

Christian Contemplative Living

SIX CONNECTING POINTS

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CONTENTS

Introduction	
Tomato Soup and Grilled Cheese Sandwiches	5
Connecting Point 1	
Engaging the Divine Mystery	13
Connecting Point 2	
Practicing Spiritual Discipline	33
Connecting Point 3	
Seeing the Big Picture	49
Connecting Point 4	
Embracing Silence and Solitude	65
Connecting Point 5	
Changing Attitude and Perception	83
Connecting Point 6	
Redefining Abundance	101
Epilogue	
A Trunk in the Attic	119
Selected Bibliography	123
About the Author	125

INTRODUCTION

Tomato Soup and Grilled Cheese Sandwiches

When I was a very young boy, about nine years old, I was at home on a nondescript day. My two younger sisters and I were quietly trying to occupy ourselves with whatever board game we could manage to play together without fighting. It was a typical January winter morning in Michigan, overcast and snowing. To lighten the mood that seemed to be present, the babysitter was preparing some tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch. The family sitter was a high-school senior, a girl trying to earn some extra cash. In between her babysitting duties and lunch preparations she was working on her homework. All of her textbooks were piled high on the kitchen table, poised and ready for her use.

On this particular day I recall that I excused myself from the board game. With some effort I pulled myself up onto one of the kitchen table chairs very near the textbooks the babysitter had piled on the table. I took one of them in order to examine it more closely. Although I am unable to this day to remember the subject, I have no such difficulty identifying the emotion I felt as I paged through the text: I was devastated—that is, if a nine-year-old boy can truly be devastated by a book. I was overcome with a feeling of anxiety and a sense of impending doom. I recall thinking to myself, 'How am I ever going to be intelligent enough to understand such complex information?'

The grilled cheese sandwich and the tomato soup served just a few moments later did not lighten my disposition. I remained sullen and withdrawn through lunch. I resisted my sisters' invitation to resume our game and remained in my funk until my mother returned home from work later that afternoon.

Mom, despite the fact that she must have been quite tired after another stressful day, nevertheless busied herself with beginning dinner. She soon sensed the mood of her eldest child and asked what was

going on. When I shared with her my experience with the textbook, she responded by giving me one of those looks that only a mother can give. I presume she was wondering, “Where did this kid come from?”

But instead of following her first impulse, Mom comforted me. She assured me that by the time I became a senior in high school, like our sitter, I too would be well prepared to read and study my assignments. She also assured me that there were very few nine-year-old boys who could read a senior high school textbook, so I should not be too concerned.

Because I knew Mom to be very trustworthy in these matters and concerns, I had no reason to doubt her assurances.

I have often recalled this charming story from my youth on more than one occasion, especially at those moments in my life when challenged by a particular task I felt unprepared to assume. To this day I can easily replay my mother’s soothing voice of reassurance, “You will be prepared when it is required of you.” Whenever I remember that calming and soothing voice, I am not easily discouraged or anxious. I understand, in the words of the great mystic Julian of Norwich, “All will be well.”¹

This experience was not only an example of the tender manifestation of love and trust between a mother and a son. It was also something much more for me. It was my first memory of being mentored by a teacher, a person familiar with the path that was about to unfold for me. In her role as my mentor and teacher, Mom assured me that I would acquire the intellectual skills that would be required and expected of me. She knew the path; she had already walked it. And as a result she was able to give me words of assurance and direction regarding that path. As a result, my anxiety was replaced with confidence.

That is what I would like to do for you in this book.

As a priest, a spiritual director, and retreat director for the greater part of my life, I have often been privileged to share with others something of their spiritual journey. When I listen to their personal stories, men and women of all different ages, I am often struck by what seems to be a shared concern. They report a lack of confidence or assurance that they are on the right path, a feeling that there is no sense of progress, and even occasionally questions about whether or not they are capable of engaging in a particular spiritual practice.

Time and time again, people have shared with me their frustra-

tions and anxieties, often summed up with a sentiment that is stated something like, “Despite my best efforts I just do not feel close to God.”

One way I attempt to help them feel a little better about their progress is to encourage them to take a step back and examine the big picture. Often the ability to see their spiritual struggles within the context of their larger life experience is quite helpful. At the very least, this exercise can be reassuring and somewhat comforting, just as my mom’s insights were to me so many years ago—providing both a glimpse of the path their mentor has already traveled and a vision of their own journey.

As you step back and examine the wider view of *your* spiritual life, it is quite possible to recognize the connecting points, the moments in your experience when you have been squarely positioned at the exact point you needed to be. With this recognition comes some measure of satisfaction and an impulse to keep moving down the spiritual path.

Not all people consciously and deliberately walk this path; some choose other things to occupy their attention. However, the majority of us, at least at one time or another in our life, determine a need for some sort of spiritual meaning. Much to our amazement, we often discover that we have been traveling a spiritual path all our lives, even though we may not have been aware that the path we were walking had spiritual significance. Even more are we surprised to learn that our spiritual path is “contemplative,” in its best and most traditional definition.

We will see in these pages that there are distinct and essential connecting points on the spiritual path of contemplative living. But it is not at all helpful to imagine each connecting point as a single step that needs to be mastered before we take the next step on our spiritual journey.

