to offer a style of hospitality which welcomes careful exploration of dreams, "extra-sensory" experiences, imaginary use of Scripture and visionary material. Secondly we need to value such experiences and material as possibly at least having application in the life of the individual. Thirdly we need to be open to the notion that sometimes such gifts are given to an individual for the wider community. Fourthly we are called to assist the individual to process these experiences in order for them to move from the ephemeral to the practical. Fifthly we have the opportunity to practise and encourage some discernment about when such material connects with tradition and/ or builds up the Body of Christ. Finally we have the chance to seek, with those we companion, for evidence of spiritual fruit in the life of the individual or the community.

When I was invited to prepare an article for this publication, I decided to spend the next six weeks praying my way through the expanded version of the Revelations of Divine Love. I find that I have enjoyed this process very much. Whilst there are many famous excerpts from Julian which I could finish with, I am going to offer you one that I believe conveys her absolute sense of the love and sufficiency of God.

On another occasion I was led in imagination down onto the seabed, and there I saw green hills and valleys looking as though they were moss-covered, with seaweed and sand. This I understood to mean that if a man or a woman were under-sea and saw God ever present with him (as indeed God is) he would be safe in body and soul and take no hurt. Moreover he would know comfort and consolation beyond all power to tell. For God's will is that by faith we should see him continually, although it seems that we are seeing him so little. By this faith he makes us ever to gain grace. His will is to be seen; his will is to be sought; his will is to be awaited and trusted.⁶

Good Books:

Flinders, Carol Lee- **Enduring Grace, Living Portraits of Seven Women Mystics**. Harper, San Francisco, 1993.

Hazard, Davis - **I Promise You a Crown**. Bethany House Publishers, 1995. Please note that this contains paraphrased material from Julian, as well as excerpts from the original text.

Petroff, Elizabeth (ed)- **Medieval Women's Visionary Literature**. Oxford University Press, NY, 1986.

Endnotes:

1 Julian of Norwich – Revelations of Divine Love, translation by Clifton Wolters. Penguin 1966 Pp.17,21

2 Julian, p.13

3 Julian, Chapter 9, p.75

4 Julian, p.19

5 Cherie Sutherland – Life After Near Death Experiences. Bantam, Australia 1992

6 Julian, Chapter 10, p. 77

RICHARD ROLLE – MYSTIC AND VERNACULAR THEOLOGIAN*

by Hugh Kemspter

The Life and Writings of Richard Rolle

Richard Rolle was born around the turn of the fourteenth century at "Thornton, near Pickering" in Yorkshire, and died in 1349 probably from the plague.¹ Most of what we know of his biography comes from his own writings, and the *Office* of lessons and antiphons that was drawn up in the 1380s, in an attempt to effect his canonisation. The *Office* didn't achieve its aim, but the cult that was inspired by this young hermit Rolle flourished for some 200 years after his death. Rolle was a prolific writer in both Latin, and latterly in Middle English, and in the fifteenth century was one of the most widely copied of English authors (Hope Emily Allen lists some 29 writings in both Latin and English, and over 400 manuscripts that contain one or more of Rolle's works – cf. Julian of Norwich, 6 manuscripts).

So how did this very ordinary son of William Rolle, a servant of the landowner John de Dalton, come to attain such a notable career as a mystic?

Richard must have been a bright lad, because at the age of 13 or 14 he received a scholarship to study at Oxford University. In his 19th year, however, he became disenchanted with his studies and dropped out. There is a delightful story in the Lesson I of the *Office*, in which Richard arranges a secret meeting with his favourite sister in the woods near their home (no doubt afraid of his parents' reaction to his decision to leave Oxford). Richard mysteriously asks her to bring two dresses, one grey and one white, and their fathers' rain-hood. He then proceeds to rip the sleeves off the grey tunic and the buttons off the white one. He strips off, then puts on the white dress, and the now sleeveless grey one on top. Finally he dons his father's rain-hood, and stands before his gob-smacked sister: "How do I look?" Rolle's sister (understandably) screams: "*Frater meus insanit: My brother's gone mad.*" And that is the last we hear of Rolle's family – no doubt things were a little tense at home after that!

Had he totally lost it? Possibly, but more than revealing a taste for cross-dressing gained in Oxford, this scene from the *Office* marks the launch of Rolle's life as a self-styled hermit. In the story Rolle is putting together a D.I.Y. hermits' habit. This is typical of Rolle, who does very little by the book. Nicholas Watson's study of Rolle is entitled *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority*, and is an interesting look at how Rolle created his own authority rather than go down the usual paths laid out by the church and society.²

Rolle's *Invention of Authority* continues in Lesson II of the office. Hermits required a patron to support their life of prayer, and Richard was very creative in acquiring his sponsor. He goes to the local church to pray, and accidentally (on purpose one might suppose!) sits in the family pew of his father's former employer and local landowner, John de Dalton. The Lady of the Manor later arrives for church only to find this eccentrically dressed young man in her pew. Her sons are all for turfing the intruder out, but lady Dalton is impressed by his deep devotion. The *Office* informs us that the next day Rolle was permitted to preach a sermon, which he did with such "virtue and power" that every one there was moved to tears. Lady Dalton was so impressed she invited him for lunch, but again he demonstrates his great piety by hiding away in an outhouse rather than joining the feast. Eventually lady Dalton finds the humble hermit and makes a place for him at the high table. He has found himself a patron.

