

The Christian Community

Perspectives

June—August 2020



Meditation and Prayer

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The Lady and the Unicorn in the Cluny Museum in Paris

Back cover *The Unicorn is Found*, tapestry from *The Hunt of the Unicorn* in The Cloisters museum in New York

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Reading the signs of the times—that is a challenge that seems more important, and perhaps more difficult now than ever before in our lifetimes.

There is no shortage of voices telling us how we could interpret what is going on around us.

Some seem very certain that they know definite answers to an astonishing array of questions of geopolitics, epidemiology and public health policy.

Others seem satisfied to accept the ‘official’ explanations, even when this means accepting twists and turns in policy that go without comment.

I have a friend who has stopped signing off his messages with ‘stay safe!’ and instead writes ‘stay awake!’

I was inspired by an essay by Charles Eisenstein*, which I read early on in the crisis. There, he describes a path of honesty with himself about what he does not know, as well as what he does know. Whatever information comes towards us, we can attend to our own process of knowing, examining what might lead us to decide that something is true and something else is not. We can also be proactive in informing ourselves about the world. After we have engaged intensely with whatever news or information sources we are interested in, we can let the detail fade away and attend to our inner state.

In the quietness that grows in our soul, we may grow attuned to thoughts that do not originate in ourselves but in the spiritual beings who care for the world. We can imagine the spirit of the age, that being whose consciousness extends beyond individuals and groupings of people to the whole of this ‘present generation’—as Jesus describes it in the gospels. Might he be able to work particularly strongly in a time when humanity is united in the same concerns? Beyond that level of consciousness, we can divine the working of minds that embrace the whole planet in its evolving. As the problems that led to this crisis go beyond the human to the planetary, we might imagine that the spirit of the age, a being of the Third Hierarchy, is working together with beings of the Second Hierarchy, whose field is the created world itself. This thought by itself can be a source of comfort and strength: our concerns are shared with benevolent beings far greater than ourselves.

A great theologian once observed that if prayer is a conversation, we may find that it works better if we listen more than we speak, just like in every other conversation. Creating a space where our thoughts and the many thoughts of other human beings can fade away can create the quiet in which we can listen. There we can divine—not as dogmatic, fixed ideas, but as thoughts that lead us to further questions—how the spiritual beings that accompany our destinies and those of our world behold the crises and challenges that we face: not perhaps as aberrations or mistakes, but as opportunities for learning and growing. Then we may find that the way we behold world events is subtly transformed. We start to see opportunities for growth and transformation even in developments that seemed the most worrying to us. TOM RAVETZ

* charleseisenstein.org/essays/the-coronation/

Opening

Ioanna Panagiotopoulos

I leave you the peace; my peace I give to you. I do not give it as the world gives. Let your hearts not grow troubled and fearful. JOHN 14:27

Our world is rapidly changing and with it, our inner life also. We can begin with holding peace to ward off fear. But how do we then meet our world when the wind that is blowing heralds the threat of illness, control, isolation and fear?

When the bird-to-be is enclosed in its shell it has no need for powerful wings. Enfolded within, protected from the surrounding atmosphere of the air and the rushing of the wind, it waits without visible movement for the moment of birth.

We live in a time that calls our consciousness into wakefulness. Like the bird in the egg, the shell must fall away before we learn what it is to live in our rapidly changing world, for there comes a time when what is eternally ripe in the world of possibilities heralds its presence in the day to day in order to bring creation closer to fulfilment. In order to become, through the ordeal.

Like a great rushing wind, it will bring disruption before it brings peace.

The wind that disrupts us in our world destiny is like a word, that when spoken, alters our world.

It will force us into a new world within the world we have known all along, and call forth new abilities in us.

The great rushing wind will call forth the forming of our wings, just as the light forms our eye to see. Like the spirit of change, it will bring the breeze of another world into our soul.

It will form us so that we will not be blown out of the nest, but rather, inner wings will emerge, that in turn enfold, wrestle and shape its force that we become both its home and its vessel for flight.

We no longer feel ourselves to be static, but free.

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Canberra.*

We can feel ourselves no longer afraid of the great agitations of our times.

With courage for active fearlessness we can master the great rushing wind and fly with it, becoming bearers of the great wind, the spirit, that the Father-ground himself forms as the world-wielding Word.