The progression is not something that can be measured as step one, then step two, and so on. More often than not, although there is some palatable sense of having mastered a particular point of practice, most of us experience the full range of the connecting points simultaneously throughout our life.²

We will review and examine the six essential connecting points routinely encountered:

Engaging the Divine Mystery
Practicing Spiritual Discipline
Seeing the Big Picture
Embracing Silence and Solitude
Changing Attitude and Perception
Redefining Abundance

These connecting points might best be understood as a roadmap to a practical way of Christian contemplative living. The map helps us incorporate in day-to-day living the truth that we are engaged as fully awake, as fully alive, and as fully focused as possible. This is a perspective on the meaning of human life that is shared by many religious traditions, but it is central in the Christian tradition.

This spiritual perspective asserts that all human beings are invited to engage fully in the gift of grace. We have all been given the ability to experience the universe with our eyes wide open—drinking in the wonder, beauty, and mystery that surrounds us. This gift of grace leads us to an experience of the sacred, the discovery of the presence of the Divine Mystery.³ With this understanding, Christian contemplative living nourishes the conditions that are required for us to grow each day in what I will call throughout the book “spiritual maturity.”

As we develop the practice of Christian contemplative living, we experience what it means to become spiritually mature. Spiritual maturity, at least the way I understand it, does not necessarily mean that we are always able to connect easily or at a high level with the Divine Mystery. Spiritual maturity is rather the ability to recognize and understand the holiness of the ordinary and extraordinary experiences of life that connect us with the singular manifestation of divinity that we Christians call “God.”

When this process of contemplative living is engaged, we can maintain a balance between each of the six connecting points within the context of a continuing journey. For yet another indication of some sort of spiritual maturity—and I would assert that it is perhaps the *most important* indication of the presence of maturity—is that we are able to maintain a profound respect and reverence for *each* of the connecting points simultaneously. In other words, we are able to effortlessly and gratefully experience again and again a basic point of spiritual connection that might occur at the beginning stages of our

spiritual journey as reverentially as we experience a point that is perhaps more profound, or at least more difficult, for us to achieve.

Although I am certainly unable to identify myself as a completely formed and spiritually mature human being, I am comfortable enough to identify myself as at least growing in the spiritual life that comes with the gift of grace. For example, although there are some particular devotions and pious prayers that I no longer routinely use in my own spiritual practice, I am able to respect and reverence their use by other people. On those occasions when I am invited to express my spiritual practice in a manner I no longer routinely use, I do not struggle but rather maintain a healthy respect for the discipline. I recognize that at one time in my life the particular practice was an essential experience of my spiritual life. On those other occasions, when I am invited to share in spiritual practices that demand a focused and ritualized expression with which I am unfamiliar, I adopt the same healthy respect and do my best to follow the lead of others. Spiritual maturity, even—or should I say especially—Christian spiritual maturity, recognizes the grace and the power of God in many different experiences and is not insistent on one particular expression of faith.

As together we explore growing in Christian contemplative living, we will examine the six connecting points on the spiritual path I have identified. There are others, and they can be given different names, but it is my hope that anyone who spends some time with this book will recognize in these connecting points what it means to grow in the spiritual life. The wisdom and the teachings of Jesus Christ will be part of the experience, and to make them come alive in new and perhaps unfamiliar ways I have used a new translation of the Bible in contemporary language by Presbyterian minister Eugene Peterson, *The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition*, for all quotations from the scriptures.

I hope and anticipate that each of you will discover here a new and perhaps a more satisfying understanding and appreciation of your own spiritual practice. It is also my assumption that you are familiar with the dogmas and doctrines, the sacraments, the liturgy, the rituals, and the pious devotions and expressions of the Christian tradition. As you read these passages, however, you will notice I make few direct references to the religious practices and traditions of any specific Christian denomination. Rather I attempt to build upon the foundational

teachings of Jesus, with an emphasis on a spirituality that animates and informs the universal or “catholic” Christian tradition.

It is also possible to read these pages and profit from the commitment to do so, even if you are no longer a member of some organized church and are simply seeking some kind of direction in your spiritual life. The six spiritual connecting points described here are a universal experience of grace.

My singular goal for this work is not to become your teacher but rather, as my mother did for me over fifty years ago, a mentor or trusted companion, someone with whom you might choose to spend a few reflective moments for help and reassurance. Although I am not an expert spiritual director or practitioner and am in no immediate danger of being mistaken for a saint, I do understand the major components of the spiritual path. I hope my words encourage you, invite you to continue your spiritual journey, and—especially if you are experiencing any spiritual anxiety—achieve the confidence of Julian of Norwich: “All will be well.”

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NOTES

1. Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) is recognized as one of the great mystic saints of the Medieval Age. Her *Revelations of Divine Love* is considered one of the most remarkable documents to emerge from this period in history. Although never formally canonized as a saint, her unofficial feast day is celebrated by her many fans on May 13.
2. It may be helpful to imagine a continuum rather than a straight line. Imagine perhaps the “Wheel of life,” with six connecting points. A person connects with individual points on the wheel at different periods in life and often returns to a point of connection as the wheel turns.
3. I deliberately use this descriptive reference, “the Divine Mystery,” when I speak of God. I understand that this description acknowledges our awareness that we are encountering someone “other” than ourselves. I also understand that while the use of this description is both freeing and limiting, it is perhaps most of all incomplete and ultimately unsatisfying.

