



The World Community for Christian Meditation

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There is something, I suppose, that we all seek even if we can't recognise or acknowledge it. Call it empathy. Not the best word as it suggests we are looking for people to empathise with us, whereas it is more mutual, a spontaneous acceptance of equality and common destiny. A kind of falling in love without the desire to possess, or even having to get through the stage of idealised infatuation. I don't know the exact word - the easy -simpatico- maybe, or even the untranslatable -saudades-.

Ultimately this quest-object is God, the living God. Not the cold divinity of morality and power structures. But the light at the end of the tunnel that we know will never reject us or even pronounce a judgment other than revealing a compassionate truth. It is the God of the immediate and infinite embrace. The -end of love-longing- as the Upanishads call it. The Father as Jesus understood it. But it is found also in this world and manifests in the rare relationships that are built on perfect humility where there is neither power nor competition. To help us understand -humility-, the Cloud of Unknowing distinguishes between imperfect humility in which religious piety specializes - a self- dramatization of all the interesting faults of our ego - and perfect humility in which we simply know ourselves, in God, with all our self-evident faults, exactly as God knows us. In this humility-which-is-wisdom we are blown away by realizing, sometimes by painfully slow gradations, that we are, actually, irrefutably loveable. It takes time and it's not as easy to get to as it sounds.

She seemed, if you excuse the caricature, an unexceptional little old lady. She did not hold eye contact for long. She waited till the end of the session to speak: this can sometimes denote a big ego wanting the last word or a weak ego taking the last chance to be heard. In her case, judging from her tone and poise, it was the decision of a balanced ego, a little on the self-deferential, shy side but no longer self-effacing. There is a rare kind of authority that emerges, as it must have done in Jesus, infuriatingly to his opponents. It arises effortlessly from a personality that has both known humiliation and experienced the state of resurrection.

She told her story. How, many years before, she had been drinking for years and was barely raising five children. One day, the worse for wear, she was driving aimlessly through town when she realised she was looking for a church, any church. She was not a religious person. When she found one she rang the bell and a priest opened the door. To this day she can't remember what he said as she unloaded her misery and shame on him. All she remembers as he changed her life was that she felt accepted and known. Perhaps he was the best of

priests or the very worst of priests. At that moment in the downward spiral of her desperation he was just a priest to her. It was very disarming, seeing how that experience of finding acceptance and recognition was so redemptive; it changed her life and remained alive in her, decades later, as a moment of grace that saints might long for and never receive as directly as she did. Yet, fresh as that moment remained for her and although, like Julian of Norwich, she had mined that moment of revelation all her life for new deposits of meaning, she was not living in the past. She had known other joys and breakthroughs, like the discovery of meditation as the key to the eleventh step, which filled her with gratitude. Indeed she seemed intoxicated ? what Gregory of Nyssa called the sober intoxication.

Being grateful, like knowing that you are accepted, is an immensely liberating state of mind. Anxieties and insecurities that have held you bound for ages can fall away instantly as you soar to new heights of the self and discover how the joys of giving exceed those of receiving ? and why didn't you see so obvious a truth as this before? Like the others in the twelve step program she had never forgotten what it is like to hit rock bottom and rise again with the help of that totally unforeseen insight and immeasurable energy we call grace. It seemed for her, as for many who had each their own story to tell, that time telescoped. The past was redeemed and the future, still unknown, was assured. She was alive in the spirit of advent ? the slow, instant coming of the future towards us and its eruption in the present. And all because one ordinary afternoon someone had opened the door to a stranger and been to them what God is to us and what we are meant to be to each other.

Laurence

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The World Community for Christian Meditation, of which Laurence Freeman OSB is director, has recently opened a new outreach program ? ?Meditatio? (www.wccmmeditatio.org)

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