Tapestry panel from the series *The Lady and the Unicorn* in the Cluny Museum in Paris

The sources of inner quiet

Bastiaan Baan

With the rise of a new pandemic, a new ‘age of anxiety’ has begun for countless people all over the world. Although we are told that anxiety is itself a factor in how prone we are to become ill, it is extremely difficult for most people to overcome this collective mood. In this article I will try to bring from my own study and meditative practice some suggestions to develop inner quiet.

In a certain way, quiet is everywhere and nowhere nowadays. Our world is flooded by unrest and anxiety. Not only do we have to travel far in order to find quiet places, but at the same time unrest is expanding everywhere. This unrest is the strongest hindrance to develop a meditative life.

Christian Morgenstern once wrote: ‘Above the waters of your soul there circles continuously a dark bird: unrest.’ Perhaps these words were not yet completely understandable for people at the beginning of the twentieth century; however in our time, unrest is omnipresent. Only an experienced meditant is able to meditate amidst the chaos of a big city out of the sources of inner quiet.

In the fifties of last century, Rudolf Frieling worked in New York City. A colleague from Great Britain who visited him asked: ‘How is it possible to meditate in New York City?’ The answer of Rudolf Frieling was: ‘If you can’t learn to meditate here in Grand Central Station, you won’t learn it at all.’

At this time, during two years, a giant building opposite the chapel of The Christian Community was demolished, accompanied by the noise of explosions, pneumatic hammers and building machines. During work days, the Act of Consecration was held amidst the deafening noise—a daily trial for the celebrant and the congregation. Might it be possible to find in such extreme circumstances a deeper layer of quiet than in the idyllic silence of rural life? In the near

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future it will become a necessity in the chaos of outer existence to make real the words of the poet Adriaan Roland Holst: 'Quiet is the axis of existence.'

It took me many years to realise something of this mood. Here are two exercises that helped me immensely. An impression that one can find almost everywhere on earth is the image of a blue sky. One can internalise this impression by 'drinking in' the visible image of the sky. After having looked intensely at the colour, I close my eyes and try to imagine this impression. Then I revisit the sense perception (Is my inner image correct, compared to what I see?), until I am able to visualise the blue of the sky. After some practice, I am able to evoke the image without further observation. Then, you can envelop yourself with colour like an invisible mantle. This image creates not only inner quiet, but the heavenly blue colour also has a vitalising effect. The poet Albert Steffen expressed this experience once in an original way:

One can internalise the harmony that streams from the blue of the sky by 'drinking' this blue, surrendering completely to the impression. 'Today I didn't drink enough blue,' when you are distracted or impatient. In order to overcome this, you only need to look up for a minute. When I have looked at a glowing sunset in this way, I feel as if I drank a good glass of wine. My courage has grown, my self-confidence is strong and thoughts are developing easily. However: the effect lasts longer—and afterwards there is no hangover.

The observation of clouds in the sky brings us in another dimension of time and space. When you follow the slow movements of the clouds, you enter a world of constant, gradual changes. A wonderful exercise to overcome hurry and unrest!

The German author Hermann Allmers** wrote the following poem about this experience:

Alone in Fields

*I rest at peace in tall green grass
And gaze steadily aloft,
Surrounded by unceasing crickets,
Wondrously interwoven with blue sky.*

*The lovely white clouds go drifting by
Through the deep blue, like lovely silent dreams;
I feel as if I have long been dead,
Drifting happily with them through eternal space.*

The composer Johannes Brahms set this poem to music. His song leads us by its very mood into another world of timeless, 'eternal space'.

Another observation in nature that creates quiet in movement and movement in quiet is the impression of running water. Every holiday, I sit for hours at the waters of a river or a waterfall, taking in with all my senses the impressions: the silver shining surface of the water, the splashing drops of water, the singing sounds of a brook or the ceaseless flowing of a waterfall. The interplay of sun, shadow and water gives enchanting impressions.

Just as I do when observing the sky, from time to time I close my eyes and recall the impression in my imagination. I have noticed over time that when I bring these impressions into my daily review and into the night, I wake up the next day refreshed and replenished.