CONNECTING POINT 1

Engaging the Divine Mystery

“Don’t bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need. This isn’t a cat-and-mouse, hide-and-seek game we’re in.”

MATTHEW 7:7

God leads the child he has called in wonderful ways. God takes the soul to a secret place, for God alone will play with it in a game of which the body knows nothing. God says, “I am your playmate! Your childhood was a companion of my Holy Spirit.”

MECHTILD OF MAGDEBURG

To seek is as good as seeing. God wants us to search earnestly and with perseverance, without sloth and worthless sorrow. We must know that God will appear suddenly and joyfully to all lovers of God.

JULIAN OF NORWICH

Thou takest the pen—and the lines dance. Thou takest the flute—and the notes shimmer. Thou takest the brush—and the colors sing. So all things have meaning and beauty in that space beyond time where Thou art. How, then, can I hold back anything from Thee?

DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD

God’s presence accompanies the sincere efforts of individuals and groups to find encouragement and meaning in their lives. He dwells among them, fostering solidarity, fraternity, and the desire for goodness, truth, and justice. This presence must not be contrived but found, uncovered. God does not hide himself from those who seek him with a sincere heart, even though they do so tentatively, in a vague and haphazard manner.

POPE FRANCIS

When it comes to Christian contemplative living, relationship precedes practice. We love God because God loves us first. Contemplation of that relationship follows.

A singular and powerful assumption within the Christian spiritual tradition is riveting in its assertion and in the ramifications of the pronouncement. The assertion: each member of the human race has been called into life by a creator God and is an individual person uniquely loved by the Creator. Think about this: Which came first, the chicken or the egg in regard to contemplative living? In this case, we already know the answer to that question.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, quoting the great Second Vatican Council, expresses this dogmatic truth in these words: “For if humans exist, it is because God has created them through love, and through love continues to hold them in existence.”¹ The implications of this truth are mind-boggling for the spiritually mature Christian. We don’t have to *know* God or *discover* God or even *seek* God and we are already *loved by* God. We don’t have to do a thing and we have already gotten to the point that many other humans attempt to reach over a lifetime. We are loved unconditionally before we raise a little finger.

As if this assumption is not enough, the Christian tradition further insists that the Creator desires to be intimately in relationship with creation, specifically with humanity. The dynamic is active and includes all of those qualities that are fundamentally necessary for any other relationship that human beings are capable of experiencing. In other words, not only does God love us, but God is open to having that love returned by us. We don’t have to wonder what God wants. We already know that too.

And here is a third brilliant thing about Christian contemplative living: If we accept this theological viewpoint as it has been preserved and nurtured in the Christian tradition, we have an ability to join our individual response of belief with the responses of countless other men and women through the ages who have also embraced this assumption about the relationship of God and humans with enthusiasm. Many people therefore join their voices with the voices of the Church when it both observes and teaches that “in many ways, throughout history down to the present day, humans have given expression to their quest for God in their religious beliefs and behavior: in their prayers, sacrifices, rituals, meditations, and so forth. These forms of religious expression, despite the ambiguities they often bring with them, are so

universal that one may well call the human person a *religious being*.”² We need not be alone in our contemplative living. We have our fellow human beings to practice it with!

ENCOUNTERING THE DIVINE MYSTERY

For a Christian believer, then, the theological perception of a God who loves us, wants to be loved by us, and wants to work together with us is best understood as the core experience of what is called “revelation.” Revelation in this understanding comes to us through scripture, tradition, and our observance of the created world around us. These three components (scripture, tradition, and creation) are the “converging and convincing arguments”³ of the order and beauty of the universe.

For most of us, however, the ultimate experience that convinces us of the existence of Divine Mystery⁴ is our *personal encounter with the inexpressible but nevertheless convincingly felt presence of a sense that we identify as sacred and divine*. We believe because we believe, and that is all there is to it.

As Christians, a traditional way to understand and fully appreciate this personal encounter with mystery is to seek some insight into how this encounter has been lived out and experienced in the past. It is quite helpful to us, therefore, to turn to the story of men and women, our ancestors in faith, in search of some kind of insight and understanding of their encounter with the divine dynamic. The stories that are preserved in the sacred scripture seem to be the best place to start our spiritual quest.

ABRAHAM'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE DIVINE MYSTERY

It would not be too much of a stretch of the imagination to suggest that from the beginning of the human experience we have always had within us a curiosity, a desire for what many spiritual masters might identify as the “other,” “divinity,” or some version of the word “God.” As a result of our response and recognition of the presence of Divine Mystery, we are able to look back from where we have come and rec-

ognize manifestations of this experience through form, presence, or elaborate ritual.