Obviously the readings in the *Office* are somewhat prone to hagiography, but they do demonstrate the eccentric charisma of this self-styled holy man.

Rolle's self-confident attempts to "invent" himself and his authority as a mystic shine through in his own writings as well as the *Office*. Alliteration was a popular form of writing in the Middle Ages, but the exuberant Rolle takes it to the extreme in one of his early texts, *Melos Amoris* (Songs of Love). The eccentric young mystic alliterates to such a degree that the meaning of the text almost becomes lost behind the style. Even if you can't read Latin this is clearly evident in the passage below:

Domine Deus meus, tu diligis deuotos: siquidem sciuit quod semper suspiro secure ut saner. Inimici insurgunt ut prepediant pergentem ne Cupitum contempler. Dignare dirigere me motum a malis. Si peccatum peregi quod non putauit, precor ut pungar penaliter ut prauus donec penitus a paruulo purgetur qui traditus sum tibi ut teneam tutamen.³

Clifton Wolters notes: "It is difficult to avoid the impression that at times Rolle is 'so inebriated with the exuberance of his own verbosity' that his alliterations have obscured his thought – and made life unnecessarily hard for the reader."⁴

Rolle was much more than a charismatic eccentric, however. His writing was to play a major part in the changing the face of English spirituality, and would set the agenda for the vernacular theologians who followed him. Essentially Rolle Anglicised and, perhaps most significantly, popularised a current of mystical thought and practise that had been developing on the Continent for 200 years through the writings of mystics such as Bernard of Clairvaux, William of Thierry, Hadewijch, Mechtild of Magdeburg, Hildegard of Bingen, Eckhart, Ruusbroec and so on. It was an affective piety that placed great emphasis on the emotions and the almost bodily experience of God (in Rolle's writing the trio of spiritual sensations often feature: heat, sweetness and song).

A vivid example of this affective experience of God that is so central to Rolle's mysticism is found in the prologue to one of his best known works, *Incendium Amoris* or the *Fire of Love*:

I cannot tell you how surprised I was the first time I felt my heart begin to warm. It was real warmth too, not imaginary, and it felt as if I was actually on fire. I was astonished at the way the heat surged up, and how this new sensation brought great and unexpected comfort. I had to keep feeling my breast to make sure there was no physical reason for it! But once I realised that it came entirely from within, that this fire of love had no cause, material or sinful, but was the gift of my Maker, I was absolutely delighted, and wanted my love to be even greater.⁵

Although the Latin medium of this text restricted his early audience, Rolle seems aware of a wider audience even at this stage:

I offer, therefore, this book for attention, not of the philosophers and sages of this world, not of great theologians bogged down in their interminable questionings, but of the simple minded and unlearned, who are seeking rather to love God than to amass knowledge. For God is not known by argument, but by what we do and how we love.⁶

The following century, like others of his Latin writings, this text had been translated into Middle English and was widely available. In her *Book Margery Kempe* (a middle class woman unable to read or write) mentions only three mystical texts, Rolle's *Fire* being one of them.

Between 1322 and 1340, everything Rolle wrote was in Latin. In his last nine years, however, he began to write also in the vernacular, a radical move for a time when Latin was essentially seen as the only legitimate language of the spirit. Some of these English works were addressed quite clearly to solitaries, such as Margaret Kirkby, for whom Rolle wrote *The Form of Living*, but by this time a wider audience was also becoming evident.

One of his most mature works, written near the end of his life, was *Emendatio Vitae* or the *Mending of Life*. Gone are the extravagant stories of his spiritual exploits, and the confusing experiments with style; instead we have an A to Z of the mystical life, a neat little programme on how to progress from conversion to contemplation! Although its early audience was restricted because of the Latin, by the end of the century it had been translated into Middle English, and by the end of the fifteenth century there were no less than seven independent translations that had been made. It had become a veritable "best seller" especially popular among lay people (like Margery Kempe) with an interest in the contemplative life.

By the end of his life, Rolle's call was to anyone, lay or religious, prepared to commit to a life of disciplined prayer. You didn't need to join an order, or learn Latin, or even seek spiritual direction from your priest. All you needed was a commitment to love God and lead a disciplined life of prayer. His writings were radical in an age in which the church was struggling to maintain control over the things of the spirit. As Watson writes, Rolle's writings became "instruments for empowering unprepared (ie. uneducated) readers with the capacity to think of themselves as having passed beyond the need for penitence into a state of near-permanent joy in God." Rolle was a pioneer in the late-medieval English democratisation of contemplative spirituality. Deep and intimate encounters with God were not just the domain of monks, nuns and clerics any more – anyone could be a mystic (with lots of hard work and commitment).

Although Rolle was painfully orthodox, the democratisation and the breakdown of the secular and the sacred which Rolle's work implicitly advocates, laid the way for John Wycliff's writing in the 1380s, the "heretical" Lollard movement of the fifteenth century, and ultimately the reformation of the sixteenth. His writing also provided a bench-mark for the four vernacular theologians who were to take up where Rolle had left off: Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, and Margery Kempe.

* Using contemporary Middle English.

