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THE BREATH OF THE MYSTIC

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INTRODUCTION

God was meant to be man's breath. Man was to be healthy and full of life by breathing in the loving power of God. But man polluted his interior environment. What we see around us in the pollution of the air, the streams, rivers, lakes, and oceans, our woods and forests and countryside, and in the jungles of our cities, is but an *icon*, a dramatic image, externalized, of what man is doing within himself in the unlimited expanses of his "inner space." There he was meant to run, fly, soar, with the speed of light; no space, no time would hold him back as he was propelled into the future by the created energy of love, bubbling forth from his center. Instead, he sits now lonely within himself, sick and afraid.

George Harrison of Beatles fame interpreted the modern mood in his song, "Within You and Without You":

We were talking about the love that's gone so cold
and the people who gain the world but lose their soul.
They don't know—they can't see—are you one of them?
When you've seen beyond yourself then you may find
peace of mind is waiting there.
And the time will come when you see
We're all one and life flows on within you or without you.

Decades before, G. M. Hopkins declared that the world of signs is "here, and but the beholder / wanting." Still, in spite of man's failures, "there lives the dearest freshness deep down things."

Julian Green puts it succinctly: "God is dying of coldness. He knocks on all the doors, but whoever opens? The room is taken. By whom? By ourselves." ¹

Yet we are witnessing a tremendous surge, especially among the young, towards mysticism. Starved for an immediate experience in the deepest reaches of their consciousness, they turn on to the Absolute with a frenetic vengeance that at times reaches pathetic proportion. This explains the fascination among the young for Hindu Yoga, Zen Buddhism, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, Gurdieff, occultism, Edgar Cayce, etc.

Carl G. Jung has pointed out that the impoverished West has lost myths and symbols, the archetypal models implanted in man's subconsciousness whereby he can commune with the invisible world of the Transcendent Absolute. In a dehumanized, rationalistic world, man is rich in techniques, poor in intuitions, in feminine receptivity to the inner voice that resides in the "temple invisible." The reaction—to become a person and to continue to grow into greater personalism through intermutuality in an I-Thou relationship—has opened to Western man a great interest in body integration, a growing hunger for solitude and silence, as well as the practice of Yoga and Zen methods of transcendental meditation. From Eastern Christianity there is a new-felt influence upon the youth through the beautiful Byzantine icons, the Jesus Prayer, and the haunting Liturgies that lead a worshiper into a deep experience of God through vivid sense impressions, not the least of which flow from stirring religious music.

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF MYSTICISM

Mysticism is one of those often misunderstood words in English usage. Ask the ordinary person on the street what mysticism connotes to him, and he would probably describe something touching demonology, occultism, or magic. Or else the word will conjure up the psychical experiences that nuns and monks of all religions have when they push themselves too far in their fastings and vigils and morbid introspection.

To call a person "mystical" is usually taken to mean that he is a bit "out of it." He cannot be trusted with a wrench or screwdriver, or with any serious task in this "nitty-gritty" world of ours. He is a poetic type, living in a dream world.

Yet in the Far East and in the Christian East of the Greek and Slavic world, mysticism is synonymous with being in touch with the "really real." Reality abides not in the changing, in the temporal, but in the unfathomable abyss where God speaks within the heart of man in silence. Mysticism is a living experience of God, not as an object outside of us, but as an encompassing power of permeating love that, as St. Augustine said, is more intimate to me than I to myself. At the center of our deepest awareness, beyond our habitual pre-conditioning of sense and emotional and intellectual responses, we are gradually purified of our false ego-orientation in order to open ourselves towards the Allness of God.