It is impossible to pinpoint the first moment in the human journey when this awareness and desire for some form of relationship with the presence of the Divine Mystery was first acted upon. However, whenever the first human person became aware that there was something or someone greater than himself or herself, humanity started the process of seeking to know more, to understand more, and ultimately to seek some sort of union with God. We call this search “contemplative living.” Ultimately, of course, when we take the necessary time to begin this process of seeking, the realization soon dawns on us that what we are seeking seems to be returning the favor: The seeker is also being pursued.⁵

Perhaps the ancestral person who is key in three great monotheistic religions that are still active and animated today—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—might best illustrate this dynamic. In the story of Abraham, faithfully preserved in the Hebrew Scriptures in the book of Genesis and repeatedly referenced in the Koran, we are introduced to a Bedouin nomad who desires to respond to the stirrings within him. Looking through the mist of history, we do not know for certain that Abraham’s quest was primarily a spiritual quest. From our limited perspective it is enough to understand that Abraham’s story has many of the components traditionally considered necessary to engage in such a spiritual journey.

According to the story as it is recorded in the Torah and the Koran and also referenced within the oral and written tradition that supports both of these holy books, Abraham seems highly motivated to establish a relationship with God. The Koran informs us that from his earliest childhood experiences Abram (later Abraham) sensed the presence of the Other, whom he eventually identified as the “one God.” Abraham desired to serve only this presence, which he assumed to be divine. In a world filled with many gods and spiritual paths, Abraham remained clearly focused on his pursuit and succeeded in establishing a relationship with the God whom he pursued.

In the Torah, where we meet Abraham not as a child but as an old man, the story unfolds at its seemingly most dramatic junction. It is the point where obvious communication between Abraham and the Divine Mystery has been established and a certain familiarity is

also present. This dramatic moment, certainly acknowledged as a core moment in the Jewish and the Christian traditions, is known as the “covenant” between Yahweh and Abraham, effectively ratifying the relationship between God and humans for all time: “I’m establishing my covenant between me and you, a covenant that includes your descendants, a covenant that goes on and on and on, a covenant that commits me to be your God and the God of your descendants” (Genesis 17:7).

What is missing from each of the stories that are preserved in the tradition is any insight or details into the process that Abraham engaged in during this pursuit. The readers of the holy books are not informed of the countless hours of reflection. There is no reference to the wonderings, doubts, and questions that would necessarily be part and parcel of an experience of moving from an acceptance of the many gods of polytheism to the one God of monotheism.

It would not have been easy for Abraham to lay aside old habits and beliefs. It would have been equally difficult for him to convince others, including his wives, children, and other members of the extended patriarchal family, to do the same unless he felt a conviction deep within himself. It would have been necessary that this conviction would eventually manifest itself into a belief, and then strongly held values, and finally a morality and commitment to action that would animate the rest of his life and define his relationships.

What is also missing from the Abraham story—and the contemporary reader realistically should not expect the story to be complete, since it tells only of one ancient person’s very first encounter with the presence of the Divine Mystery—is the portrait of a fully-formed and spiritually-mature ancestor in faith. Abraham is most certainly not fully formed or spiritually mature, as we might understand such maturity today. He is very much a product of his day and his time, and we should not expect otherwise. It is enough that the stories that are preserved in the tradition are effective in helping us learn valuable lessons from Abraham’s experience. These are stories that retain their ability to effectively illustrate some of the requirements for today’s spiritual journey.⁶

Abraham was a patriarch and apparently quite happy with his position. There is nothing in his story that indicates that he was suffering from any kind of angst as a result of his patriarchic habits and opinions. The story also suggests that the Divine Mystery (identified

as Yahweh in this retelling) that Abraham encounters also exhibits all of the qualities and sensibilities of another patriarch: Yahweh engages Abraham in the manner in which Abraham is the most comfortable, Patriarch (Yahweh) to patriarch (Abraham). As patriarch, Abraham is looking for something, something that will prove to be an advantage to his tribe. Yahweh is also looking for something. However, what Yahweh was looking for was not necessarily something that would increase the divine advantage.

Both Abraham and Yahweh are seekers. As the story unfolds and the drama is played out, both receive what they are seeking, the result of an equal patriarchic agreement best summarized with the concept, “I will do this and you will do that and then you will receive this and I will receive that.”

We should not be put off by this negotiation between God and a human, and we should not be surprised by the story as it unfolds in the pages of the scripture. Remember, all scriptural stories intend to teach the reader something about a relationship, and most relationships—especially our relationship with Divine Mystery—begin on this very basic level. As the relationship between Abraham and Yahweh develops, the trust level increases, vulnerability becomes possible and even necessary, and then and only then the intimacy between the two deepens and grows in richness and complexity. It is not too far-fetched to assert that the dynamic becomes much more free-moving. Likewise, the dynamic at the beginning of our relationship with God is not as free-flowing or even for that matter as appealing, as it is when the relationship develops over time.

The lesson that we can learn from this first encounter between the Divine Mystery and our representative ancestors in faith (in the story there is little reference to the parallel and equally important role played in the unfolding of the relationship by Sarah) is that Yahweh encounters this first man and woman of fragile faith exactly as they are. It seems that Yahweh engages and enables the relationship from that starting point. The story therefore teaches a valuable lesson: We who desire to enter into a relationship with God do not have to be perfect or fully formed. Contemplative living is very much a journey, an unfolding, if you will.