Endnotes:

1 This outline of Rolle's biography is based on that in Rosamund S. Allen, ed., *Richard Rolle: The English Writings* (London:SPCK, 1989), pp9-25

2 Nicholas Watson, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority* (Cambridge:C.U.P., 1991)

3 David Daintree, *Later Latin* (Hobart: Archetype, 1994), p.73

4 Clifton Wolters, trans., *The Fire of Love: Richard Rolle* (London: Penguin, 1972), p.31

5 Wolters, p.45

6 Wolters, p.46

CLARE OF ASSISI AND HER TEACHING ON CONTEMPLATIVE AWARENESS OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD

by Briege O'Hare osc

Clare of Assisi lived in the early 13th century and was the companion of Francis of Assisi, one of the most loved saints in the Church. They brought in a new era in Christian history with a spiritual teaching which attracted people from all walks of life. At this time in the middle ages the mystical path was always understood in terms of ascent, i.e. to experience the presence of God one must transcend one's humanness and move into the realm of the spirit. Consequently, spiritual literature of the time frequently used the metaphors of climbing mountains or of climbing ladders as describing the process of transcendence. Phrases like, "The ladder of perfection" were in common usage. Francis and Clare brought in a wholly different mystical teaching and spoke rather of "following in the footprints of Christ". By this they meant that God is to be experienced, not in rising above our humanity, but in the wholehearted and truthful embracing of our human condition; in walking barefoot on the earth and connecting with the God of life in all creation. Just as God embraced the human condition in Christ, so we too by embracing our own humanity in all its poverty, weakness and frailty, are one with the divine.

A New Consciousness

Clare of Assisi befriended a woman called Agnes of Prague who was a royal princess (daughter of the King of Bohemia). When Agnes heard of this new teaching of Francis and Clare she gave up her royal status and established a contemplative community in Prague similar to Clare's community in Assisi. Agnes's option out of a life in a royal court in order to take a risk of seeking life in the freedom of Clare's beautiful vision of "following in the footsteps of Christ" is something which seems to have so thrilled and excited Clare that she could hardly contain her joy!

"I am filled with such joys for your well-being and happiness and marvellous progress"

"I sigh with so much more exultation in the Lord".

"Truly I can rejoice – and no one can rob me of such joy – since having at last under heaven what I have desired." (3rd letter of Clare)

Something extraordinary seems to have happened to Agnes. She seems to have experienced a whole new shift in consciousness, a profound insight into the mystery of Christ, and she must have communicated this in the letter she wrote to Clare.

Clare for her part is ecstatic with joy because the grace she prayed for Agnes, whom she loved, has been granted. So now, even though they are separated physically by many miles, they are now together in the same spiritual dimension of experience as they move even more deeply in the joy of life in Christ. For us too as Christians this is the heart of our mission. Wherever we go, we are seen by others as people to whom something different has happened; we are seen to be people who live in a different realm of consciousness, people who have been awakened to a "seeing" into the mystery of our human existence; and it is this shared "seeing" that bonds us, empowers us and moves us out to others in a love that transcends the ordinariness of people's normal human pre-occupations.

Living in God's presence

All of us are invited to this; to live a life moved in God is to live life from a contemplative consciousness. We may not be called to live a contemplative life which is a specific vocation, but we are all gifted naturally with a capacity for contemplative awareness. Any child is a contemplative; recall your own childhood and remember the simple capacity that you had as a child for wonder at the created earth, at the beauty of this world; and hopefully that is not lost to us. But we can lose connectedness with this natural gift, sometimes through our own neglect, or through the busy-ness of our lifestyle, or just because of the unfortunate condition of our western consciousness which has become so rationalistic over the past couple of centuries. This happened to us because of the Cartesian revolution, which in effect separated the soul from the body and our self-understanding as well as our understanding of the created universe, became more and more mechanistic. We know that our western medicine still operates out of this mechanistic worldview where the body is seen as a machine rather than treating the whole person as a living embodied spirit. While as Christians we have never espoused this materialistic philosophy, our whole conditioning has been so profoundly influenced by it that we are hardly aware to what degree we have been separated from living from our true spiritual nature which is essentially the capacity for immense wonder and joy and engagement with all of life and the myriad manifestations of the divine beauty that await us at the threshold of our deepest selves.

So Clare is rejoicing that Agnes has made the option to live in this profound experience of the presence of God. This is the heart of our Christian mission. It is not about the works that we do, even though action is undoubtedly a constitutive part of our Christian lives. Our ministry is not about bringing God where God isn't – *it is rather about being able to name the presence of God in our own experience and in the experience of those to whom we minister.*

Naming the Presence of God

But how is this done? How do we name the presence of God in our experience and in the experience of others? How do we come into Agnes's experience of a transformed consciousness and become people who see with new eyes? For without this "seeing" we are unable to follow in the footprints of Christ and even our best efforts can leave us bereft of any true sense of aliveness and can often reduce us to a suffocating religious idealism. This in turn can so dishearten us that we take refuge in finding all our meaning in the work that we do. This is not to say that the service we give is not an essential element in our self definition but sometimes we can identify with our work to such an extent that we lose connectedness with our true souls because we are not being nourished by those gifts which come from taking time to be with the more profound mysteries of life. To follow in the footprints of Christ then, is to enter deeply into the essence of our own humanity; it is very much an inhabiting of this earth; it is feet on the earth; it is finding the God incarnate in every living thing and especially in the embrace of the totality of our own humanity and the humanity

of our sisters and brothers, even where, and indeed especially where we are most frail and vulnerable. It is this "seeing" which for Clare is contemplation and it is not just a passive, reflective mode but rather it engages us at every level of our being.