This openness is attained in a gradual process of communion that unfolds in the ever-deepening silencing of our own inordinate desires and sense of independence and in the surrendering of ourselves to His divine will. It is what must be experienced, not what can be described in words

that is important. Kahlil Gibran has beautifully expressed the spirit of Eastern mysticism and of all authentic mysticism in these words:

It is enough that you enter the temple invisible.
I cannot teach you how to pray in words.
God listens not to your words save when He Himself utters
them through your lips.
And I cannot teach you the prayer of the seas and the
forests and the mountains.
But you who are born of the mountains and the forests
and the seas hear them saying in silence,
'Our God, who are our winged self, it is thy will
in us that willeth.
It is thy desire in us that desireth.
It is thy urge in us that would turn our nights,
which are thine, into days which are thine also.
We cannot ask thee for aught, for thou knowest
our needs before they are born in us:
Thou are our need and in giving us more of thyself
thou givest us all.²

Mysticism moves beyond the Cartesian duality of subject and object in order to experience God as the very inner force within us and all around us, supporting all being in his mighty, transcendent creativity. Evelyn Underhill has given us an apt description of mysticism that adequately summarizes what has thus far been said:

Mysticism is the expression of the innate yearning of the human spirit towards total harmony with the transcendental order, whatever may be the theological formula in which this order is expressed. This yearning with the great mystics gradually takes possession of the whole field of consciousness; it dominates their whole life and attains its climax in that experience called mystic union, whether it be with God of Christianity, the World soul of pantheism or the Absolute of

philosophy. This desire for union and straining towards it in as much as they are vital and real (not purely speculative) constitute the real subject of mysticism. Through this the human consciousness reaches its further and richest development.³

Thus intrinsic to any authentic mysticism is a conscious, immediate communion of the soul with the Transcendent Source of all being. This communion is progressively felt to be a union through assimilation, a continued surrendering of the one possessed to the loving power of the possessor. It is a leaving behind of the operations of the senses, emotions, and intellectual powers in order to "strain upwards in unknowing as far as may be towards the union with Him who is above all being and knowledge. For by unceasing and absolute withdrawal from thyself and all things in purity, abandon all and set free from all, thou will be borne up to the ray of the divine Darkness that surpasses all being."⁴

THE BREATH OF MAN

Breath is the most important gift God has given to man. When one no longer breathes, a doctor pronounces him dead. Breath is a sign of life. It brings us the life-giving oxygen without which we would shortly suffocate and die.

We can say that our breath is in a way a part of God. He shares His life with us when He continues to breathe into us His breath. "Yahweh God fashioned man of dust from the earth. Then He breathed into his nostrils a breath of life and thus man became a living being" (Gen. 2,7).

Again Job calls us back to the complete dependence of man upon the breath that God gives us: "He holds in His power the soul of every living thing, and the breath of

each man's body" (Job 12,10). "I was fashioned out of clay. God's breath it was that made me, the breathing of Shaddai that gave me life" (Job 33,4).

The Psalmist, in the Semitic existentialism of the desert mystic, cries out before God's grandeur reflected in the ordered heavens: "By the word of Yahweh the heavens were made, their whole array by the breath of His mouth" (Ps. 33,6).

Yet we are seeing a powerful message from God being acted out in our physical environment today. With millions of humans scurrying about in our congested cities like frenetic ants, who find it day by day more difficult to breathe, who are developing diseases of the lungs, heart and all parts of the body because of the polluted air, God is telling us that we have forgotten that His Divine Spirit of Love is our true breath. "After saying this, He breathed on them and said: 'Receive the Holy Spirit' " (Jn. 20,22).

Many of us have ceased to breathe spiritually. What spiritual diseases we carry around within us because we are not nourished by the fresh Breath of God's Spirit!

Ezekiel was touched by God; His Spirit carried him away and set him down in the middle of a valley, full of bones. There he saw vast quantities of bones lying on the ground, the whole length of the valley, "quite dried up." Then Yahweh told him: "Prophesy over these bones. Say, 'Dry bones, hear the word of Yahweh. The Lord Yahweh says this to these bones: I am now going to make the breath enter you and you will live. I shall put sinews on you, I shall make flesh grow on you, I shall cover you with skin and give you breath, and you will live; and you will learn that I am Yahweh.' I prophesied as I had been ordered. While I was prophesying, there was a noise, a sound of clattering; and flesh was growing on them and

skin was covering them, but there was no breath in them. He said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man. Say to the breath, 'The Lord Yahweh says this: Come from the four winds, breath; breathe on these dead; let them live!' I prophesied as He had ordered me, and the breath entered them; they came to life again and stood upon their feet, a great, an immense army" (Ezek. 37:2-10).

