



# RESOURCES IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Dedicated to Research and Reflection in Formative Spirituality

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## IN THIS ISSUE: DESIRE

Søren Kierkegaard proclaims in *Works of Love* that while the ego works the soul is constrained to *suffer*. The statement points to a fundamental tension between the ego’s requirements for healthy functioning and productiveness on the one hand and, on the other hand, of the soul’s receptive needs for connection and intimacy. *Working* thus refers to agency, to the ego’s powers of doing and accomplishing, while *suffering* has to do with the propensity of the human spirit to go through, to undergo experience, passively as it were. The soul’s capacity to suffer and to go through evokes what we mean by passion, including the Lord’s *Passion*. There is also the suggestion in Kierkegaard’s assertion that what appears on the surface of a person’s life does not necessarily reflect what is transpiring in the hidden depths of the person’s soul. According to Simone Weil, the always appropriate question to ask someone is: “What are you going through?” To raise the question is to acknowledge the presence of spiritual activity in human life. Addressing the question directly to another person invites that person to share what is happening existentially in his or her life and thereby to disclose what really matters to him or her.

The two movements of human life — of ego agency and spiritual aspiration — represent various dimensions of human personality: we are, as ego, *pre-transcendent*; as spirit, fundamentally open to transcendence, capable that is of going out of and beyond ourselves in self-transcendence. A more detailed an-



thropology reveals that we are socio-cultural beings, biophysical organisms, creatures endowed with functional potencies, and: ever-emergent life-forms drawn to and capable of transformation. Desires are implicated throughout. We desire to belong (a social need). Vital drives command our desires for food and shelter, for survival and self-preservation, and for intimacy and reproduction. The functional ego desires to compete and succeed, to make a place for itself in the world and to attain a certain level of satisfying result. People of all times and places are moved by these needs and desires. Ever-present as they may be in human life, pre-transcendent desires on their own do not however make us fully human. They do not express or satisfy our deepest embodiment of desire..

We might say that on the pre-transcendent level the objects of desire (as above) are familiar to us. They are objective. But what are we to make of the inherently subjective nature of our longings, of those desires for which objectives do not apply, and which ultimately cannot be assuaged or “replaced”? Our fundamental openness as spirit means that we will remain open, that our desiring self will not reach closure. The contents of this issue of the Newsletter address the reality of the human person as a desiring entity. It is hope that the essays, reflections and book reviews herein offer insights into living one’s life formatively as a subject of desire.

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## POETS OF CARMEL: LONGING FOR THE INFINITE

~ Romeo J. Bonsaint, SC, and John D. Hamilton, CFX

Great longing fuels the poetry and prayer of the Carmelite mystics. Giving their all for a higher love and union with the divine, they rend the veil separating the soul from God. The Infinite Embrace of God which they experienced in the depths of spiritual struggles transformed their hearts and flowed into the magnificent poetry that sings evocatively of the new life to be found in the Spirit.

I gave all my heart to the Lord of Love,  
And my life is so completely transformed  
That my Beloved One has become mine  
And without a doubt I am his at last! [1]

~ St. Teresa of Avila

### Poetic Expression: A Summons to Awakening

The appeal of the poetry of the Carmelite mystics lies in its timeless evocative capacity. If we take the time to attend to its summons, the poetry of these daughters and sons of Carmel can serve to awaken us from the drowsiness of habit and reaction to the fullness of our unique life in Christ which the gospel promises.

In his memoir entitled *Another Beauty*, the poet Adam Zagajewski offers a metaphor for such an awakening as he relates the effect which the ringing bells of Krakow has on his consciousness:

One day I heard the bells. They rang every day, but I couldn't always hear them.... This ringing merely makes the air's latent, inner trembling both immanent and audible. It divulges the air's hidden nature. Some passersby clapped their palms to their ears, shielding them; they couldn't bear the ringing. Others grumbled that the bells woke them at dawn, or didn't let them watch TV, or kept them from getting to sleep.... But I didn't cover my ears; the deluge of bells made me happy. The bells gave me a moment of happiness; thanks to them I understood once more that greatness exists in spite of my laziness, in spite of those long spells when I forgot all about it; it slipped my mind for weeks on end as I got lost in other projects, grew preoccupied by other cares and longings. The bells woke me to a higher life. [2]

The everyday form which *our* "laziness" takes is forgetfulness, a forgetfulness that life is more than the "bottom-line." It is a forgetfulness of our deepest desires and our ultimate longing. It is our loss of connection to the yearnings, joys, and pains of our heart and soul because of the pervasive noise of the immediate demands to be productive, successful and connected. If we can let them, the words of the Carmelite poets, in their very potent summons to silence and presence, can

afford us a "moment of happiness" in the midst of our stress and strain.

At the core of our being we are participants in a ceaseless *conversation*, a dialogue of our soul with God. In our everyday lives which are dominated by the "laziness" of habit and reaction, we are absent from this conversation. We could say that our pre-transcendent life (a life lived mostly on the exterior) is a life of self-absorbed anxiety, while our transcendent (interior) life is a loving dialogue:

I stayed: I surrendered  
resting my face on my Beloved.  
Nothing mattered.  
I left my cares  
forgotten among the lilies. [3]

As an expression of the poet's experience of his/her soul's conversation with God, the poem is also an invitation to us, as reader, to enter that same conversation, albeit in our own uniqueness. Thus, we approach the poem as a kind of sacred space, a locus wherein we are privileged to share in a soul's unique dialogue with God, while at the same time being drawn into this expanding conversation in such a way that it now includes our unique presence.

This connection between the beatitude of one's own encounter with the Divine and the need to share the experience with others is, of course, a consistent theme in the Christian tradition.

What we have seen and heard we are telling you so that you too may be in union with us, as we are in union with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing this to you to make our own joy complete.

(1 John 1: 3-4)

The joy of Divine Communion is realized only when others participate in it with us. As Adam Zagajewski notes: "In a certain sense, the very phrase 'the inner life' is imprecise. It is in fact within us, but it's in ceaseless conversation with what lies outside. It's always directed toward the outer world, and exists only in dialogue with a small or great transcendence." [4]

This "conversation with what lies outside" is an expression, however, of the inner dialogue with the "great transcendence." In this way it differs from the pre-transcendent dialogue of ordinary life which converses with "the outside" in order to discern, from others, its identity. The great twentieth century Carmelite St. Therese of Lisieux describes the fruit of this inner conversation which sources her life and expression:

Lord, you chose me from my earliest childhood,  
And I can call myself the work of your love... [5]

Thus, the poetry of Therese, and of all of the Carmelite poets, is an expression of her unique experience of being called by God and an invitation to the reader to awaken to and recognize her/his own call

Poetic expression, the fruit of poetic consciousness, is so distinctive from ordinary (prosaic) expression precisely because it emerges out of this unique interior conversation. In his *Detailed Rules for Monks*, St Basil declares that he is occasionally “overcome by a kind of dread and numbness at the very possibility of ceasing to love God... because of my lack of recollection and my preoccupation with trivialities.” [6] The “trivialities” of which St. Basil speaks, of course, are the ordinary concerns related to our management of everyday life. These concerns become trivial, in his sense, when we react to them out of habit and routine rather than responding to them distinctively out of our unique interior conversation with the Divine.