DAVID'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE DIVINE MYSTERY

Another biblical character whose relationship with the Divine Mystery seems to have captured the imagination of the biblical story tellers is King David. Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Rebecca, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, and other men and women of the Hebrew Scriptures all have a significant place in the unfolding of the story and the relationship between Yahweh and the people of the covenant. However wonderful and enriching their relationship may have been, however, it is King David whose story is the most intimate, tender, vulnerable, and emotional. It effectively captures a full range of human emotions, none of which seem to be varnished or papered over by the storytellers but rather exposed for all of us to reflect upon centuries later.

When we first encounter David in the pages of the book of the prophet Samuel, there is an immediate sense of something dramatic about to take place. Samuel has been sent by the Lord to a patriarch in Bethlehem, Jesse, who is the father of eight sons, one of whom is to be chosen and anointed as King of Israel. Jesse presents his seven oldest sons to Samuel for his consideration but none of them captures the Seer's attention. It is only when the youngest son of Jesse is presented to him, a young boy "the very picture of health—bright-eyed, good-looking" (1 Samuel 16:11b), that Samuel hears the voice of the Lord, who identifies David as the one who has been called and chosen. From that moment on, "The Spirit of GOD entered David like a rush of wind, God vitally empowering him for the rest of his life" (1 Samuel 16:13b). David is seized by the Divine Mystery, "like a rush of wind," and his relationship with the Lord plays out for the rest of his life. What an adventure it is!

His story includes a battle with a Philistine giant, a goliath of a man whom he slays in the name of Yahweh. He has an intimate friendship with Jonathan, who is David's "number-one advocate and friend" (1 Samuel 18:1b), but later in the story suffers a tragic death at the side of his father, Saul, all the while remaining loyal and faithful to David. David has marriages, some for political convenience, one for love, and seemingly one—to the infamous Bathsheba—for reasons rooted in lust that nevertheless results in the birth of the future king, Solomon. Threaded throughout David's story are various military escapades, plots and coup attempts, a few murders, and one spectacu-

lar display of religious piety and devotion to Yahweh when, stripped down to the bare necessities, David dances with joy and abandon before the Ark of the Covenant as it is carried into the city of Jerusalem. (See 2 Samuel 6:13-14.)

These adventures do not necessarily help us understand what makes the biblical character of King David so appealing, however. For some understanding of why he may be so beloved and celebrated, it is important to reference two moments from his life that stand out from all of the others. One is a moment of dramatic repentance and acceptance of guilt. The second is a moment of reflection and thanksgiving after a long and fruitful life.

The first is revealed in the story of David and the prophet Nathan, who is sent by Yahweh to the king when the events concerning Uriah, Bathsheba, and David come to light. The story is beautifully related by Nathan in 2 Samuel 12:1-6:

There were two men in the same city—one rich, the other poor. The rich man had huge flocks of sheep, herds of cattle. The poor man had nothing but one little female lamb, which he had bought and raised. It grew up with him and his children as a member of the family. It ate off his plate and drank from his cup and slept on his bed. It was like a daughter to him. One day a traveler dropped in on the rich man. He was too stingy to take an animal from his own herds or flocks to make a meal for his visitor, so he took the poor man's lamb and prepared a meal to set before his guest.

When David hears this story as related by the prophet Nathan, he flies into a rage, proclaiming the injustice of what has occurred and demanding punishment and restitution. "As surely as God lives," he says to Nathan, "the man who did this ought to be lynched! He must repay for the lamb four times over for his crime and his stinginess!" In this famous encounter Nathan simply confronts David with these starkly pointed words: "You're the man!" Almost three thousand years after the event itself the tension in the story is still palpable. The reader can almost feel the eyes of everyone in the room turn to the King and wait for his reaction.

Confronted by the prophet, and confronted even more by the

gravity of his sinfulness, David surprises everyone and admits his guilt and seeks the forgiveness of God. In any instance the story would be dramatic, but it is even more heartfelt when it is realized that the confrontation, the admission of guilt, and the desire to repent occurs at the peak of David's power. Even a casual reader of the text might recognize that his response could just as easily have been the response of one who is arrogant—incapable of honest reflection and acceptance of personal responsibility. After all, David possesses the power to divert attention away from himself and focus it on another. The fact that he rejects this path and assumes the posture of the vulnerable and the humble is riveting and revealing of his true character.⁷

As powerful as this moment is, however, it is perhaps the second moment that focuses the reader's attention more sharply. It is this second moment that helps us understand David's relationship with Yahweh and perhaps offers some understanding of why he remains so beloved to the people of Israel, despite his significant faults and failings. The moment occurs near the end of David's life.