We are not Separate

Clare writes to Agnes, "You supply most wonderfully what is lacking both in me and the other sisters..." (3rd letter v.4). This is another wonderful insight of Clare's into the nature of contemplative awareness, to the "seeing" of God's presence where, because of the incarnation we are all interconnected and interdependent at the deepest level. We now live in an age of quantum physics where the reality of interconnectedness of everything has been scientifically demonstrated and this is beyond anything Clare would have understood. More and more quantum theory is moving away from the Newtonian, mechanistic view of the universe towards seeing the earth as a living organism where everything is interconnected to everything else; nothing is separate. But while Clare may not have known this scientifically, she certainly realised it from a mystical perception; that is to say from a contemplative awareness, she saw that everything is interdependent and she is exhorting Agnes to realise that her choice to live contemplatively is a choice to enter into the experience of the oneness of all that God has created and especially of the mutual interdependence of human beings.

In our time we are coming to understand this as never before. Nothing exists separately; our science, our psychology, our politics all point to this. Every event, no matter how apparently insignificant, has an immediate effect everywhere else. Everything we do, everything we say, think and believe affects everyone else and in terms of our mission as Christians the implications are considerable. The world needs people who are willing to move into a deeper realm of consciousness in order to connect with the divine source of all peace and harmony and love and in the very act of doing this we affect the consciousness of all living beings. Clare understood that we need each other far more than we realise. A mechanistic worldview sees relations to other people as external or accidental whereas a contemplative consciousness sees our relations to people, our environment and our culture as constitutive of our very identity.

The Subtle Infiltration of Evil:

Clare writes to Agnes, "By a special gift of wisdom...you have brought to ruin the subtleties of our crafty enemy..."

In order to help Agnes realise the immensity of the mission in which she is engaged as a co-worker with Christ, Clare goes on to remind her of the other side of the reality of our human experience where we are caught in the struggle with unconscious forces and indeed the collective evil of this world. Anyone who has experienced contemplative prayer knows that it is not long before one is confronted with these realities both within the depths of oneself and in a heightened sensitivity to evil in the outer world. This theme of conflict with the powers of darkness is woven like a thread right back throughout all the history of Christian spirituality. Jesus himself, at the commencement of his mission went into the desert to confront the forces of evil; and right from the beginnings of religious life in the Church there has been an awareness of the need to engage in the same struggle as Christ – not so much as an asceticism but as a way of participating in hastening the cosmic victory of Christ. Clare is making Agnes aware of this aspect of her involvement in the salvific mission of Christ and it is something of which we need to be continually aware.

There is much evidence in the lives of Francis and Clare that they engaged in this kind of spiritual warfare and it would be a mistake for us to fail to recognise our need to do the same, for it is these powerful unconscious forces within us which can take us over and wreak havoc in our lives. It is important to be aware of what Clare was reminding Agnes that it is often in our struggles in prayer and even in our struggles in relating to one another's frailty or our own frailty, that we are a source of spiritual life and deliverance for people. It is for this reason that Clare goes on immediately to tell Agnes that it is precisely by her humanity, her faith and her strong embracing of her own poverty that she takes hold of God's Kingdom hidden in the world and in human hearts. Yes, the world and the human heart may indeed be polluted with every kind of evil but it is our mission as Christians to be able to move within the depths of this to uncover and name the presence of God because,

- through our contemplative awareness
- through our willingness to take time to experience the deeper levels of our own souls
- through our inhabiting of this earth with profound reverence for all of creation
- through our refusal to live in "separateness" and our choice to live in the oneness of all living things in God
- through our embracing of the poverty and frailty of our own humanity

Through all of these, which are the heart of our Christian life, we have the eyes to see and the prophetic voice to say to others, "Look, behold the Lamb of God!"

CATHERINE OF SIENA, WOMAN OF OUR TIMES by Mary Concannon

Catherine Benincasa, more commonly known as Catherine of Siena from her Italian birthplace, was one of the most extraordinary women the world has known. Born in 1347, the daughter of a cloth dyer, she lived a mere thirty three years, yet today her writings, teachings and activities still bear tremendous fruit. Without formal education or status her influence cut across the divide of social, religious and political pretensions. This influence was rooted in what is generally called her mystical life.

Fifteen hundred years ago Augustine, that great observer of human nature, commented, "*Our hearts are made for you, O God, and they are restless till they rest in you*". More modern writers have identified this human hunger as a mystical yearning, a thirst for God. However, we may be tempted to regard Augustine's insight somewhat incredulously when we apply them to ourselves. Mystical experiences are what characterise the saints, we may say, and their absence marks our lives as non-mystical by contrast. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. Twentieth century theologians such as Karl Rahner and William Johnston together with many of their predecessors like Thomas Aquinas and John of the Cross point out that mysticism stands at the heart of the baptismal heritage intended for all Christians. The presence and creative activity of the Trinity in every human life defines true mysticism. It is precisely because the mystics illumine for us the mystical dimension of our own lives that theologians like Karl Rahner have stressed the necessity of discovering the mystics. Rahner was specific: "The Christian of the future will be a mystic or not exist at all".

Mystical experiences were a very frequent occurrence for Catherine. The first recorded is a vision when she was about six, of Christ seated on a royal throne giving her his blessing. Visions, ecstasies and other mystical phenomena were part and parcel of her life. This is a dimension of her story which modern people often find bewildering. In fact our age treats such things with considerable scepticism. It was probably for this reason that her first biographer, Raymond of Capua, was careful to authenticate his account of these happenings with the word of reliable witnesses. The occurrence of these phenomena in her life is undeniably true.