GOD'S BREATH: THE HOLY SPIRIT

God's Breath, the Holy Spirit, is truly breathing mightily throughout the world. Men, women, and children are breathing a new life in the Spirit. As a dead man come back to life hungers for food and drink, so a multitude sits in the desert in solitary and communal prayer, hungering for the Living Bread from Heaven.

Prayer is man in his hunger stretching forth in the totality of his being to touch God, his source of life. Prayer is man, having experienced his exile, his poverty and alienation, his sickness and close-to-death condition, crying out that the Giver of life come and heal him deeply. Prayer is man, lonely and afraid, seeking to be accepted by Love so that he may love all mankind in return.

What has caused this hunger for prayer among us today? One reason is that our whole being, made for God, has been frustrated by a steady diet of cotton-candy and now, by His absence, God is making himself powerfully felt. Breath, in so much pollution, makes us stagger frantically towards pure air.

MEANING IN ABSURDITY

Our modern arts are a good index of what has been happening in our world today. In theater, painting,

sculpturing, music, dancing, and singing, we encounter a violent rebellion against static, "clear and distinct" Cartesian forms. The 60's saw on stage a Dionysian frenzy of sensation in the whole gamut from topless to bottomless to nude. The "Living Theater" and the "Open Theater" had actors running all over the theater advocating wild freedom and animal license as a reaction to an outdated Puritan type of morality.⁵

Reality as seen by a "realistic" scientific age was really not where it was at! A world that was based on science and reason had produced a comfortable "box" in which modern man could live, like a pre-programmed guinea pig in a laboratory. But what happened to man's power to love strongly, to his basic emotions, appetites starved for individual, spontaneous expression?

In all art forms today, in protest to an ordered universe, we find the accent, not on reasoned reality, but on the absurd, the meaningless, the inexplicable quality that makes up most of our lives. Strinberg, Jarry, Pirandello, Artaud, Ionesco, Beckett and, to a bizarre degree, Genet, have created the "theater of the absurd." Are they telling us life is absurd? Or are their attempts to portray the absurdity in life reactions to a de-humanized rationalism, the land of Swift's *Laputa*? Does reaction not come before the solution or at least before the attempted synthesis? Is there no other alternate than the either/or of rationalism vs. irrationalism?

RETURN TO THE DESERT

But John the Baptist is again raising his piercing cry in the desert. When we turn within and descend into our deeper selves, beyond the habitual, pre-conditioning of our

sense, emotional and intellectual baggage, we hear the voice calling for a change of heart, a *metanoia*.

We are temples of the God who lives within us. "Didn't you realize you were God's temple and that the Spirit of God was living among you? If anybody should destroy the temple of God, God will destroy him, because the temple of God is sacred; and you are that temple" (1 Cor. 3:16-17). No wonder Jesus Christ flashed such anger as He cleared the temple that was to be God's place of prayer but had been turned into a den of thieves. "Your body, you know, is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you since you received Him from God. You are not your own property; you have been bought and paid for. That is why you should use your body for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

If we are temples of the Holy Spirit, then He lives and breathes in us. When we turn within to listen to that breath breathing in us, then we become true temples of prayer.

The heart, in all Eastern religions, including Eastern Christianity, has always been the interior "place," the *locus Dei*, where man meets God. Against a de-personalized highly-scientific culture, modern man seeks freedom to be his true self. Ultimately, true freedom that leads man into love, peace, and joy, the fruits of the Breath of God within us (Gal. 5,22), does not consist primarily in the choice between good and evil, purity and fornication, love and hatred, but consists in man's ability more perfectly to determine himself, in ever-increasing, total consciousness, to be the person God his Maker intends him to be.