In the story, as recorded in the second book of Samuel, David is portrayed as a man deep in thought and prayer. He is fully aware that his days are coming to a close. As a powerful king he might be understandably distracted by his impending death. There were certainly the struggles that came with the transfer of power to his anointed son, Solomon, or by any of a multitude of other diversions. Although such affairs may well have occupied some of David's time, he is seemingly more focused on his relationship with the Lord. He prays the prayer of a man who is completely aware of the power of God and the favor that God has repeatedly shown to him:

God is bedrock under my feet,
the castle in which I live,
my rescuing knight.
My God—the high crag
where I run for dear life,
hiding behind the boulders,
safe in the granite hideout;
My mountaintop refuge,
he saves me from ruthless men.

I sing to GOD the Praise-Lofty,
and find myself safe and saved.

2 SAMUEL 22:2-4

While the story of Abraham teaches the spiritual seeker about the kind of persistence that may be required in seeking a relationship with Divine Mystery, the story of King David is illustrative of another equally important concept for contemplative living. King David's relationship with God is full of significant bumps and detours on the spiritual path. The only constant factor in the relationship seems to be the depth of emotion he feels for Yahweh. King David routinely forgets or ignores the proper actions and the choices of a spiritually mature (and for that matter any morally upright) person. Despite his less-than-vigilant attention to the details of his essential relationship with God, there is a profound depth to the spiritual connection to the Divine Mystery that is often strained but never broken. King David loves Yahweh, and it seems that Yahweh is also smitten with the king.

MARY OF MAGDALA'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE DIVINE MYSTERY

In the Christian Scriptures there are many stories of individual and communal encounters with the Divine Mystery. One especially poignant person is the woman from Galilee who is today known as Mary of Magdala or Mary Magdalen.⁸ Her New Testament characterization is not necessarily dramatic or extensive, at least at first reading. Upon further reflection, and from a Christian interpretation, perhaps it is more dramatic than it might originally appear.

Mary Magdalen is introduced to readers of the New Testament in the gospel of Mark, Chapter 15, standing at the foot of the cross of the crucified Jesus.⁹ In this reference the reader learns that she was part of a group of women who had routinely ministered to Jesus and provided hospitality to him throughout his life as an itinerant preacher. Her presence at this moment of his greatest agony, and the presence of the other woman at the foot of the cross, stands in stark contrast to the absence of most of the male disciples, who had evidently fled the scene of this horror.

The readers of the testament next encounter Mary a little later in

the story, an encounter that appears not only in the gospel of Mark but is also substantially confirmed in the later gospels. In each retelling of the story, early in the morning of the first day of the week Mary is on her way to the burial place of Jesus, intent on preparing his body for a more proper burial. Upon her arrival at the temporary place of his entombment, she discovers that it was a much more temporary entombment than anyone might have imagined. Jesus is not in the tomb and his body is no longer present. The gospel of John presents the story in this manner:

But Mary stood outside the tomb weeping. As she wept, she knelt to look into the tomb and saw two angels sitting there, dressed in white, one at the head, the other at the foot of where Jesus' body had been laid. They said to her, "Woman, why do you weep?"

"They took my Master," she said, "and I don't know where they put him." After she said this, she turned away and saw Jesus standing there. But she didn't recognize him.

Jesus spoke to her, "Woman, why do you weep? Who are you looking for?"

She, thinking that he was the gardener, said, "Mister, if you took him, tell me where you put him so I can care for him."

Jesus said, "Mary."

Turning to face him, she said in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" meaning "Teacher!"

Jesus said, "Don't cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go to my brothers and tell them, 'I ascend to my Father and your Father, my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene went, telling the news to the disciples: "I saw the Master!" And she told them everything he said to her.

JOHN 20:11-18

It seems to me that in this story an essential component of the connecting points of Christian contemplative living is made explicitly clear. Mary is called by name, and when she is called, she responds—immediately and with unequivocal belief and commitment, which is

then directed into specific action: She is sent to the other disciples with her dramatic testimony that Jesus had risen from the dead. It is not too much of an assertion to suggest that her action makes her the very first Christian evangelizer. She becomes the initial witness of the Christian life, rooted in her encounter with the fullness of the Divine Mystery.

King David's response to the Divine Mystery can be seen, in one sense, as a very complicated love story played out on a very public stage. Mary Magdalen's story is also a love story, but it seems neither convoluted nor complicated. Mary seems to love Jesus, fully and completely, giving herself entirely over to the profound experience of intimacy with and attachment to him. Perhaps the maturing of her spiritual life came from her life-long witness to the power of resurrection. As her relationship deepened, she was slowly called and formed to see Jesus not only as teacher but also as Lord.

PAUL'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE DIVINE MYSTERY

Mary Magdalen represents those who knew and lived the experience of the historical Jesus, but there is yet another reality that is expressed in the stories of those who became followers of Christ immediately after the resurrection event. Perhaps the most complicated story of the encounter with Divine Mystery from a Christian perspective is that of Saul of Tarsus, who was known—after his own encounter with Christ—as the apostle Paul.

From a personal perspective, I have always been intrigued by Paul, especially by the enthusiasm and obvious excitement that he obviously felt for his mission and ministry. I have often wondered how he could have become so dedicated to evangelization, since he never experienced a personal relationship with the historical Jesus. Paul's was seemingly an encounter clouded and shrouded in what seems to be at its core a life-changing vision or mystical experience.