At the beginning of this article I wrote: quiet is everywhere and nowhere. Indeed, even in our own hectic inner life, we can find in the depths a realm of utmost quiet, standing far above all anxiety and fear. Rudolf Steiner once wrote a free rendering of an old sixteenth century Jewish verse** and gave it as a meditation to Ita Wegman:

*In you lives the human being
Who perceives God face to face, who is eternal
And who is in the circle of the seven great spirits
This being is loftier than anything in you
that is angry or fearful
It rules with the powers of the higher world
and is served by the powers of the lower world
It holds sway over its own life and its
own health and can also do so for others
Nothing can surprise it; no misfortune
can befall it; it cannot fall prey to confusion and
cannot be overcome*

*It knows the essence of the past, present
and future
It possesses the secret of awakening from death
and of immortality.*

In this text, the deepest (or highest) dimension of quiet is expressed. With a part of our being, we stand above all panic, even above all forms of destruction and death. We will need this faculty in the future more than ever before, in order to survive in a chaotic world.

Quiet is not a luxury product with which we can withdraw to an ivory tower when the world is on fire. It is an invisible mantle in which we can enfold everything that is longing for quiet.

* 'Feldeinsamkeit', Hermann Allmers

** Published in: *Who was Ita Wegman*, Emanuel Zeylmans van Emmichoven
Volume 4, Mercury Press, 2013



Detail from *The Unicorn is Found*

How can people die 'before their time'?

James H. Hindes

The Corona virus is running wild throughout the world right now. As a result, many people are giving a lot more thought to death, the how and when of its arrival. Is there a time for each of us? What can it mean when the young die? Can it be avoided by taking care so that accidents are less likely to happen?

There are those who say there are no accidents—it is all karma. Well, karma does preside over all that happens on earth. We know that everything we think, feel and do will have consequences, as B.B. King puts it, 'a little further down the road.' Those consequences may arrive in a future life when we have lost all memory of our original action. So, anything that happens could be an inevitable karmic result of past deeds. But freedom is also a part of our daily life. And we know that accidents do indeed happen. Maybe we have even seen them unfolding. Someone blinks, or daydreams and control is lost. Gravity, the great enforcer, is always ready when wakefulness is in short supply. Most human lives are visited by tragedy at some point. Then, too often, all that can be said is: it was an accident. Clearly, from our personal experience here on earth it is simply false to say 'there are no accidents.' We could, indeed, 'pass away before our time.' But does every human being have an 'appointed time to die'?

Let's consider this question from a Biblical perspective. In Jesus Christ's farewell discourse to the disciples he speaks of the time when 'Heaven and earth will pass away...' (Mark 13:31). He is speaking of the death of the earth; or, if you will, a metamorphosis so majestic that the earth we experience today will be no more. What is the 'appointed time' for this event? Jesus continues, 'But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven,

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nor the Son, but only the Father' (Mark 13:33) So there is a definite time for the death of the earth but only the Father God knows.

What is true for the earth altogether is true for those of us who live on it. Our time here is limited because the earth is only our school; heaven is our real home. With so much to learn we return to school again and again, always to acquire new capacities and knowledge. Furthermore, we are here also to teach one another, ultimately, to learn to love. How much we can acquire in one lifetime will vary a great deal from person to person. When we have absorbed as much as we can, when our strength to help or teach others is exhausted, our time has come to go home, to die. Then we work with the angels transforming our newly acquired knowledge into increased abilities to learn and love during our next sojourn at school.

So, there is some kind of 'appointed time' for our departure from our earthly existence, even if only the Father God knows. But this sounds a lot like 'there are no accidents,' a notion that contradicts everyday experience. We know that accidents do happen and that they sometimes lead to what is clearly an untimely death. How can this contradiction be resolved?