Our ordinary language, based on a grammar of sentences and paragraphs, is best suited to our capacities for management and control. The thought, embodied in the sentence, and the idea, fleshed out in the paragraph, is fully captured and explained for communication to the listener. The reality or the experience, which is the basis of the communication, is thus *reduced* to the speaker’s idea or comprehension of it – that which is capable of being explained. Each word in the sentence serves, and is thus limited by, the thought expressed by the sentence.

Poetry, on the other hand, is distinguished by the fact that its basic unit is not the sentence but the line. In

poetry, each word stands out, far more, on its own. The lines of poetry are often fragments, not the conventional single meaning of the sentence. Thus, the word remains not a functionary of a limited and controlled thought but a pointer to the mystery, the inexpressibility of that experience from which it comes.

In the spiritual poetry of the Carmelites, the language of the poem is an access into the mysterious connection of the poet with his/her Divine call (the “interior conversation”) and an open invitation into the reader’s own sharing in this great Divine connection. The poet Edward Hirsch has recently written: “Reading poetry is a way of connecting – through the medium of language – more deeply with yourself even as you connect more deeply with another. The poem delivers on our spiritual lives precisely because it simultaneously gives us the gift of intimacy and interiority, privacy and participation.” [7] Poetry is a most appropriate medium for the communication of the inner dialogue, precisely because of its “unbounded” nature. It gives open expression to the poet’s unique conversation of soul with God (intimacy) while inviting (and even leading) the reader to enter into her/his own conversation (interiority). Its openness of expression respects the reader’s unique conversation (privacy) while offering the companionship of a fellow solitary (participation).

What gives the poetry of Carmel its spiritual potency, the ring of truth to its description of the silence, the connection and conversation with the Divine Within? As we work toward an answer to this question, let us consider a poem of St. John of the Cross.

*Anchorless and Yet Anchored*

Anchorless and yet anchored,  
living in darkness without light,  
I consume myself completely.

My soul is unattached  
to any created thing,  
raised above itself  
in delightful life,  
anchored in God alone.  
Now everyone will know  
what’s most important to me;  
that my soul now finds itself  
anchorless and yet anchored.

And though I pass through shadows  
in this mortal life  
my pain is not excessive;  
I may feel the lack of light  
but I have life from heaven.  
For when love grows this blind,  
it gives us so much life  
that the soul is left with  
living in darkness without light.



Love has worked such things in me  
since I came to know it,  
that all my good and evil  
it turns into my delight,  
making my soul like itself.  
And so, in the delightful flame  
that I feel within myself,  
swiftly and thoroughly  
I consume myself completely. [8]

The poet here invites us into the most intimate of places in himself, into his very soul. In fact he tells us that we will “know what’s most important” to him. The call to the monastery, as the call to radical discipleship, is a call to absolute poverty and detachment. “Go and sell everything you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” (Mark 10:21) It is, in St. John’s words, to live with one’s soul “unattached to any created thing,” to anchor one’s soul “in its God alone.” But what is such an unattached but anchored life like? What does it mean to be “anchored in God alone”? It is, says St. John, to find one’s soul “anchorless and yet anchored.” It is to feel “life from heaven” in one’s “lack of light.” It is to come to where Love turns “all my good and evil ... into my delight.” It is to have one’s self consumed by Love that one’s soul may become like Love itself.

But St. John does more than merely describe “what’s most important” to him. His poem creates a word in which we are invited to abide. We, who are not called to the monastery but nonetheless to radical discipleship, are invited to enter the place where our illusions of power and control are darkened, and we realize that we, too, have no anchor but God alone. Of course, the very fact that we have been drawn to this poem suggests that we are already available to such a call. Thus, we already have some knowledge of the cost of such discipleship. And it is here that St. John’s generosity of speech may most serve us. For, he tells us that what we most fear about this experience of being anchored in God alone is precisely what is most important to him. That is, we are truly anchored only in our anchorlessness. We are not anchored to God despite our feeling of being adrift, but precisely *in* that very experience. With our poetic companion, we can dare not to fear our sense of anchorlessness but rather to trust it fully and thus experience being truly anchored in God.

In his essay “Poetry and Place” the poet Wendell Berry takes up the significance of place in poetry, what poetics calls “decorum.” Drawing from his personal experience Berry notes that his poetry is inextricably connected to where he, the poet, lives. Poetry is always “a reference or response to a subject or a context outside itself.” [9]

I believe that the source of our poetry is the idea that poetry must be used for something, must serve something, greater and higher than itself. It is a way to learn, know, celebrate, and remember the truth – or, as Yeats said, to “Bring the soul of man to God.” [10]

The poetry of Carmel is indisputably a poetry of the place. First of all, the poetry comes out of the stable, humble, simple, and silent environment of the monastery – a place designed to allow for the deep sinking of roots in the soil of an unadorned humanity. But, it is also a poetry of a personal, “metaphysical,” place. The “action” of the poetry occurs in the place of the soul’s ongoing, formative conversation with the Lord himself in the heart of the Trinity. The great significance of this poetry lies in the ultimate significance of its place, its context, its setting, and its subject: the place of encounter and communion with the Divine.

The mountains, my love,  
the lonely forested valleys,  
foreign islands  
and busy rivers,  
the whisper of amorous airs.  
The night that grows calm  
with breeze that stirs at dawn,  
the soft music,  
the ringing solitude,  
the meal that renews in love. [11]

What distinguishes the poems of the Carmelite mystics (and this is no doubt a result of their rootedness in place and in spiritual practice) is the humility and simplicity, the *truthfulness*, of their expression of the encounter with God. Never for a moment do they leave the human place. In his essay, Berry deals with this very unique issue of decorum (remaining appropriate for the human being) through comparing aspects of the work of two of the greatest poets of the Western Tradition: Dante Alighieri and John Milton.

According to Berry, the great flaw in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is precisely a violation of decorum. Milton invokes God’s “Celestial Light” that he might be able to “... see and tell / Of things invisible to mortal sight.” Here, says Berry, Milton’s aspiration has become ambition, “a kind of artistic hubris. [12] For Berry, Milton’s great work is flawed at the point where he attempts to do what it is beyond the capacity of man to do, to “see... things invisible.” Milton falls into the very “sin” of Adam and Eve which his epic poem is describing: to seek to know what it is not the human being’s to know, and his poem becomes flawed when he attempts to write of the invisible as if he has seen it.

One of the larger concerns of decorum, reaching to more than literature, is the question of what is proper to do... How you act *should* be determined, and the consequences of your acts *are* determined, by where you are. To know

where you are... is at least as important as to know what you are doing... Not knowing where you are, you can make mistakes of the utmost seriousness: you can lose your soul or your soil, your life or your way home. [13]

Milton loses his way just as Adam and Eve did, through disobedience to decorum, to reality. Berry points out that Dante, by contrast, never speaks of the invisible with an omniscient voice, but only with his own humble voice.

Dante, speaking only as himself "with mortal voice," and in a style conscientiously "humble," arduously and by grace ascends to a vision of the Light Supreme, before which his speech fails, of which he can remember only the "sweetness" – but the awesomeness and power of which are borne into the imaginative life of the poem by the failure of speech and memory. [14]

Unlike Milton, Dante's poem transcends by its very humility. It is the "failure of speech and memory," the darkness, which invites us to enter through our own formative potential into the "awesomeness and power" of the place the poem communicates.

As for the Carmelite poets, they never lose their sense of place, their "decorum." They never dare to speak with God's voice, or even in the voice of an imagined or idealized state of personal transcendence. They always speak from a profoundly human place, a ground of deep, dark and silent humility. Although they are often speaking of an experience of humanization and spiritualization that far transcends us, their description is never beyond our recognition, the formative potential of our memory, imagination, and anticipation. Thus, their words can always connect with and beckon us.