One conclusion might be that his encounter with the Divine Mystery was not necessarily relational, as it was with Magdala, played out in the arena that included growth in trust, a deepening vulnerability, and then some experience of intimacy. Rather it would seem that Paul's was played out in the realm of ideas, ideas about the Risen

Christ, the role of the Law, and the power of grace. He proposed many other concepts that were opposed by those who had come to believe in Jesus as a result of their personal relationship with him. That being noted, however, it still seems to me that ideas, as powerful as they might well be, simply do not have the power to effectively animate us as much as experience itself. Something more than an idea had to motivate Paul and his mission.¹⁰

Paul's torrent of ideas, descriptions, and what has become for the modern Christian the theological basis of the faith that has been handed down to us suggests that his experience was powerful, beyond comprehension and words. Paul's struggle to describe and to define what he knows to be essential and true about the Risen Christ is important, illustrative of a reality perfectly promised by Jesus in the Gospel of John: "Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing" (John 20:29).

At the same time, it would seem that Paul's experience, although not rooted in a relationship with the historical Jesus, nonetheless develops into a deep relational faith and spiritual practice. How else might we explain the depth of feeling and intimacy that is so often expressed in his writings?

Love never gives up.
Love cares more for others than for self.
Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.
Love doesn't strut,
Doesn't have a swelled head,
Doesn't force itself on others,
Isn't always "me first,"
Doesn't fly off the handle,
Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn't revel when others grovel,
Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,
Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end.

I CORINTHIANS 13:4-7

THE WISDOM OF JESUS

Jesus was born into a culture that was steeped in a communitarian belief in God. His parents, reflecting the deep roots of faith in this culture, named him Yeshua or “Yahweh saves.” Jesus, his parents, and their extended family were a people who knew and identified with the story of Abraham. They reveled in the stories of the great King David. And perhaps most important of all, they lived in anticipation of the imminent, sudden, and unannounced manifestation of the power of God announced by the prophets.

The message of the prophets that had been preached to the Jewish people for over one thousand years was to remind them of their sinfulness, certainly, but most of all it told them of God’s desire to be with his people and make things right among them. As a people who lived in an occupied land and were oppressed in their poverty, they longed for the day when God’s people would be restored to their proper place of respect and dignity. Until that day, however, they needed to scrape together a living and find a way to survive.

Jesus’ primary place of residence, for the first thirty years of his life before his baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, was the backwater town named Nazareth. By all accounts it was an extremely poor village. Recent archeological excavations of the site have discovered nothing of value, suggesting that it was primarily the residence for day laborers who perhaps found work in the not-too-distant city of Sepphoris. This bustling city, in stark contrast to Nazareth, was experiencing the trickle-down effects of the lavish patronage of King Herod, whose intent was to rebuild the city.

A few years before the birth of Jesus, Sepphoris had been razed by the Roman occupiers in response to its perceived treason and rebellion during a short period of unrest. By the year 6 AD, Sepphoris was the focus of renewed and frenzied activity. There was an obvious and pronounced need not only for skilled artisans but also for the unskilled laborers who could support their effort.¹¹

Nazareth, as it would turn out, was an ideal place for Jesus to deepen a relationship with the Divine Mystery. There were no significant distractions. The temple with its scribes and Pharisees were many miles away. The town, a hamlet really, was too far off the beaten path to be of interest to anyone. There was only the routine of daily

life—and the silence and the solitude that was so easily within reach just a short walk away from that routine. For a sensitive boy, with a keen ability to perceive and understand life, it was a perfect place to experience the sacred. For a person like Jesus, who desired to deepen his relationship with the Divine Mystery, it was the place where the burning bush of the great Hebrew ancestor Moses might be daily encountered. Nazareth was, indeed, holy ground. (See Exodus 3:1-21.)

Some thirty years after his birth, when Jesus emerged from Nazareth and began his life of public ministry, he had been formed into a man who had routinely experienced the burning presence of the Divine Mystery. Jesus proclaimed his personal relationship with the Divine Mystery not with the tired and worn-out words and concepts of the scribes and the Pharisees but rather with real stories of encounter and experience that invited his followers into a similar dynamic. For Jesus, the Divine Mystery was Abba, the Father with whom a trusting, vulnerable, and therefore authentically intimate relationship was not only possible but deeply desired.

As the ministry of Jesus unfolded, he seemed to make a dramatic choice that would help define his efforts. The choice was to refuse to enter into debate with the representatives of the temple cult in Jerusalem, who had a much different understanding of God. Jesus chose, in stark contrast to the religious authorities of his time, to simply share with the people who were willing to listen his personal experience forged in the burning heat of his encounter with his Abba.