Actually, it is a contradiction only for a materialistic perspective that thinks of eternity as earthly time extended infinitely into the future. Eternity is better thought of as a spiritual 'place' existing outside time. Time, as we know it in our physical world, exists only here on earth. *The Father God* exists, lives, abides in eternity, outside time. To say that he 'knows' the time of someone's death does not mean that a time and date are entered in some celestial calendar that directly corresponds to earthly calendars. It means that he perceives it from eternity and it 'instantaneously' becomes part of a much larger story. From the perspective of eternity, the moment something terrible happens, something obviously not in God's current 'learning plan' for someone, that event is taken up by the Father: he 'knows.' In that instant, with his hands, which are *the Holy Spirit's* nine hierarchies of angels, the Father reaches right down to our individual guardian angels, to conceive and work out another plan incorporating and transforming what is (was) a disaster here on earth. This wisdom of the Spirit at work in the hierarchies is sometimes called Holy Sophia. Any earthly disruption of human desti-

nies immediately becomes a step on karmic paths that leads us forward to fulfill a greater plan, a more encompassing karma. Present and future earthly sojourns are transformed as such souls leave school perhaps early and then return again to earth at a rescheduled earthly date.

Then, it comes down to us here during our lifetimes to learn as much as we can, to love as much as we can and to endure the blows of destiny that may come our way. But we have heavenly help even here. For it is *the Son God in Jesus Christ*, who brings *us* the divine power to become, to transform any earthly destiny, no matter how much death and how many accidents may befall us.



The Unicorn is Found, medieval tapestry from *The Hunt of the Unicorn*
in The Cloisters museum in New York

The Universe is my Companion

*The spirit of the universe is my companion
I want for nothing
You give me rest in quiet places
You go with me beside still waters
And you complete me
You lead me as I learn to love and respect all beings
Even though I am followed by the shadow of death
I will not be afraid, for you are with me
Your laws and your presence comfort me
You present me with abundant life
In full view of those who are cynical and envious
You bless me
The forces of my life are greater than I can imagine
Your fulness and grace are with me each day of my life
And I exist within the holiness of your life, forever.*

PETER HOWE,
from Psalm 23

Spiritual distancing

*A poem is words
And the space between words
Where meanings grow
Like the space between people
Where angels go.*

If you have any—poems, or perhaps angels—we're keen to see them.
We don't promise to use them, but will let you know.
Please send to: howe04@gmail.com

This, then, is how you should pray

Become a seed—become a flame—become a sun

Georg Dreißig

Talking to myself

If you ask children who are approaching confirmation what it means to leave childhood behind and become a teenager, the answer—and in my experience it has always been the same answer in all groups over many years—comes as quick as an arrow without the need for much thought. It is: ‘Becoming a teenager means that we are free, free to decide for ourselves.’ After some time, another answer complements the first—and this also happens in every group—with the insight: ‘Now we are responsible for ourselves.’

But how is this actually supposed to happen? How *can* young people act responsibly from now on? Who can tame their striving for freedom and guide it in such a way that it develops in a meaningful way? In conversation, it quickly becomes clear that the young people are aware that they do things that in retrospect they know are neither right nor responsible. ‘That was not good. You’ll have to do better next time,’ they say to themselves. They must learn to act responsibly. The teacher for this is themselves.

We need to feel the reality of this situation in which the pupil is at the same time their own teacher if we want to experience the dynamic reality of a young person’s life. Practising this art is also the secret to remaining young until one is old. It becomes possible when we realise that when they are on their own, they are in a dialogue with their own lawgiver; with the one who makes them aware of who they are and what their deepest motivations are; the one who has the right to demand: ‘*You* will have to do better next time.’

The confirmands often have to work hard to find an answer to the question: Which of these two am I? Am I the one who has acted, or the one who has the authority to call the action good or bad? When they have weighed up both answers, they normally come to the insight that

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both are part of them. Without constantly bringing my higher self into conversation with my everyday self, I cannot be true to myself and I cannot act responsibly.

The wonderful quality of this inner lawmaker becomes clear when the children are asked: 'What do you want to achieve in the world; what would you like to change?' The heavens rejoice when they hear the answers. 'I want an end to starvation. I want the gap between rich and poor to be narrowed. I want there to be no more wars.' In this small circle of young people, whose life on earth has just begun, there lives the longing for the good, for justice, appreciation and love, as well as the unbounded trust that they are possible.

In such conversations, we witness how the human 'I' extends beyond its own limits and sets a goal before itself that is far greater than any individual human being. No one could say: *You* are responsible for peace or for justice in the world. Only one person can do that, the individual person, and they can only say it to themselves in the form: I am responsible, or rather: I make myself responsible.