This sense and power of poetic decorum permeates a poem by Jessica Powers (1905-1988).

*There Is a Homelessness*

There is a homelessness, never to be clearly defined.  
It is more than having no place of one's own,  
no bed or chair.  
It is more than walking alone in a waste of wind,  
or gleaning the crumbs where someone else has dined,  
or taking a coin for food or clothes to wear.  
The loan of things and the denial of things are possible  
to bear.

It is more, even than homelessness of heart,  
of being always a stranger at love's side,  
of creeping up to a door only to start  
at a shrill voice and to plunge back to the wide  
dark of one's own obscurity and hide.

It is the homelessness of the soul, in the body sown;  
it is the loneliness of mystery:  
of seeing oneself a leaf, inexplicable and unknown,  
cast from an unimaginable tree;

of knowing one's life to be a brief wind blown  
down a fissure of time in the rock of eternity.  
The artist weeps to wrench this grief from stone;  
he pushes his hands through the tangled vines of music,  
but he cannot set it free.

It is the pain of the mystic suddenly thrown  
back from the noon of God to the night of his own human-  
ity.

It is his grief; it is the grief of all men praying  
in finite words to an Infinity  
Whom, if they saw, they could not comprehend;  
Whom they cannot see. [15]

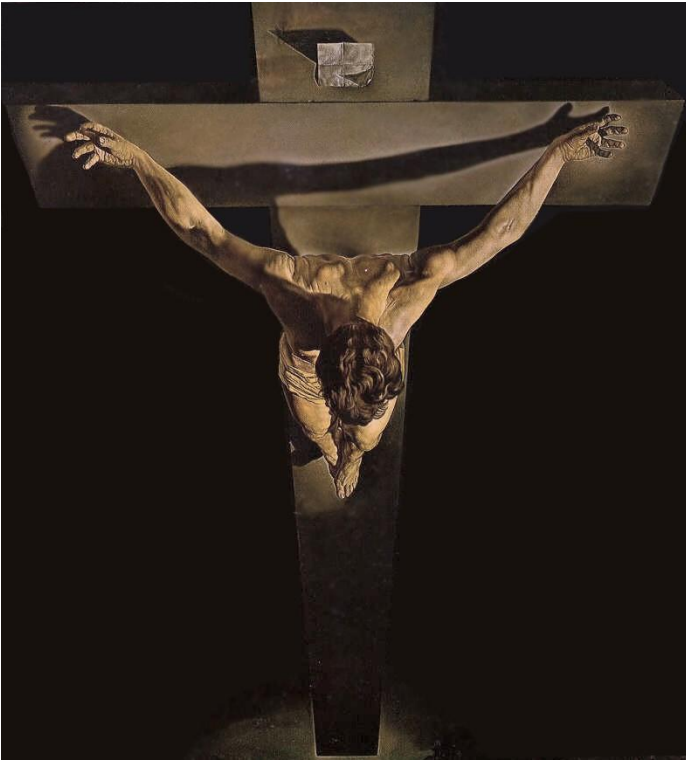
As St. John of the Cross writes of being "anchorless yet anchored," Jessica Powers describes a home that is homeless. This is, says Powers, a homelessness that is far beyond that of the social, the physical, and even the emotional. It is the existential. "It is the homelessness of the soul, in the body sown; / it is the loneliness of mystery." It is the homelessness at the bedrock of the human experience, the pathos that constitutes our very experience of self. It is a grief so deep that no artist can "wrench this grief from stone" or set it free "through the tangled vines of music." And, finally, it is a pain that only intensifies the more one becomes anchored in anchorlessness. "It is the pain of the mystic suddenly thrown/back from the noon of God to the night of his own humanity."

For Powers, this homelessness is the only truly human home. For, to be human is to pray, to be in conversation with God. But human beings can only pray "in finite words to an Infinity / Whom, if they saw, they could not comprehend; Whom they cannot see." In this poem of Jessica Powers, as throughout the mystical poetry of Carmel, we are drawn into the dark night, the sounding solitude, the homeless home of the solitary conversation.

The Carmelite poets thus invite us to share with them a homecoming. The cost of this homecoming is the loss of every security that moors our identity and any light that supports our understanding which is less than the "noon of God" and the "night of... (our) humanity." But the gift is, as St. John of the Cross says, that although "I may feel the lack of light...I have life from heaven."

**The Night of Unknowing:  
Prelude to Creative Expression**

In a commonplace – though by no means easily understood – saying of John of the Cross: "To come to the knowledge you have not you must go by a way in which you know not." [16] The darkening of the intellect is one effect of the Dark Night. We have it on good authority that John not only explained the phenomenon of the Dark Night but also personally endured it. The tur-



bulent experience of the soul in the Dark Night in fact preceded the transcendent, mystical knowledge celebrated in the poetry. The new potency for spiritual expression that emerged in the poetry was earned in darkness: “You must go by a way in which you know not.” “Not-knowing” leads to spiritual understanding you do not yet have.

The saint beckons: because spiritual knowledge is so valuable we should approach the night of not-knowing as potential friend. In concrete terms this means suspending ordinary knowledge and bracketing our attitudes of knowingness in favor of exploration. This is the stance of interior openness and prayer, of standing before God and the mystery of our existence to “hear” what is being spoken to us in the silence of wonder. The awareness of not-knowing becomes a point of contact with the mystery, the possibility of entering into new understanding and relationship. John of the Cross describes the spiritual exchange which occurred when he entered – without knowledge – this place of not-knowing:

I entered I knew not where  
and remained without knowing,  
*there transcending all knowledge!* [17]

John is *beyond* the Dark Night in this poem. It is a poem of transcendence: “I was . . . raised out of myself / I was stripped of all intelligence and feeling, while my spirit was gifted with unknown understanding.”[18] This stands in sharp contrast to the violent images of undergoing love that we find, for example, in “The Liv-

ing Flame of Love”: “(you) wound my soul at its deepest center;” “O searing brand... you killed me, making life from death;” “... caverns of my senses that were blackened and blind.”[19] In “transcending all knowledge” John affirms that he “still knew nothing;” yet having arrived there he “understood important things.” [20] In contrast with the poems which speak of great suffering, here we have “peace and piety” – things “understood in solitude,” “knowledge of the deity’s Essence.”[21] Paradoxically, not-knowing leads to the highest knowledge of all: to experience of the deity’s Essence. The transcendence of this state is further revealed in the following stanzas of the poem:

Whoever arrives there  
truly dies to himself.  
Everything he used to know  
seems to him now unworthy,  
so much does this knowledge grow  
that he ends up knowing nothing . . .

The higher you rise,  
the less you understand,  
for the darkening cloud  
illuminates the night.  
Whoever knows that this is right  
no longer knows anything . . .

This knowing without knowing  
is so very powerful  
that wise men’s arguments  
can never defeat it,  
since their knowledge cannot grasp  
unknown understanding . . . [22]

John ends stanza eight with: “whoever has self-mastery / through knowing without knowing / in the end will always transcend.” The night of unknowing is presented as an indispensable means of receiving the more perfect knowledge of God’s Essence and the spiritual insight which accompanies the experience.