In deliberate and telling contrast to Jewish leaders of his time, Jesus shared his conviction that his Abba was not far away from us but rather very close. His preaching and teaching excited the people of Galilee. His passionate message invited them to imagine—and for many people for the first time in many years even to hope—that the Divine Mystery of Abraham, David, and other Jewish ancestors had not abandoned them. Jesus assured his listeners that the Father was intimately and passionately concerned for them. Jesus spoke of a God who felt not only love but, perhaps most important of all, compassion for his people and the circumstances of their lives.¹²

SEEKING THE DIVINE MYSTERY TODAY

For most of us today, the spiritual quest does not begin on a wind-swept plain, surrounded by herds and family, as it did for Abraham. The quest is perhaps not as dramatic as it was in the life and adventures of King David, or as intimate as it was in the response of Mary Magdalen, or as mystical or intellectual as that of Paul. However, the quest for God is just as significant and essential for each of us. It might be argued that it might be more difficult and demanding for us to even consider such contemplative living in the contemporary world. But in a world filled with a myriad of distractions, voices, images, and potential choices, the single most difficult decision might be to identify the stirrings, or as some traditions name it, the “call,” within each of us to be spiritual.¹³

Despite the obstacles, however, when we sense that we have arrived at a point in life where we feel a need within the core of our very being that cries out to be attended to, we may well feel compelled to move to respond to the Divine Mystery that most of us call “God.” When we become tired of old ways of thinking, when the distractions that once succeeded in getting us through the day no longer seem to work, when we feel lifeless, uninspired, or begin to wonder what life is all about, we may well be responding to the ancient stirring within that is calling us to become engaged with life in a completely different way.

It is then—and only then—that we experience the “rush of wind” that is available to each of us for our spiritual growth and development. If this restlessness is from the Holy One, it will not simply disappear or go away; some sort of response will be required of each of us. This encounter with the Divine Mystery is the first connecting point on the spiritual journey. It is what leads us to seek the other connecting points. It is the foundational experience of contemplative living. It leads to the lifelong path of pursuing a real relationship with God that leads us to wholeness and holiness.

NOTES

1. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 27, *Gaudium et Spes*.
2. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 28.
3. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 31.
4. “A Zen-like riddle preached by Augustine preserves this wisdom succinctly: ‘If you have understood, it is not God.’ (Sermon 117.5) If you have fully figured out who God is, then you are dealing with something else, some lesser reality. It is a matter of the livingness of God, who is not just a bigger and better object in the world but the unspeakably Other.” Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J., *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*. (Continuum, New York, NY, 2007), p. 13.
5. Alphonsus Liguori, a saint and spiritual teacher who lived in the 18th century, referenced in his many spiritual writings that “we desire because first we have been desired.” In other words, Alphonsus believed, as do many other spiritual teachers, that there is within us an innate call, an invitation, or perhaps just a stirring, that orientates the human person toward spiritual wholeness and unity. We respond to this innate part of ourselves at different times in our life and for many different reasons.
6. I am convinced of the authenticity of the encounter between Abraham (Sarah) and the Divine Mystery. My conviction does not rest on the details of the story as it has been preserved but rather on a particular theme that is part and parcel of this story and encounter and which is an essential component of the stories that follow in the testament. The writers of the Genesis story were steeped in the tradition that identified men and women as people who “are formed in the image and likeness of God.” In the story of Abraham, it seems that humanity is all too willing to return the favor and form the Divine Mystery in the image and likeness of humans. The Divine Mystery’s resistance to this attempt at control is pivotal. The Divine Mystery’s self-identification as “I am Who I am,” leads me to believe that the encounter was genuine if not fully appreciated by the representatives of humanity.
7. Recall this story when we examine the fourth connecting point. Here in this story David models the dynamic that the spiritual connecting points can be experienced throughout life and are not dependent on

our ability to perfect any one experience. However, the more we are aware of any point of connection the more that we can directly learn from the experience and continue to respond to the invitation to grow and develop toward spiritual maturity.

8. Magdala, or el Mejdal, was a prosperous fishing village on the north-west bank of the lake of Galilee. It was destroyed around the year 75. The people of el Mejdal had a reputation for licentious behavior and living, which may well explain the identification of Mary as a sinner or, even worse, a prostitute. Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*. (Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1993), p. 15.
9. Although it is true that she appears slightly earlier in the gospel account by the evangelist Luke (Chapter 8), the reference in Mark is the reference in the gospel text that is routinely accepted as the earliest gospel.
10. Recently Pope Francis in his exhortation of 2013 *Evangelii Gaudium* seems to make this point when he states: “There also exists a constant tension between ideas and realities. Realities simply are, whereas ideas are worked out. There has to be continuous dialogue between the two, lest ideas become detached from realities. It is dangerous to dwell in the realm of words alone, of images and rhetoric” (231).
11. John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts*. (Harper, San Francisco, CA, 2002), pp. 36-39.
12. Many wonderful books are useful in coming to an understanding and appreciation of who Jesus is and how he might have lived. I have discovered many such books on my own spiritual journey but I am impressed with one book in particular: Jose Antonio Pagola, *Jesus: An Historical Approximation*. (Convivium Press, Miami, FL, 2009). I would highly recommend it.
13. “Furthermore, when a person does come to engage belief in a personal way, society makes this difficult to do. For modern society is marked not only by atheism and agnosticism but also by positivism, which restricts what we can know to data accessible from the natural sciences; secularism, which gets on with the business at hand, impatient of ultimate questions, with a wealth of humanistic values that allow a life of ethical integrity without faith; and religious pluralism, which demonstrates that there is more than one path to holy and ethical living.” Johnson, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29.