In such a statement, an earthly I turns to the ultimate ground of reality and senses its being. The 'I' is the being which reaches beyond itself by striving for divine aims; only by doing this does it really become itself. The good, the true, love—divine forces of the sun are to work in our innermost being, but that does not mean that they become merely personal. They can only be at work in the world when human beings allow themselves to be grasped and warmed by them, and say 'I' to them.

To pray is to become a seed

What the confirmands are describing is the process through which the 'I' becomes a seed. When the 'I' senses a reality beyond its own limits and overcomes the forces that seek to shut it off from the greater world, it behaves like the seed-germ that breaks through its husk and opens to the power of the sun. The 'I' can turn to the reality of the sun, which it senses, hoping and longing to allow the sun's forces to enter it, to take hold of it and enable it to unfold. The 'I' can become a seed by opening itself to the sun in freedom and love, by sowing itself into the ground of God.

Prayer begins with the inner experience of being a seed. Christ tells the disciples that they need to withdraw into their innermost being before they pray: 'If you want to pray, go into your innermost chamber and lock your door.' (Mt 6:5 ff.)

The first step is to come to yourself, Christ tells us, and to notice that when you are completely with yourself, you also sense the existence of another, who is a part of your being. You can embed your being in him; you will find in him your goals and the courage and strength to achieve them.

This experience of a 'you' is part of your own inner experience of yourself. I am only myself when I am a seed in this way.

This 'you', whom we can feel within us, is the one that Christ means when he says: 'Pray to your Father, the one who is in secret!'

At the time of Christ, the only locked room in the house was the one where the seed was kept. When we pray, we enter the seed-store of our self-contained interior and become seeds ourselves. However, the disciples may have thought of another locked chamber when they heard Jesus' words, which filled them with a holy awe. The centre of their religious life was the Holy of Holies, the dwelling place of God in the temple. There, the tablets of the law were sheltered under the wings of two great cherubim. Now the disciples learn that their own inner being is to become a Holy of Holies. Here, it can experience its own laws; here, angels keep watch and God's being can be experienced.

To pray is to become flame

The process of becoming a seed is the beginning of praying: we feel our way beyond our own limitations into another being. Christ encourages the disciples to do this, when he teaches them not to ask the Father, but to pray to him. The Greek words used in this passage sound very different: *aiteo* for to ask, *proseuchomai* for to pray. The sounds make it clear that in the Greek language, these are two very different activities. In order to be able to pray as Christ meant us to, we must clearly understand how praying differs from asking.

The Greek word *proseuchomai* means to praise. We turn to another being and direct our praise towards them. This of course presupposes that the one who prays has an inner perception of the divine being so

strong that they can reveal it in praise and glorification. To pray means to listen into the heart of God and to feel how his being expresses itself in my thinking—*your name*; in my feeling—*your kingdom* and in my will—*your will*. God can flow into this active imagining of his being. He fills the soul of the one who prays as they seek his reality, just as the forces of the sun flow into the seed and fill and revive it. When we pray, the Father enters us; we draw him into our own soul. What we give him, he fills with his being. Christ points to this gift of the Father when he says: ‘Your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.’ Praying is giving and taking at the same time; we breathe in God.

If praying means that we form the essence of God in our soul so that it may be filled by him, we can say in all humility: In our prayers to God, God also prays to us. When we let the image of his being arise in us, the imagination, the image of the aim of our becoming arises within us too: the image of man, which we can grasp and try to fill with our own life. Now prayer transcends mere words: through it, we unite ourselves with God; we become one with him.

If we imagine that the divine being enters the one who prays, the image of the seed turns into the image of the flame. This is fitting, because it is the essence of the seed that it can be grasped and strengthened by the power of the sun, which responds to the seed’s devotion with its own gift. Let us become aware of the greatness of this divine gift! In a candle flame it is not only the wax of the candle that burns; in terms of quantity, the oxygen of the surrounding air is even more important. They *can* only burn together. The seed is only revealed in its reality when we see the small outer grain invisibly enveloped in a flame which seizes it and leads it beyond itself so that it can blossom and bear fruit. In this way, the human being at prayer is also illuminated by a sacred flame, which is made up of the gifts they bring; its greater part is formed by the devoted giving of divine beings. When we pray, we not only need to surrender ourselves; we must also allow ourselves to be seized. In this way, our existence can become fruitful.