The dark night of physical and spiritual suffering as well as the darkening of the intellect in the night of unknowing can be traced in the life journeys of several Carmelite mystics: Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity, and Edith Stein. In each case, a former way of knowing and understanding had to be sacrificed in order to come to a more complete *loving knowledge* of the God who communicated his essence to the soul beyond our ordinary faculties. The poetry and prayers of these mystics testify to the great gift they received in the Spirit. Their willingness to enter the night of not-knowing led to inner enlightenment and to a renewed potency for transcendent expression, the ability to write and speak movingly of their experiences in lan-

guage that evokes longing in the human spirit for that which transcends it infinitely. So open and encompassing is their discourse of heart-to-heart encounter that we easily find a place ourselves to enter and share in the longing expressed and the love received in their poetic hymns.

### **Sighs in Exile: The Transformative Power of Loneliness**

As we pointed out earlier, any great poem must have decorum. That is, the poetic expression must come out of and be linked to a proper sense of place. As Wendell Berry puts it: "What we do and say is properly determined by where we live." And this sense of decorum is not only true for the poet. For any of us, to be really and truly human requires that we know where we live, where we stand at the present moment. When the disciples-to-be first encounter Jesus (as related in the gospel of John), they first inquire of him: "Rabbi, where do you live?" (John 1: 38) In the art of poetry, as in the art of living, all begins with recognition and awareness of "where one is" at the present moment.

Wherever we may physically stand at any given moment, however, we are always, to some degree, living in exile. The description of Adam and Eve as offered in chapter three of the book of Genesis rings true: "I heard the sound of you in the garden; I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid." (Gen. 3:10) As with our first forebears, when we come to self-consciousness we do so, to some degree, with a sense of our own being that is anxious, shameful, and lonely. Jessica Powers writes: "There is a homelessness, never to be clearly defined."

When we dare to awaken to where we are living at any given moment, we realize that our consciousness is often conflicted and split. As creatures who live with awareness of both our transcendence and mortality, we are, in a certain sense, neither "here nor there." In a poem entitled "Sighs in Exile," St. Teresa of Avila expresses our state in a powerful metaphor:

The fish caught  
On the painful hook,  
In death's embrace  
Its torment ending. [23]

As the fish caught on the hook wriggles and strains to be free of its fate, the only release from this painful dilemma is its resolution in death. The teaching of the Carmelite mystics, however, is that the death by which the torment ends is not merely physical death; it is even more our death to that conflict and tension which our disobedience to reality creates. The death which embraces us is the death of the autonomous, autarchic

self. This death is a doorway to the "at-oneness" with God and all creation which we enjoyed "before the fall."

According to the teaching of St. John of the Cross, if we are to come to know the embrace of such a death, we must first embrace *it*.

Endeavor to be inclined always:

not to the easiest but to the most difficult;  
not to the most delightful, but to the most distasteful;  
not to the most gratifying, but to the less pleasant;  
not to what means rest for you, but to hard work;  
not to the consoling, but to the unconsoling;  
not to the most, but to the least;  
not to the highest and most precious, but to the lowest  
and most despised;  
not to wanting something, but to wanting nothing. [24]

To come to the life of love and consonance for which God has made us, we must, according to St. John, willingly enter the vortex of life's conflict. In our spiritual practice we are to reverse the process of the fall. Where we would spontaneously move to have things our way, we are to embrace reality as it is. And we are to do this at such a depth that in time our very life of desire is transformed to that point where we desire nothing other than what is given. And then, say the Carmelite mystics, we shall know that everything is given to us, that all is grace. But the only way to the end of the "torment" is through it; it is to pass through the place of exile where we live.

The most familiar manifestation of this exile, of "homelessness," for most of us is the experience of loneliness. But to be able to enter our loneliness we, paradoxically, need to feel less alone. The poetry of those who have fully entered the exile of their own lives can mediate to us a presence and companionship as we make the conversion to a more interior way of living.

Soul, since you are My room,  
My house and dwelling,  
If at any time,  
Through your distracted ways  
I find the door tightly closed,

Outside yourself seek Me not,  
To find Me it will be  
Enough only to call Me,  
Then quickly will I come,  
*And in yourself seek Me.* [25]

St. Teresa of Avila recognizes well that the fearful, lonely, and ashamed self frantically seeks companionship outside of itself, while God patiently awaits within for our recognition and address. Because our own loneliness frightens us, we disperse our attention *without* rather than focusing it *within*. This is why we require

an abiding sense of companionship if we are to face and enter our own solitude.

The companion not only accompanies us into the place of our loneliness, he or she also draws us ever deeper into it. As Noel Dermot O'Donoghue writes: "All love, all companionship opens a space greater than it fills." [26] The exile that characterizes where we live is beyond the capacity of anyone we can know or anything we can see to overcome. It is this reality that makes the companionship of the Carmelite mystics so invaluable to us. For they have so deeply entered "the place" of their own humanity that their words can illuminate an otherwise dark path. "What great art gives us most of all," writes O'Donoghue, "is companionship in our loneliness." [27] The mystic alone is capable of accompanying us to the deepest levels of that loneliness, to a place where the most profound experience of loneliness and exile becomes a place of communion.

In her poem "In the Hands of God", St. Teresa of Avila speaks of the great power and freedom each of us has at every moment of life, no matter how broken or alienated we may feel, to place our lives in God's hands.

In Your hand  
I place my heart,  
Body, life and soul,  
Deep feelings and affections mine,  
Spouse – Redeemer sweet,  
Myself offered now to you,  
*What do You want of me?*

Give me death, give me life,  
Health or sickness,  
Honor or shame,  
War or swelling peace,  
Weakness or full strength,  
Yes, to these I say,  
*What do you want of me?*

Give me, if you will, prayer;  
Or let me know dryness,  
An abundance of devotion,  
Or if not, then barrenness.  
In you alone, Sovereign Majesty,  
I find my peace,  
*What do You want of me?*

If you want me to rest,  
I desire it for love;  
If to labor,  
I will die working:  
Sweet Love say  
Where, how and when.  
*What do you want of me?* [28]



This poem draws us into that place where we are never alone, where nothing in our life or experience is outside of the great conversation. Here the question is not "Why is this happening?", or "How can this be?", or even "What must I do?" It is rather "*What do you want of me?*" At the core of our being, in our very loneliness and solitude, there lies a transcendent form potency, a deep freedom, to willingly abandon ourselves to the loving, creative, enduring Mystery. "In Your hand / I place my heart." From this place, the freely chosen actions of one's life emerge out of the great conversation with reality as it is manifested both within us and outside of us. Our life-choices are a response to the Lord's answer to our ongoing question: "*What do you want of me?*"

I am here at the root of my freedom where my will generates its own energy or else feeds on other energies. I become self-creative as I stand in my own truth, willing my own being as it is, accepting fully the dimension of loneliness (as also the dimension of nothingness). Within me a great source of power awaits my discovery, but I must face the truth of myself to make this discovery. It awaits me beyond the final loneliness as also beyond the final misery. The way to this source of power is hard and even bitter, yet this is involved in the very nature of the enterprise, being as it were the very material from which the power is generated.

This energy is the great dynamic of poetry and the other arts. [29]

The power of the poetic expression we have been discussing issues from an energy which the Carmelite mystics have entered because of a profound sense of decorum, that is by rooting their work, prayer and poetry in a concrete place: the monastery in which they

spend their days in spiritual practice and the reality of their own lives which they accept and offer in truth and humility. Their poems invite us to discover and share this energy source by offering us a milieu whose words can hold us as we more deeply enter into our own lives and awaken us as the Lord summons us to our unique conversation with the Divine Presence within.