However their presence is not what makes her mysticism important. Phenomena are by definition the exception not the rule and they are certainly not the essence of mysticism. At best they may be described as one expression of a very deep relationship with God. True Christian mysticism may be valued by the presence of the virtues and the operation of the gifts of the Spirit. In short the worth of Christian mysticism may be judged by the degree in which the mystic is increasingly conformed to the image and likeness of Christ.

It is by this standard that Catherine may be acclaimed as a really great mystic. Her mysticism was the source and strength of her intense outreach to others. Her prayers give us a good example of this. There are twenty-six of them extant. They were transcribed by others when she prayed aloud, often in ecstasy. In them God is repeatedly praised and thanked. They also demonstrate her constant drive for the salvation of others. It is this last characteristic which gives the lie to the mistaken belief that mystics are too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use.

In her prayers we find Catherine pleading passionately with God for mercy to all – the world, the Church, the Pope, her friends, all in need. Intercession was for her an expression of her love commitment both to God and her neighbour. Her sentiments are expressed well in the excerpt from Prayer 12:

"Eternal goodness, you want me to gaze into you and see that you love me, to see that you love me gratuitously, so that I may love everyone with the very same love. You want me, then, to love and serve my neighbour gratuitously by helping them spiritually and materially as much as I can...

"...by helping them spiritually and materially as much as I can".

Catherine did just that in response to God's love with an extraordinary array of good works. She began by nursing the sick and caring for the poor but soon felt herself called into the public arena as a peacemaker between feuding families and warring Italian states. This public life was as extraordinary as her mystical life from which it took its origins. It led her into political and religious circles far beyond the expected realm of an unschooled daughter of an artisan worker. A spiritual director of great repute and an ardent worker for justice Catherine is nevertheless best known for her strenuous efforts at church reform. She literally wore herself out with these efforts and died in 1380.

Catherine's written works are just three, her *Prayers*, her *Letters* and a book called *The Dialogue*. These works make clear that while her life may sometimes be characterised by the extraordinary, she knew from personal experience that the ordinary way to holiness is that of faith, hope and love and is open to all Christians. She wrote to Francesco, a tailor in Florence:

"The way has been made. It is the doctrine of Christ crucified. Whoever walks along this way... reaches the most perfect light."

An examination of Catherine and her teachings show us the truth about mysticism. Mystics are those who have been transformed by what she called "the fire of holy desire".

We should allow their example to kindle within us that same fire which brings each of us to the unique perfection of ourselves in Christ.

BOOK REVIEWS

THE LESSONS OF LOSS

- A guide to coping

By Dr Robert Neimeyer PhD

Reviewed by Aynsley Mackie

This is a very readable book, designed both for those who have been bereaved and for those who seek to help the bereaved. Dr Neimeyer moves away from the more traditional views of stages of grief feeling that these can be restrictive, making people feel that they have to go through each stage. He also makes a point that people grieve very differently and need the freedom to do what is right for them.

In brief:

1. Dr Neimeyer sees grieving as an active process of transformation.
2. He covers the different types of loss from death, to relationships, to job loss.
3. He helps the reader mobilise the personal and social resources for healing.
4. Suggests ritualising and memorialising the people and things we miss.
5. Develops a fresh theory of grieving as a process on "meaning reconstruction".
6. Uses actual stories of actual people struggling through loss.
7. Argues that traditional theories of grief are too superficial and simplistic.
8. Outlines concrete personal applications that are compatible with a meaning reconstruction approach to help with grief.

In the chapter, "Activity of Grieving", Neimeyer stresses the point that while bereavement is a "choiceless event", there are a number of challenges in mourning which help the mourner through this difficult time.

1. Acknowledge the reality of the loss, both the personal loss and the loss to the wider family.
2. Open yourself to the pain. Once the immediate shock and excruciating pain are diminishing gently, explore the many feelings that arise.
3. Revise your assumptive world. As well as being robbed of someone or things we love, our beliefs and assumptions can also be undercut, leaving us vulnerable and unsure.
4. Reconstruct your relationship to that which has been lost. Death transforms, changes relationships from physical presence to symbolic connection.
5. Reinvent yourself. Part of us dies each time someone we love dies and we will never be the same person again. As we sift through the lessons of loss, we can come to approach life with renewed priorities, with a clearer sense of what is important.

In the chapter "Meaning reconstruction and the experience of loss" Neimeyer outlines six straightforward propositions that together offer a fresh vantage point from which to view human mortality and bereavement.

1. Death as an event can validate or invalidate the constructions on the basis of which we live, or it may stand as a novel experience for which we have no constructions.
2. Grief is a personal process, one that is idiosyncratic, intimate and inextricable from our sense of who we are.
3. Grieving is something we do, not something that is done to us.
4. Grieving is the act of reconstructing a personal world of meaning that has been challenged by loss.
5. Feelings have functions, and should be understood as signals of the state of our meaning making efforts in the wake of challenges to the adequacy of our constructions.
6. We construct and reconstruct our identities as survivors of loss in negotiation with others.