To pray is to become the sun

When we catch fire in our prayer to the divine flame, we are aglow with the fire of the divine powers that sacrifice themselves to us. Our

orientation in life, what we do, gains significance beyond ourselves. It can shine out into the world; it can bring light, warmth and life into the darkness. God's power permeates the world.

Our calling to become a sun shines through Christ's words in the Sermon on the Mount when he says: 'For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.'

In the light of the sun, we can see what is good and bad. But the *warmth* of the sun has the power to grasp and transform that which is not yet perfectly formed. The sun does not only see the seed as it is; it perceives the plant's capacity to blossom and bear fruit that is latent in the seed. Together with its clarifying light, it gives the plant the power to grow into the image that it perceives. When we pray, a similar power of transformation can shine down on others. We can perceive the image of God in every human being. The one we behold can find courage and joy as they grow into this image. Whatever burden of guilt they may be living with, they may find the courage to take hold of it and work on it themselves. This will become a meaningful and fruitful part of their striving.

'This, then, is how you should pray!' Do not make many words, but turn to your heavenly Father by opening your thoughts, feelings and will to his work, just as the seed opens itself to the work of the sun! Feel how he flows into the forces of your souls, how he warms you and in the end kindles himself with you to become part of the holy sacrificial flame! Then, you can carry the light of this flame out into the world like a sun, to bring about growth and transformation.

Prayer

Peter Holman

The whole of life could be a prayer. From the moment we awake and give thanks for the sunlight of a new day, to stepping gently onto the mother earth of our bedroom floor, to greeting our fellow humans with a kind smile ... speaking, listening, eating, laughing, working, walking, playing ... praying.

More than ever the times we live in tell us that everyday life can become a prayer. It is not only Camphill communities that have practised 'attention to detail' in daily life: for example reverence and consciousness in the way we prepare the meal and set the table, perhaps with the individuals who will share the meal in mind. I knew a mother who selected each apple individually in the supermarket with a particular child in her awareness (and she had a big family!). Then, too, the cleaning of a room, the tending to the garden, the folding of fresh laundry, the writing of a letter (do we still do that?). Could all this become prayer in action?

Can prayer be in deeds as much as in words? The spirit or attitude by which we conduct our daily lives out in the world can bear testimony to what we strive for in our soul. Are we able to 'walk the talk'? The nuns and monks of old lived by the motto *ora et labora*: prayer and work. Matins, grace and silent meals, sowing seeds and weeding the garden, tending to chores, ringing the bells, more prayers, bedtime prayers, sleep. The landscapes of Europe and elsewhere were permeated, formed and cultivated by this prayerful living and working. Might what was then achieved in the monasteries now be called for in our daily lives?

If our daily lives have an impact on nature and the earth, then how

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many weeds and ugly plants grow today in the soul-life of landscapes? As I complete this at the end of March, with the whole world trying to come to grips with the corona virus and the severe ways of dealing with it, I cannot but help wonder whether, locked away from the comfortable lives that many parts of the world pre-

viously enjoyed, enough people will reflect on this: The earth that we were called to be stewards of has suffered ever more harm and abuse in recent decades. What once was a beautiful lovingly tended garden, has been destroyed in large part through rampant taking. The soil is weakened and littered with weeds. Only prayer in action can save it. We must come out of this lockdown period with reinvigorated resolves to have a very different fundamental attitude to life, a different focus.

We may be headed for a new world, new shores. Let me here insert a beautiful thought that a member of my Stellenbosch congregation near Cape Town shared. Before missionaries landed on those shores (whether from Europe, Malaysia or India), as the ships circumnavigated the coast, people on board formed a half-circle of prayer, a prayer necklace from the sea surrounding the large tip of Africa, the new land. Thus Christians, Muslims, Hindus reached the soil of their future home. A warm, religious sheath of prayer at the threshold to a new life. Fanciful and rose-coloured? I think not entirely!

So is prayer an essential part of religious life? And what forms can prayer best take? What were the first prayers? When humankind first became aware of being separated from the divine world and wanted to invoke or speak to God, prayer began. In Genesis 4, once Adam and Eve lived on earth, no longer close to God in paradise, we read (v.26): 'At that time men began to call upon the name of Yahweh.' Noah communicated with God and after the flood built probably the first altar (Gen. 8:20). Abraham spoke with God, he prayed (Gen. 20:17), as did Moses. In the New Testament we read the moving story (Luke 11) of how the disciples, witnessing Christ's frequent sessions of deep prayer with His Father, asked to be taught the way of prayer; the Lord's Prayer was given to mankind.