### Singing the Song of Infinite Embrace

*But we have this treasure in earthen vessels. (2 Cor. 4: 7)*

We are reminded in this familiar passage from Corinthians that our spiritual treasure is contained in earthen vessels, *to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us*. The transcendent power that we see manifested in the poetry of various Carmelite mystics witnesses to the treasure that shines through our human weakness. As St. Paul affirms:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us but life in you. (2 Cor. 4: 8-12)

The treasure of life in God propels the mystic to undergo any trial, if only it will lead to more intimate relationship with the Beloved. The longing is stronger than any difficulty the soul may encounter. It is an eternal longing, a desire planted deep within the soul for "something" which is permanent, free, above sorrow, and of eternal value." [30] The restlessness and the sire for union implied by this irreducible longing are at the heart of the yearning we find in the mystics.

In a recent publication, *Why Religion Matters*, Huston Smith observes that:

Minds require eco-niches as much as organisms do, and the mind's eco-niche is its worldview, its sense of the whole of things. Short of madness, there is some fit between the two, and we constantly try to improve that fit. Signs of a poor fit are the sense of meaninglessness, alienation, and anxiety that the 20th century knew so well. The proof of a good fit is that life and the world make sense. When the fit feels perfect, the energies of the cosmos pour into the believer and empower her to a startling degree. She knows that she belongs. The ultimate supports her, and the knowledge that it does produces a wholeness that is solid for fitting as a piece of a jigsaw puzzle into the wholeness of the All. [31]

The call of the mystic, present in some measure in each of us, is a call to realize the treasure buried deep within us. The greater the longing, the stronger the drive for

"a perfect fit." The Carmelite mystics, however, are not driven so much as they are impelled to undergo the passion of Christ: "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." Experientially this means confronting all of the meaninglessness, alienation, and anxiety that is in the soul, at conscious and unconscious levels. Everything in the soul that is a "poor fit" for eternal life must be purged and purified, gradually converted and transformed into the promised treasure.

Smith tells us that as the fit improves "the energies of the cosmos pour into the believer...; she knows that she belongs." As the Carmelite mystics grow in their knowledge of and intimacy with God, their poetry sings of the belonging, the support, and the fulfillment they find in the arms of Infinite Love. In a marvelous little poem by St. Teresa of Avila, for example, we have a personal declaration that "her mind is stilled" and that "she draws abiding joy and strength from the One within:"

Her heart is full of joy with love,  
For in the Lord her mind is stilled.  
She has renounced every selfish attachment  
And draws abiding joy and strength  
From the One within.  
She lives not for herself, but lives  
To serve the Lord of Love in all,  
And swims across the sea of life  
Breasting its rough waves joyfully.[32]

These lines are a moving testimony to free formation flow, [33] to the divine energy that carries one when one has broken through to the deeper spiritual life that is our greatest treasure. Flowing with the deeper life of the Spirit, Teresa faces obstacles courageously, "breasting the rough waves joyfully." It is not reality that has changed, but her experience of reality.

In a subtle poem of St. John of the Cross, "Anchorless Yet Anchored" (quoted earlier), John uses the image of an anchor to express the support, freedom and new life he has attained in God. "Darkness without light" is "life from heaven;" "being consumed" is a delight, for it is "transformation of



the soul into God." Therese of Lisieux wrote a gloss on this poem, dedicating it to her confrere and taking up his themes of divine support and transformation. Her support, she writes, "is to see and feel my soul / supported without any support! " and feel my soul / supported without any support!" Reverberating John's theme of anchorlessness, Therese affirms that she is supported alone by the Invisible God. Like John, she "suffers without light" but "at last... I possess / the Heavenly life of Love:"

Love, I have experienced it,  
Knows how to use (what power!)  
The good and the bad it finds in me.  
It transforms my soul into itself.  
The Fire burning in my soul  
Penetrates my heart forever.  
Thus in its delightful flame  
I am being wholly consumed by Love![34]

Similar themes emerge in the prayers of Elizabeth of the Trinity, a Carmelite who lived roughly contemporaneously with Therese, in the Dijon Carmel, in France. Hans Urs von Balthasar considers these two French Carmelites in his *Two Sisters in the Spirit*. [35] (See Susan Muto's *Catholic Spirituality from A to Z* for biographical information about Elizabeth. [36]) Elizabeth has been bowled over by the limitlessness of God. Von Balthasar tells us that infinity is no simple word for her; it is, rather, *a spiritual disposition*, a physical experience, and an inescapable need. [37] Limitlessness speaks immediately to her of God and, in surrendering to it, she *knows*: God is here! Elizabeth urges us to go beyond life's limits: "there comes a moment when, raised beyond her limits, the creature must stagger into the bottomless ground of infinity without perishing." [38] The "path to the abyss" must be traveled in this life. This is faith: to enter the infinite world in the midst of the finite - the creature "must learn to love and explore as his home what appears to be the most alien of places." [39] When Elizabeth testifies, "here we find the strength to die to ourselves... and to be changed into love," we hear reverberations of her fellow Carmelites, whom she read and knew well. [40]

The power of longing attested to in the Carmelite mystics is clearly present in Elizabeth's teaching as well. Ineluctably, longing roots the soul in God and moves it toward union with the Beloved:

The soul who penetrates the depth of God and lives there... becomes with each movement, with each of her yearnings, with each of her actions... more firmly and more deeply rooted in the one she loves. [41]

Elizabeth's vision of deepening union in the "double abyss" of God's boundlessness and soul's nothingness

resonates in fact with the entire tradition of apophatic spirituality stretching all the way back to Gregory of Nyssa. In Gregory, for example, we read about the limitlessness of the soul's union with God:

Never will the soul reach its final perfection,  
For it will never encounter a limit...  
It will always be transformed into a better thing. [42]

Elizabeth echoes this spacious progress of the soul's union:

I sense myself called by him to live in endless fields  
where union with him takes place. [43]

In longing and faith, she sets out on her path to the abyss. The important point, however, is that *the Infinite meets her!* The abyss of infinite longing is met by the abyss of God's boundless love. The infinity of longing is also prefigured in Gregory of Nyssa:

Since the First Good is infinite in its nature,  
Communion with it on the part of the one  
Whose thirst is quenched by it will have to be  
Infinite as well, capable of being enlarged forever. [44]

We note finally that the experience recounted by these mystics is preeminently one of intimacy and embrace. In her famous Trinity Prayer Elizabeth writes

The Trinity drew me into an embrace.  
I found in its abyss my landing.  
No one can carry me back to shore,  
For I range freely in boundlessness,  
No bars block my recreation,  
My endless life lives in the Holy Three. [45]

When the Carmelite mystics turn to expression, now as poets of divine formation, their language sings. They sing a song of Infinite Embrace. And in doing so they manifest, albeit in earthen vessels, the secret treasure and wisdom of the scriptures:

We too believe, and so we speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.... We do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. (2 Cor. 4: 13-14, 16)

Even as our outer nature wastes away, our potency for transcendent expression graciously may be renewed. Edith Stein, Carmelite mystic, scholar and poet, profoundly embodied this transcendent potency, even to her untimely demise in a death camp at Auschwitz. One of her poems resonates with all those we have discussed thus far. In it she conveys her journey in the Spirit and gives expression to the "polyphonic melody of becoming" [46] in which she participates with her fellow and sister Carmelite poets.