In the meaning making model developed in *Lessons of Loss*, the journey of grieving is quite a different one. Loss, in this view, forces the unbidden exploration of a new, if initially painful world, on a boundless journey from which we will never completely return. In the course of our travels we will be confronted by innumerable choices, some apparently trivial, other existentially consequential, but none of which can be easily resolved by consulting a standard guidebook. Gone is the comforting familiarity of universal guideposts, but gone too is the implication that the twists and turns of our personal journey represent dangerous deviations to be diagnosed or distrusted. Moreover, while appreciating that each traveller ultimately experiences a different landscape, this approach to mourning emphasises the joint role of others in shaping the direction and pace of our journey, whether these others are members of our intimate circle of family and friends, or represent fellow travellers encountered along the way. The grief counsellor too, in this view, acts as a fellow traveller rather than consultant, sharing the uncertainties of the journey, and walking alongside, rather than leading the grieving individual along the unpredictable road towards a new adaptation.

THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE

By Doris Grumbach

Reviewed by Ross Miller

The words contemplative and contemplation are much misused. The true contemplative is on a journey beyond dependence on words, images, symbols, thoughts and feelings. It is a process of waiting on God, relying on God alone to provide prayer.

Over half a century ago at age 27, Doris Grumbach had no religious education or faith.

One day, quite spontaneously, she had a luminous experience which she never doubted, then or later, was an encounter with God.

She then embarked on nearly 50 years as a loyal and active church member, hoping daily to recapture this experience, or to understand why it did not return.

Eventually she wrote to her vicar to explain why she would not be coming any more. Grumbach had been reading about contemplative prayer, and it seemed to her she must pursue this alone. Three years later she is able to write: I believe I have found out something about the proper posture ("proper", remember for me alone, not for everyone, not for those contented with where they are now) in which to wait, something about the spiritual rewards of the Psalter I have chosen to pray, a little about expressing gratitude to "Whose I am" for granting me the place and the clement climate of seclusion, silence, and solitude for prayer...

She is waiting, she is letting go, she is simplifying. And she is drawing on contemporary writers and mystics such as Anthony Bloom, Monica Furlong, Dag Hammarskjold, Thomas Merton, Kathleen Norris, Henri Nouwen, Simone Weil – as well as classics such as Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhart, Martin Luther and the writer of the Cloud of Unknowing.

For most of the last three years she has been occupied with a hideous dose of shingles and consequent neuralgia. Her deep and honest integration of this crisis into her spiritual path is a moving thing to read.

The Presence of Absence is one of the truly important books I have read lately. It will not be comfortable, or for that matter comprehensible, to believers who expect signs and confirmations and consolations as axiomatic in their prayer – or to those for whom only what the Bible prescribes is kosher, and what it proscribes is not.

But I personally find large sections of Grumbach's landscape excitingly familiar. Others may do the same. (I got my copy from Amazon.com).

THE CLOISTER WALK

by Kathleen Norris. Published by Lion PP392 \$24.95 Paperback

Reviewed by Wendy Ward, Wanganui

"Of what possible use are monastic people in the modern world? Who needs poets?" It is these questions and their interrelatedness that Kathleen Norris, a Benedictine oblate and noted poet asks in the *Cloister Walk*. She explores monasticism and its impact on her poetry from lived experience of the monastic life rather than from theoretical deductions. This book is a collection of themes relating to the three years she spends at St. John's Benedictine Abbey, Minnesota.

An oblate is a person, female or male, lay or ordained, married or single, Catholic or Protestant, who makes an abbreviated profession of monastic vows in a particular community and promises to follow the Rule of St. Benedict (a founding document of Christian monasticism) in so far as their situation in life will allow. At its barest this book provides the reader with detailed insight into what goes on behind monastery walls. Kathleen demystifies the daily life of monastics and their guests by describing, with great humour at times the pattern of their days. My favourite example of this humour comes in her great chapter on Jeremiah. The monks at St. John's practise *lectio continua*, which means that they read through whole books of the Bible a section at a time, at morning and evening prayer. It is the turn of Jeremiah. "Know what you have done," Jeremiah shouted at us one morning. But before the monks could get over that ferocious command, the prophet had gone on to a vivid depiction of Israel as a frenzied camel in heat, loudly sniffing the wind, making directionless tracks in the desert. Kathleen points out that the monks are not used to being compared to camels in heat, but they took it pretty well. She says, "I noticed eyebrows going up around the choir and then a kind of quiet assent: *well there are days*. Monks know very well how easy it is to lose track of one's purpose in life...."

Two outstanding chapters are on Jeremiah and the Psalms. As a poet herself, Kathleen has an affinity with Jeremiah, the prophet who writes so poignantly about the pain and distress of his call. She notes both vocations lack the credentials and human values we so desire, but all we have is the authority of the call itself, to be a prophet, a poet, a Benedictine, a contemplative.

Benedictine life is full of paradox because it reflects the upside down world of the gospels. We join the author as she explores how it is that monastics who are ordinary people, are called to live such extraordinary lives. Extremely unproductive lives we might

argue. The output being prayer and worship rather than cars or coffee. We read about the dry humour and little foibles of the monks as well as their hospitality and faithfulness. But there is also a large cast drawn from the dead who make appearances when their feast day is celebrated in the liturgy with party or special supper thrown in too!

This is a book for anyone who takes words seriously. We learn about the process of writing poetry from a very different perspective to what we were taught at school. The emotional toll and communal role of poets from ancient times is described along with the revelation that immersion in liturgy has profoundly influenced her poetry. I liked the way she linked the structure of the day with the creative process, stabilising what can be a fraught and vulnerable time.

Reflection on words leads inevitably to the ultimate Word. Kathleen says, "I wonder if one of the reasons I love the Benedictines so much is that they seldom make big noises about being Christians. Though they live with the Bible more intimately than most people, they don't thump on it or with it...."