What shall we pray for?

It has often been said that a 'shopping list' of prayers is inappropriate and egotistical. Focussing on material goods or personal benefit are not really what it is about. This of course does not preclude 'arrow prayers' in times of great need or crisis.

Should we pray for something particular for one another? If a dear friend has an illness or is faced with a tough life situation can it be right for us to pray for the removal of this burden, for its healing? Some-

times, perhaps; it is certainly understandable and only human that on our knees we place before God a wish for any pain or suffering to be taken away. But is it our place to seek to influence another's destiny? We cannot usually know what they need, and what might benefit them, from a particular hardship, which will almost certainly be offering them a potential life-lesson, a chance to grow inwardly, an opportunity to resolve karma.

We do well to be cautious about specifying the results we want when praying for another person, just as we cannot tell them what choices to make in their life generally. What we can do is pray that they receive strength, help, wisdom and an openness to life's lessons on their journey. We can send light and love from our hearts. We can call on their angel to be alongside and do whatever is possible.

An interesting question could be raised at this point: Do the angels need us to call on them? Don't they anyway know what the needs are? One answer can be that what an angel would in any case do for a person, or be able to do, has a stronger quality when a *human being* on earth offers up a prayer. Their angel hands are strengthened and as a result of human consciousness the angels have a fuller perspective: we are beings 'on the ground.' They can respond to compassion felt by human hearts and this will potentise their own working.

There are other ways of praying that consist of preparing a prayerful mood, a space for feeling ourselves part of the greater reality, a place into which we can invite Christ (Rev. 3:20). One New Year's Eve night in South Africa when I chanced to be sitting alone under our Christmas tree, I had a very special experience of thinking back over the year and ahead a little. In such moments, we might find a mood settle upon us of quiet inwardness and feel that we can allow an aura of warmth and light gently to form around us. Such moments can also be brought about consciously, perhaps on a daily or weekly basis.

I can make myself outwardly still, seated in comfort but upright and alert, perhaps with a candle or a crystal nearby, breathing calmly. Eyes either closed or focused on, say, the flame. I allow my mind to clear itself, gently pushing away mundane thoughts. I feel my soul become larger and the soul-space infused with a mild glow. Tell myself 'I am here, now.' There is, for the moment, no past or future—only the Now,

the eternal condensed around me and full; it is my complete reality, my being-at-one with the universe, the Divine.

How many breaths can I be there for (I don't mean that we should count them!), how long can this power of Now be sustained? It can be a time of communing with my higher self, with God. It can be an opportunity to bring, gently, my needy friend into my soul. To surround them with love and with light, to embrace them with a prayer for strength and healing.* To bring to mind their angel...

We can bring into this sacred soul-space much else besides: an area of the earth being ravaged (last year this might have been the Amazon), a community or people battered by strife or war, something of concern we have heard about in the news, families known or unknown to us in a tiny flat during lockdown, lonely people isolated. We can picture spiritual substance streaming from our soul to the people or objects of our love. Infused with our feeling, this can be real and big.

This, too, is prayer.

Rev. Peter van Breda in London wrote a letter to his congregation at the time when our churches were closed to public worship. He included these words on prayer:

With a true intent we will soon feel that through prayer we begin to revive God's eternal presence within our souls. Whatever is to come, whatever the next hour might bring is entirely unknown to us; we cannot change it. The goal is to keep on striving towards an inner peace and an inner stillness where we can inwardly come to rest. We might even call this state a composed positive acceptance of the future. Prayer, however simple, leads us beyond ourselves and gives us a firmness and anchorage in all circumstances of life.

And when we stand up, leaving this place of prayer, we can courageously take something of it into our steps—mindful, grateful touching of the earth in the way we walk. It can colour our encounters and conversations, our zest for our work and tasks.