Who are you, kindly light, who fill me now,  
 And brighten all the darkness of my heart?  
 You guide me forward, like a mother's hand,  
 And if you let me go,  
 I could not take a single step alone.  
 You are the space,  
 Embracing all my being, hidden in it.  
 Loosened from you, I fall in the abyss  
 Of nothingness, from which you draw my life.  
 Nearer to me than I myself am,  
 And more within me than my inmost self,  
 You are outside my grasp, beyond my reach,  
 And what name can contain you?  
 You, Holy Spirit, you, eternal Love![47]

## Notes

This article appeared originally in the Fall 2002 issue of *Spiritual Life: A Journal of Contemporary Spirituality*, and in *Epiphany International*.

- [1] St. Teresa of Avila, "I Gave All My Heart," in Eknath Easwaran, *God Makes the Rivers to Flow* (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1991), p. 39.
- [2] Adam Zagajewski, *Another Beauty*, trans. Clare Cavanagh (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), pp. 117-118.
- [3] St. John of the Cross, "On a Dark Night," in *The Poems of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Ken Krabbenhoft (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1999), p. 21.
- [4] Zagajewski, p. 125.
- [5] St. Therese of Lisieux, "For Sister Marie of the Trinity," in *The Poetry of Saint Therese of Lisieux*, trans. Donald Kinney, OCD (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1996), p. 210.
- [6] St. Basil, *Detailed Rules for Monks*, in *The Liturgy of the Hours* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975), Vol. III, p. 121.
- [7] Edward Hirsch, *How To Read A Poem* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1999), pp. 4-5.
- [8] St. John of the Cross, "Anchorless and Yet Anchored," in Krabbenhoft, pp. 51-53.
- [9] Wendell Berry, "Poetry and Place," in *Standing By Words* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983), p. 93.
- [10] Berry, p. 98.
- [11] St. John of the Cross, "The Spiritual Canticle," in Krabbenhoft, p. 7.
- [12] Berry, pp. 102-3.
- [13] Ibid. p. 103.
- [14] Ibid. p. 106.
- [15] Jessica Powers, "There Is a Homelessness," in *The House At Rest* (Pewaukee, WI: Carmelite Monastery, 1984), p. 10.
- [16] St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), I, xiii, 11, p. 150.
- [17] St. John of the Cross, "I Entered I Knew Not Where," in Krabbenhoft, p. 25.
- [18] Ibid.
- [19] St. John of the Cross, "O Living Flame of Love," in Krabbenhoft, p. 23.
- [20] St. John of the Cross, "I Entered I Knew Not Where," in Krabbenhoft, p. 25.
- [21] Ibid. pp. 25-29.
- [22] Ibid. p. 27.
- [23] St. Teresa of Avila, "Sighs in Exile," in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1985), p. 383.
- [24] St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, in Kavanaugh, I, xii, 6, p. 149.
- [25] St. Teresa of Avila, "Seeking God," in Kavanaugh, p. 385.
- [26] Noel Dermot O'Donoghue, *Heaven in Ordinarie* (Springfield, Ill: Templegate, 1979), p. 68.
- [27] O'Donoghue, p. 65.
- [28] St. Teresa of Avila, "In the Hands of God," in Kavanaugh, pp. 377-8.
- [29] O'Donoghue, p. 66.
- [30] Suzuki, D. T., "The Awakening of a New Consciousness in Zen," in *Twenty Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy*, ed. G. Lee Bowie, et. al. (USA: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc.), p. 46.
- [31] Smith, Huston, *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief* (New York: Harper Collins), p. 26.
- [32] St. Teresa of Avila. A free rendering by Eknath Easwaran, in *God Makes the Rivers to Flow*, p. 66.
- [33] Van Kaam, Adrian, "Free Formation Flow." This concept refers to the consonance which takes place in the soul when obstacles to transcendent formation have been overcome. See discussions of the transcendent dimension, the disposition of awe, and pre-transcendent formation in, respectively, Volumes I, II and VI of the series *Formative Spirituality* (Crossroad Publishers).
- [34] St. Therese of Lisieux, p. 148.
- [35] Hans urs von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992).
- [36] Susan A. Muto, *Catholic Spirituality from A-Z* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications and The Epiphany Association, 2000), pp. 74-5.
- [37] von Balthasar, p. 421.
- [38] Ibid.
- [39] Ibid.
- [40] Ibid. p. 423.
- [41] Ibid. pp. 428-9.
- [42] Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, quoted in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: Essays on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), p. 38.
- [43] Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit*, p. 422.
- [44] Quoted in von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought*, p. 38.
- [45] von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit*, p. 478.
- [46] Von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought*, p. 41.
- [47] Herbstrith, Waltraub, *Edith Stein: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), p. 161.



## KEY CONCEPTS OF FORMATIVE SPIRITUALITY (2)

In this and subsequent issues of this Newsletter we will present some of the key concepts of Formative Spirituality, drawing mainly from the writings of Fr. Adrian van Kaam. See below for a listing of some of his main published works.

### The Transcendence Dynamics

The hairs of your head are far easier to count than your feelings and the movements of your heart.  
~ St. Augustine, *Confessions* 4.5

Desire is pervasive in human life. It can be discerned affirmatively in human longing and aspiration for connection, growth and fulfillment. It can also be understood “negatively” in terms of want and need: craving. The negative view of desire is based on the belief that desires impede spiritual progress and leads to the idea that they should be extinguished. An affirmative view of desire recognizes that the life of desire is inclusive of positive and negative movements, and that the multiplicity of desires besetting the human heart cannot be extinguished but must be worked with to bring about a state of consonance in the human soul. The tendency to judge our desires should give way to a willingness to understand them: What is the meaning of this perpetual state of longing and craving for objects of satisfaction? St. Augustine recognized that the human heart is perpetually restless in its quest for peace and satisfaction. And in *Open to Desire: Embracing a Lust for Life* Mark Epstein translates the First Noble Truth of Buddhism as “pervasive unsatisfactoriness”. “Even the most pleasurable experiences,” he writes, “are tinged with this sense of discontent because of how transient and insubstantial they are. They do not offset the insecurity, instability and unrest that we feel.” (p. 4)

In his writings and in his theory of foundational human formation Adrian van Kaam consistently refers to desire as “the transcendence dynamic”. In a volume devoted to Transcendent Formation he observes that “The power of transcendence is at the heart of each human existence,” (3) and that “The transcendence dynamic is at work in us continuously.” (233). The transcendent dimension of our personhood is an essential openness “for more.” From the very start of life, the longing and yearning for more are movements of spirit in us that pervade all dimensions and strivings in human personality. “All formation of human life,” writes van Kaam, “whether in infancy or adulthood or in any of life’s vocations, participates in the transcendent dynamic of human formation.” (Volume I, 9) In short, the transcendence dynamic is “spirit power pervading human life and its dimensions.” (Ibid. 19)

We see evidence of the transcendence dynamic in all stages and phases of human formation. That this dynamic is “spiritual” - i.e. reflects the power of spirit at work in us—is not always evident to us. The deeper spiritual longing that drives many of our acts and much of our behavior often eludes our attention. In the midst of conflicting desires and wants, for example, a certain forgetfulness of spirit may threaten to engulf our consciousness. Van Kaam maintains, notwithstanding the dynamics of ordinary consciousness, that the transcendent dynamic “includes an implicit awareness that one is called to a higher form of life.” (Ibid. 9) An in-depth understanding of human motivation therefore requires an appreciation for the central role of the transcendence dynamic in all aspects of human life, even in those areas that may not be readily perceived as “spiritual.”