As well as chapters on many aspects of Benedictine life, Kathleen frequently makes connections with her life outside the monastery. And so she should, this is her vocation as an oblate to adapt and make relevant the ancient customs of the monastery for those at home. She describes how she does this in her home church where she finds great pleasure in being able to yoke her disparate worlds together so her congregation can benefit.

While at a monastery, I met one of the monks looking in vain for a guest who had forgotten an appointment for spiritual direction. After a search and lengthy wait, he left saying "Ah well, she has the Holy Spirit". No rancour, no impatience, just simple peaceful acceptance. That's what use monastic people are – they show us grace-filled alternatives. Truly they are alternative life-stylers!

DARK NIGHT JOURNEY: INWARD RE-PATTERNING TOWARD A LIFE CENTRED IN GOD

By Sandra Cronk: Pendle Hill Publications 1991, Wallingford, Pennsylvania

Reviewed by Ria Sandberg

"The cross lies at the center of Christian faith with ..profound layers of meaning....The crucifixion points toward a deep mystery, which does not unveil itself to human eyes. The cross brings us face to face with that we cannot fully understand: the death of God's son, the failure of Jesus' ministry...The cross was a complete stripping of any glory, power, knowing, and strength.... Even God's presence was gone. Jesus experienced the emptiness of the dark night."

Sandra Cronk was for ten years a teacher and community member at Pendle Hill, a Quaker center for study and contemplation, near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

During that time she was surprised to find many people speaking about the way the Spirit moved in their lives, having experiences of radical stripping, emptiness and absence of God. Because in everyday life one seldom speaks about such a time in one's life, it is difficult to know how frequent these experiences are, and how people respond to them.

Sandra Cronk has written this book to help those who walk this journey and those who are spiritual friends of dark night travelers. She helps to understand this pathway – its rootedness in Christ's crucifixion, its place as part of apophatic mysticism.

She relates Christ's crucifixion to the experience of the dark night journey. In its pain, death, darkness and emptiness, God gives, in Christ, resurrection and new life.

Sandra Cronk goes on to distinguish the cataphatic path (*via positiva*) from the apophatic path (*via negativa*). Both forms are part of most people's lives. They are two sides of the same reality.

Where the full apophatic pathway is the contemplative tradition – centering prayer- wordless prayer, other prayer and meditational disciplines – making use of Scripture passages, images, reflective thoughts or other – reflect the cataphatic pathway. Sometimes we follow a prayer form by choice, other times the choice is not ours, it is given to us. God's presence is purely a gift, beyond our control.

Sandra Cronk devotes also several pages to distinguish the *via negativa* from the *via moderna* (contemporary assumptions about the nature of Christian faith and life). She does not question the value of the *via moderna*, but points out that in the apophatic way being is more important than doing. "God is understood to be at work most profoundly when an experience of God's presence is absent". Doing Christ-like actions must come from being a Christlike person.

The dark night is part of all spiritual pathways. For some temporary, for others the apophatic way is the major pathway of the spiritual life. It is a time of being re-patterned by God, writes Sandra Cronk. To let go of our 'pillars', "those finite supports on which we have based our life and relationship with God". She mentions two particular pillars of misplaced faith that must be stripped away: 'self' and 'god'. From what 'we' wanted – control of that which gave meaning and power in our lives, - "a 'god' that would take away the terror of facing that empty place which lurked at the limit of all finite things and at the end of our self".

Into this emptiness God brings new life. Gal 2:20a –"I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me".

In chapters 4 and 5 Sandra Cronk writes about contemplative prayer that is available to everyone and the difficulties we may encounter. Deeper knowing (i.e. unknowing or love) is what the Christian tradition has called contemplation, "when we are forced beyond the usual analytical levels of knowing, because we have exhausted the possibilities found there".

The difficulties that block movement in the dark night usually come from the interior responses to the journey. These are anger, terror and selflessness. These blocks are discussed very sensitively and clearly. Many who will read these pages as in indeed this whole book will experience a sense of relief to find so clearly written that which we may find sometimes difficult to put in words.

Her description of 'surrender' to God: "it does not refer to surface relinquishing of one's desires, wishes, and thoughts... Rightly used, surrender means faithfulness. It means saying yes to God's call to be the person God has created us to be....letting go of our protective, clinging behaviour on one or more levels" (and this may be feelings of superiority or inferiority!)... "surrender may [also] involve a strong critique of the existing social order".

Chapter 6 discusses three special occasions of the dark night journey: the extreme curtailment of human activities (e.g. imprisonment, debilitating illness), facing death (yielding our final possession, our physical body), and the inward preparation for ministry and mature Christian living, when our lives are finally in God's hands and not our own. Sandra Cronk writes:...."The re-patterning in our lives which can move us out of this framework in order to be truly centered in God is a massive one. It must be powerful enough to shake loose these deeply imbedded impediments to a life centered in God".

Here she calls for churches and meeting communities to look for ways to give nurture, support and guidance to those whom God is calling to a deeper commitment and service. Failing this, dark night journeyers may be lost to their church and meeting communities. They may even give up the call to servanthood or ministry. She writes: "Busyness in programs of all kinds may be a way to hide from complete surrender to God".

The next chapter discusses the ministry growing out of the dark night. Ministry (servanthood) flows from our experience of God-consciousness, our ongoing one-ness with Christ's self-emptying love... "In the darkness we enter the suffering places in our world and in ourselves and know that God's love is there". There is interior freedom, availability, and compassion.