More and more, modern man realizes that he must find a center if his existence is to have any meaning. He must be directed towards a goal, one that lies beyond

himself, in Another, that is both the source of his existence and the end for which he exists. But today man will not be told in scientific language that this is so. As always in the history of man, he will be as *real* (and as human) as his experience of God is real to him.

To be experienced, God must become present to man. But His presence is a loving presence. If God is the fullness of man's inner cravings, and love is ultimately what all men seek in life, then God must be experienced as a real presence by His loving action within us.

Experiencing God as love can be done in solitude, in a deep I-Thou relation; or in a self-sacrificing love-relationship with another person; or finally through a shared love in a group, a living community. Forgetting one's self, a conversion of the heart or man's turning away from his habitual selfish values towards another in love, necessitate a certain amount of the death process that the interior desert alone can teach us.

But the desert is not the end of man's wanderings. He is heading through the experience in the desert toward the Promised Land. "Heaven is within," said Jesus Christ. Prayer is indeed a purification, an enlightenment where we discard our false delusions. But prayer also is a resurrection, a rebirth, a re-creating process into the New Man.

MYSTICAL PRAYER

There are all too many books written on prayer. I hope this will not be thought of as one "about" prayer. It would defeat its own basic tenet: prayer has been all too often taught us as a technique, a thing we do before God.

I think there is a need for a book of insights that present prayer as a state of existence, rather than an

action. It is man standing before God in as great a consciousness as man can possess of the awesome, transcendent holiness of God and of his own utter poverty and lack of completeness. He then surrenders himself to God's love, returning gift for gift received, seeking to serve a loving Father.

I have been bold enough to use in the title of this book the word, "mystic." This was no inference on my part that any of the material here presented is autobiographical! Several points were intended in such a choice of title. The first is that all humans are called to be mystics. Therefore this book is intended for all persons regardless of where they stand in the progress of prayer. In the language of the Greek Fathers (who found this term in St. Paul) the inner life of encounter with the saving, healing power of Jesus Lord was the life of the "Mysteries," of what we call today the Sacraments. Mysteries indicated for the early Christians the "really real" world. It did not mean scorning the world of matter, bread, water, wine, oil, saliva, but it meant seeing through the material signs into a world transfigured by the Divine Logos who was en-fleshed as the Living Mystery and was rendered present to our religious consciousness through material signs and symbols.

Thus the mystic is simply a person who meets God in an ever deepening openness to the "Living Mystery" within him. The mystic is the one who consciously lets the Breath of God breathe in him. He is, as St. Irenaeus says, "The glory of God—a man living to the fullest." The mystic is the person always becoming more *human* as the Holy Spirit divinizes the powers placed in man when God made him "according to the Image and Likeness" of God. A fully realized human being has to be a mystic in the truest sense. We must therefore not limit our understand-

ing of mysticism to the aberrations that accompanied the prayer life of the great saints.

A RETURN TO THE GREEK FATHERS

The early Fathers who articulated a theological doctrine of man were mystics, deep contemplatives. All of them had known the rigorism of a long desert discipline. All hungered passionately for greater union in contemplation with God.

This book, therefore, draws its inspiration and content basically from the early Fathers of the desert, the Greek Fathers who articulated the prayer experienced as "theologians" and the Hesychastic Fathers of the school of the prayer of the heart or the Jesus Prayer.

But it is not a compendium of their doctrine or insights. I humbly offer the reader what I believe are insights that Eastern Christianity gives us as a relevant teaching for today. Thus there is at work both my own intellectual as well as personal, spiritual interpretation, at the risk of seeming somewhat presumptuous in presenting such insights through the prism of my own prayer experience. Let me rather present these as sparks that hopefully will ignite something in the hearts of the reader deeper than the initial insight that formulated them.

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