Fully appreciating the fact that we are creatures of desire means that we have to become aware of our desire. More to the point, we must recognize ourselves in *essence* as a longing and a yearning for more. Multiple desires split our consciousness, sending us in various directions to seek and gain satisfaction of our wants. Yet, because desire is irreducible in us, the quest for satisfaction does not ultimately satisfy. A sort of false consciousness about our desire(s) prevails in us as long as we fail to appropriate the truth of our longing as an expression of the transcendence dynamic moving us to “strive beyond what one already is.” (Ibid. 18) The essence of longing is not acquisition or the fulfillment of a lack; it is a *becoming*, the desire to receive more life, to be more than one already is. Our capacity for transcendence is related to the desire that lies at the heart of human existence. How well we allow ourselves in the core of our being to be formed by this deepest desire is the ultimate measure of our humanness. (Ibid. 3)

In *Sacred Rhythms* Ruth Haley Barton (see book reviews) chronicles the experience that led her to discover her deeper spiritual longings:

As a conclusion to the class (on spiritual formation), we went on a retreat together to experience an extended time in solitude.... Because I had space to feel what I was feeling, I could begin acknowledging truth I had not known how to name before.... All of a sudden I was awake and alert to a level of overstimulation and exhaustion I had come to associate with normal Christian living. What was I to do with the pent-up longing and frustration that was now expressing itself?... I had to stay with my longings in his presence and get honest about the ways my life *as I was living it* was not congruent with my heart’s deepest desires. This was a stunning realization; after all, I had made most of my own life choices. How had I ended

up here? What was one to *do* with such longing and depth of feeling? (29-31)

Desire fuels the journey. If we do not appropriate and mobilize our deepest spiritual longings, our spiritual life will founder amid a multiplicity of passing pleasures and petty pursuits. Shunryu Suzuki, in one of his spiritual conferences, relates the “restraining of your many desires” to acquiring a “true-hearted spirit.” The practice of oneness of mind, of not dividing our attention among too many things, enables us to have few desires, and thereby to live in relative equanimity. (*Not Always So*, 22) As paradoxical as it may sound, we experience more peace in our lives when we have made contact with and are living out of authentic passion.

The word “passion” reminds us that there is an “in and through” dimension to our transcendent longings. To transcend is to go beyond. It is also to enter in and to go through. In the passages which follow, the transcendence dynamic will be perceived in relation to the longing for connection which is prayer, the purification of desire brought about by disappointment and the “death of desire,” and the longing for union and bliss:

### Prayer and Desire

O God, you are my God, for you I long;  
For you my soul is thirsting.  
My body pines for you  
Like a dry, weary land without water.

~Psalm 63  
Desire always prays, even when the tongue is silent.  
If you desire you will pray always.

~St. Augustine, *Sermo*, 80, 7

- (W)ith his great grace, God kindled your desire, and fastened to it a leash of longing.
- Now you have to stand in desire your whole life-long. . . . This desire must always be at work in your will, by the power of almighty God and by your own consent.
- Lift up your heart to God with a humble impulse of love; and have himself as your aim, not any of his goods.
- This is the work of the soul that pleases God most. . . . It is the easiest exercise of all and most readily accomplished when a soul is helped by grace in this felt desire. . . . Do not hang back then, but labor in it until you experience the desire. [*The Cloud of Unknowing* (Classics of Western Spirituality, 1980), translated by James Walsh, SJ, pp. 116, 118, 119 – 120]

- To pray is to pass continually from the need for God to desire for God himself. (*Spirituality: Form, Foundations, Methods* by Kees Waaijman, 2002)

### Disappointment: The Death of Desire

We must surrender our hopes and expectations, as well as our fears, and march directly into our disappointment, go into it and make it our way of life . . . Disappointment is the best chariot to use on the path . . .

~ Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism*, 25

- While eros rules the vital relations of infants within their surroundings, this is an eros not yet on the path of transformation. Infants are not yet capable of the transcendent love that complements and transfigures vital eros. While young children are immersed in the traditions of the family, they cannot yet personally grasp the deeper message of the transcendent customs communicated to them.

Their erotic sympathy revolves around their own vulnerable incipient selfhood. Like all human forms of life, infants, too, live and grow in interaction with a limited field of presence and action, of care and play. They are receivers, not yet givers, of care. They do not plan their life but live it from moment to moment. This absence of rational concern enhances the influence of the vital eros with its emotional swayings between sympathy and antipathy, feeling accepted and rejected, desire and gratification. (p. 172).

- When parental confirmation is withheld, children may find it difficult to grow in the inner independent affirmation of the dignity of their unique-communal life call. Their eros may stay wounded; it may develop an insatiable hunger for external confirmation. For a lifetime such children may be in search of the confirmation they missed in childhood.

All of us want some confirmation. Within the bounds of reality and reason, this is a healthy and normal desire. The question is how deep and comprehensive is this striving for confirmation, how much does it dominate our life, how seriously does it prevent the transformation of eros.

Our eros may be vulnerable because of our own lack of affirmation of our life call. This may give rise to an insatiable hunger for confirmation. This hunger can turn into a famine because of disappointment in others, who do not or cannot grant us the confirmation we want. Because of prolonged

disappointment, we may sink into a low-grade chronic despondency. (p. 173).

~Adrian van Kaam, *Formative Spirituality*, Volume V

- God's presence alone gives full meaning to my existence. Only his Kingdom silences my restlessness. To enter this presence, I must give to my life a new form. Not the form of anxious cravings I have made ultimate, but the form of a graced Christian life, shaped by the one desire that surpasses all others: the desire for the Kingdom. Grace invites me to the only possible fulfillment of human life: its engulfment by the Holy. The Holy Spirit inspires me to empty myself like Christ from all other desires: "Your attitude must be Christ's... he emptied himself." (Phil. 2:5-7) (pp. 151-2)
- As long as my life is filled with impatient desire, I will find neither abiding peace nor gentleness. I will lose the gentle life. Jesus tells me to renounce this anxious life of restless striving after worldly gratifications *as if they were ultimate*. If I respond to this grace of renunciation, he promises me the true life. He calls it life eternal. Not only will it last forever in the hereafter; it also has an eternal character in this world. This life of desire for the Divine is a sharing in the love and desire of Jesus for His Father and His Kingdom. It is a desire that God's will be done no matter what my own selfish wishes are. Therefore, this life is not ephemeral like the life of selfish desires made ultimate. (p. 154)
- The source of true self-fulfillment and its subsequent peace and equanimity is God alone. The source of disappointment and its subsequent tension and restlessness is the self in isolation from Him. Selfishness defeats itself. It seeks fulfillment through momentary satisfaction but leads only to lasting dissatisfaction. (pp. 155-6).

~Adrian van Kaam, *Spirituality and the Gentle Life*

## The Desire for Union

Longing is the umbilical cord of the higher life.

~Søren Kierkegaard

The will calls for being transformed in love.

~ Kees Waaijman

- The transcendent dynamic includes an implicit awareness that one is called to a higher form of life.  
~Adrian van Kaam, *Fundamental Formation*, 9
- Our transcendent dynamic is reaching out for beatitude, bliss, or happiness that fills us with a peace that goes beyond encapsulation in the life of our

senses and analytical reason alone.... The transcendence dynamic, rooted in our will to love, is always forming us; it prepares us for transformation... even when we deny or ignore it...