Sandra Cronk mentions two particular forms of ministry: the Spiritual Nurture ministry and the Prophetic ministry. And again she calls for the churches to understand two patterns of ministry: the Way of Silence and a Life Apart.

The last chapter deals with the role of the spiritual nurturer. She writes: " the goal of the spiritual nurturer is to help the spiritual journeyer see more clearly how God is working in his or her life and thereby to respond more faithfully to God's call in daily living".

For spiritual directors – Sandra calls them spiritual nurturers – a very helpful chapter, in which she describes the role of the listener, interpreter, and guide. Also what nurturing means: pointing the journeyer toward God, only he has the power to create, transform, and sustain us.

The book ends with more than twenty pages of bibliography with resources in the area of spiritual life, spiritual nurture and liminality.

Sandra Cronk writes simply and clearly with the depth of own experience and that of others she has listened to. She writes from the Quaker perspective to her interpretation of the dark night journey. Many will find this book immensely useful.

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What is Christian Meditation?

A Pamphlet available from the
World Community for Christian Meditation NZ Community, C/- Richard Clarke, P.O. Box 27, Otaki Railway. 5560.
Also the Community Newsletter of helpful articles.

This Newsletter will be the last with this title! Some people have been telling us that it has grown beyond the newsletter format so we have made the decision to publish *The Spiritual Growth Ministries Journal* from Winter 2001.

Our theme for the first Journal will be *Contemplative and Contemporary* in which we will explore being and living as contemplatives in the movements and changes of today. If you have any material you would like us to consider for inclusion please send it to me by April 30th 2001.

Mary Concannon is on study leave in the U.S. and will be home for Christmas. She spent two weeks working on supervision of spiritual directors at Burlingame Mercy Centre, then moved on to the Dominican Ashram at Kenosha, Lake Michigan for a few weeks of contemplation and rest before moving on to the Aquinas Centre at Louisville, Kentucky for a number of courses. Mary arrives home on December 13th.

Heather Pearce is maintaining the work of the Training Programme office in Dunedin. With applications now in for next year's Programme our interviewing teams are beginning their work of selecting trainees.

Valerie Bridge has resigned from the Workgroup and Trust and we thank her for her years of contribution to our work. We know God will bless her increasing focus on retreat work in the years ahead.

Our GST stresses are over and the system is working well after all the good work of our Treasurer Robin Guy of Presbyterian Savings and Development Society and Carole Hunt's accurate work as Administrator. Thank you Robin and Carole.

We acknowledge with thankfulness to God for their contributions to SGM and to retreats and spiritual direction in New Zealand the lives of Selwyn Jones and Ian Cairns who died earlier this year. Selwyn was one of the founding four in 1981 when he was vicar of Gisborne. Ian trained on the first intake of our Training Programme and will be remembered for his scholarly and deeply spiritual work as a missionary, minister and director.

FRIENDS OF SGM

Thankyou to all who contributed to the last Friends Appeal. We are encouraged by your generosity. Thankyou to the PAC Trust Distribution Group for a sizeable donation that will see us through this year in a healthy financial state. Thankyou, too, to the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand for its continued financial support for the administration side of our work – we couldn't do without your help.

We enclose with this Newsletter another Friends Appeal letter and invite your response to it as you are able. It is amazing how donations large and small mount up and we look forward to a good financial start to the new year.

CONTRIBUTORS

Mary Concannon is a Dominican sister resident in Dunedin where she co-ordinates Spiritual Growth Ministries Spiritual Director Training Programme.

Joy Cowley is a New Zealand writer and retreat leader, living at Arohanui, Fish Bay, Marlborough Sounds.

Warren Deason is minister at Albany Presbyterian Church, North Shore, and a spiritual director.

Margaret Dunn lives at Albany, North Shore, where, with her husband Andrew, she runs *Oasis Retreat and Study Centre*, is a retreat leader, spiritual director and poet.

Ngaire Gee lives in Waiwera, north of Auckland.

Clarice Greenslade is a retired Anglican priest living at Governor's Bay near Christchurch. She works as a spiritual director and assists with ministry at Christchurch Cathedral and is a trustee of the SGM Trust.

Hugh Kempster is the Anglican priest in charge of St Columba Anglican Church, Grey Lynn, Auckland, and is writing a thesis on the work of Richard Rolle.

Caroline Leys is an Anglican priest, spiritual director and psycho-therapist living in Auckland where she also heads up the SEED programme training Prayer Companions.

Aynsley Mackie lives in West Auckland where she works as a counsellor.

Sheila McGrath is a Sister of Compassion living in Timaru where she works as a teacher in religion and as a spiritual director.

Ross Miller lives in retirement at Onehunga where, among other things, he works as a spiritual director and marks assignments for the SGM Training Programme

Briege O'Hare is a Poor Clare Sister living at St Clare's Convent, Monasterevin, Co. Kildare, Ireland, where she gives retreats, spiritual direction, writes music and lyrics. She has produced a major contribution to mysticism with her Songs of the Women Mystics and Celtic songs available on cassettes and CD.

Elizabeth Rhodes lives at Meadowbank, Auckland.

Ria Sandberg is from Ngongotaha, Rotorua where she works as a counsellor, spiritual director and Quiet Day leader.

Wendy Ward is from Wanganui where she works as a psychologist. Wendy is a Benedictine oblate and leads Benedictine style retreats.

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