~Adrian van Kaam, *Transcendent Formation*, 41, 3, 233

- The greatest gift of the mystery to the human form of life is the dynamic of transcendent love.... The summit of love implies a fully consonant and transfigured vision of cosmos, humanity... and history as pervaded by an infinitely loving mystery.

~Adrian van Kaam, *Traditional Formation*, 197.

How gently and lovingly  
you wake in my heart,  
where in secret you dwell alone;  
and in your sweet breathing,  
filled with good and glory,  
how tenderly you swell my heart with love.

~St. John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*

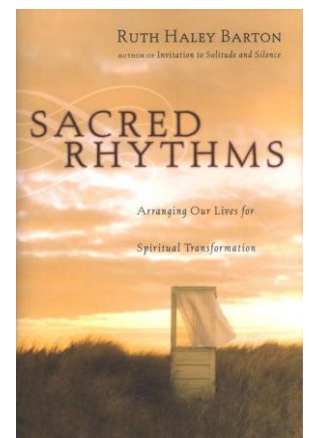
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## BOOK REFLECTIONS: LONGING AND DESIRE

In our reflective piece for this issue on *Poets of Carmel: Longing for the Infinite*, we highlight the ability of mystics and other persons to live in the deep and passionate longings of their hearts. In an age where the experience of "burn-out" borders on the epidemic, where so many of us feel overworked, hyperstimulated and overstressed, we desperately need reminders of the possibility of a life that remains connected with our deepest longings and passion for life, love, and significant work. In a technological age the temptations of functionalism threaten to weaken our link to the spiritual sources that foster longing and our deepest possibilities for love. The following books address the way back to the desiring self that manifests our true spiritual identity.

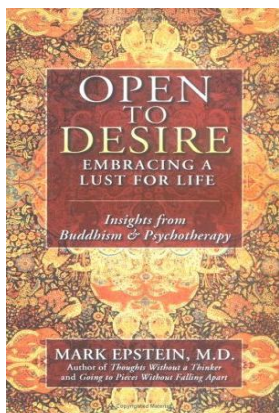
In the first chapter of her recently published book, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Intervarsity Press), Ruth Haley Barton writes:

We love God because he first loved us. We long for God because he first longed for us. We reach for God because he first reached for us.... So it is that the spiritual life begins... with the longing that stirs way down deep, underneath the noise, the



activity, the drivenness of our life. But it is not always comfortable to acknowledge such longing, and the direction that such an admission takes us [in] is different for all of us.

In the following chapters of her very clearly written and practical handbook, Barton describes and offers ways to practice several tried and true “disciplines” of living to foster deeper presence to self and God in our day to day lives: Solitude, Scripture, Prayer, Honoring the Body, Self-Examination, Discernment, Sabbath, and Rule of Life.



Psychiatrist, psychotherapist and practitioner of Buddhism Mark Epstein is the author of several books integrating the teachings of psychotherapy and Buddhism. In his book *Open to Desire: Embracing a Lust for Life, Insights from Buddhism and Psychotherapy* (Gotham Books), Epstein considers an *apparent* contradiction in the teachings of these two traditions. In his medical and psy-

chiatric training, says Epstein, he “discovered how important it was to be able to admit to, or ‘own,’ one’s desires.” In fact, the healing potential of psychotherapy often required the “learning to accept and tolerate wishes and urges from which a person had become estranged.” Yet, many religious or spiritual people have the understanding that since it is desire that is the cause of all suffering, they must “struggle to eliminate desire from their being.” Epstein believes that the “task” of the practitioner of meditation and reflective living is not to eliminate desire but rather to recognize that: “There is a drive for transcendence that is implicit in even the most sensual of desires.” Thus, we must not seek to eliminate desire but rather “learn to relate to it differently”, that is, “learn how to use desire rather than be used by it.” In this, as in his previous books, Epstein’s lucid, interesting and anecdotal style, as well as his penetrating and practically oriented grasp of his material, make for stimulating and truly helpful and formative reading.

John S. Dunne, CSC, the John A. O’Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame has described the journey from the painful longings of the heart to a deeper communion with others, the world, and God. He has done this in over 15 books, as well as in poetry, song cycles and countless articles. His theology is ruminative, meditative, and poetic. In the preface to his seminal work, *The Reasons of the Heart* (University of Notre Dame Press), he writes:

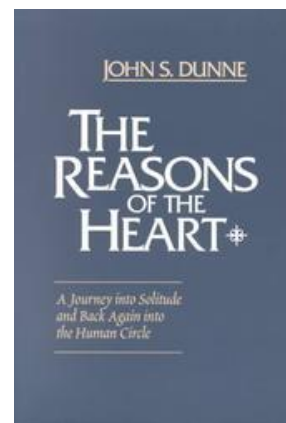
If I let myself feel the loss of the road not taken, I am led on a journey into my heart, I come to know my heart’s desire, and not only my own but that of others as well; I am led on a journey into the human heart.

For Dunne, the journey into one’s heart begins with a longing that is inherent in the loneliness we each experience “in all the boundary situations of life.” Dunne says that this longing is “the heart’s desire.” Our unique experience of this loneliness and longing and desire is our share in the love that is “from God and of God and towards God,” as Dunne quotes from T. E. Lawrence. This “going through” our unique experience of the loneliness, longing and desire is what allows us to return to “the human circle,” now willing to say “Yes” not only to “I am” but also to “I will die.” The passage from life as *we* would constitute it (what Dunne calls living by will) to willing life *as it is* – in the loneliness, the loss, and the longing – is our sharing in the power of the Lord who lays down his life and takes it up again.

At every point in our story willingness is enabling and empowering. Willingness to walk alone enables one to enter solitude and find God; willingness to be in need enables one to enter the human circle and find a new and unknown life in another person; and now willingness to let go enables one to recover the life and the person. The “power to become children of God” is the power to stand in the relationship of the Son to the Father.

*Reasons of the Heart*, as Dunne’s many other works, is not easy reading. Yet to enter into the highly meditative mode of his thinking and writing is deeply rewarding. The author’s circular writing style draws the reader into a meditative mode of thinking and into the “spiritual adventure” that he describes so well. It is a discipline against hurried, informational reading; an invitation to personal reflection and interformative dialogue with the text.

The appropriation and expression of our human desires is the key element in Ann and Barry Ulanov’s *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer*, recently reissued by Westminster John Knox Press. *Primary Speech* refers to the movements of the human heart prior to judgments and cognitive filtering, and is seen by these authors as the means of disclosing longings and wishes that reflect the true nature of embodied human life. The emotional substratum of life is not opposed to our





THE  
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JEAN LECLERCQ, O.S.B.

spiritual unfolding but is in fact the best vehicle toward self-realization and integration.

For a deeper study of desire in the Western spiritual tradition, one could do no better than Jean Leclercq's *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (Fordham University Press). These essays are

cerned with the relationships between learning and spirituality. They consider the subject of desire in the lives of St. Benedict and St.

Gregory, among others; sacred learning; liturgy, literature and the mystical life.

Michael A. Sells's *Stations of Desire* translates into English the love poetry of Sufi mystic Ibn Al-'Arabi. The poetry presented in these pages celebrates the "annihilation" of the lover, who becomes one with the divine beloved, and has much in common with the love poetry of mystics of all traditions, including Mechtild of Magdeburg, John of the Cross, Hadewijch, Teresa of Avila and Therese of Lisieux.



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