A practice similar to the above can be a wonderful preparation for attending the Act of Consecration of Man. When we then sit in the church and actively take part in the worship, *which is itself a mighty prayer*, what we have brought mingles with the sacred substance at the altar, pouring out of our souls as the jugs are emptied into the chalice

and streams of healing communion-blessing ray out into the world around us: people, plants and animals, the earth itself.

Might this be an essential part of the new world opening around us this year? As we return with deep joy and gratitude to take part again physically in the Act of Consecration of Man in our churches, the experience of the powerful healing strength of Christ streaming into the world can become the new normal for us, after we have been deprived of participating outwardly for so long. Thank God we knew we could participate inwardly—and it could become so real!

* It helps to distinguish between a cure and healing. Seeking the former is really a desire to restore things to how they were, to fix the problem. True healing is much bigger; it can encompass the journey, dawning new consciousness, transformation, even unto death—for in death all is made whole and the painful processes turn out to have been blessings, medicine that makes whole.



Detail from *The Unicorn is Found*

Meditation and prayer – starting from nothing

Roger Druitt

Being responsible for children requires constant balance between safety and free development. In growing up, protection and enforcement decrease. In a world of good and evil, befalling us or caused by us, morality takes on a different character when we take responsibility for ourselves through thinking and acting without outside authority.

In what follows, ‘starting from nothing’ means without assumptions about anything other than our own personal awareness. No spiritual world, no deity: just our consciousness and our sense for exploration, with our feelings as our personal guide. The basics of prayer and meditation are well documented so we shall focus on how these disciplines unfold and interact—and integrate us with a greater whole—and help in this path between good and evil.

Meditation

This is an activity of the mind—a ‘controlled environment’. Each thought or image is linked deliberately to the next. The activity itself gradually becomes a kind of companion to whom one wants to be faithful. Nowadays there is a powerful culture of assertion of self, sometimes stimulated through mistakes in occult practice, so it is a good basic rule never to do a meditation for any reason other than for its own sake. The right meditation becomes part of the meditator, a kind of extra limb or sense organ; and one feels that it has become a universal rather than just a personal festival.

On this middle path, the real act of meditating consists in emptying the mind after having thought, developing a new faculty to notice what arises in the space left as the strongly created thoughts (and consequent feelings) are made to dissolve away. Such a strict approach practised alongside the more intuitive

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activity of prayer is most helpful in gradually building up confidence in one's own sense for the right path.

Meditation gradually has an effect on certain finer organs which until recently were not widely considered but which are now taken for granted, possibly without a complete understanding of them. It brings these organs into movement, as organs of the soul in the spiritual world, rooted in our living being. Rudolf Steiner's advice here differs from the main body of modern usage in that while giving very particular exercises for some of these organs (chakras etc.), he barely mentions the lower ones, implying that some care is needed there since they are situated in that part of us least easy to control. He also describes something seemingly not found elsewhere, that the ancient activity of all these organs rightly fell dormant so that human beings could experience a spiritless period of evolution so as to find the 'self', independent of any Master. The path being described awakens parts of these organs, not yet active, in a way fitting for our time and this in turn reawakens the earlier dormancy to an activity similar but more suited to now. This is something seemingly unknown today, in circles where spiritual awakening is sought, as also is the existence of Christ.

Prayer

This, in contrast to meditation, is directed to a higher being. It gives form to the desire to communicate with the highest we can conceive, even if in mystery. If we have no god, in extremis we create one. Yet that sort of 'subjective' creation has a more objective side too—a creating out of nothing, cutting through the thicket of intellectual thoughts about 'God' and reaching the heart of existence. This is based purely on our personal *experience*, without using any belief in outer authority. Our heart somehow assures us we are on the right track because it recognises a *kindred* being at the very threshold of our conception. This point is often only reached in despair, helpless and hopeless. But isn't the reality that this act of turning to the void itself gives strength, another form of certainty within us, or rather, within the *practice* of prayer itself? This certainty shows itself when we notice a readiness to let go of wonderful inner experiences because the more one builds ideas about something and deepens them with further experience, the

less one needs to ‘possess’ them. Other treasures are always ready to surprise us and the ones we had can fade, growing mysteriously into something greater. Inner work generates a hidden *faculty* for a hidden *reality*. It gives a better foundation for our soul life than the thoughts themselves, in particular thoughts about the nature of ‘God’: knowledge through experience rather than being told.

This is aided by words from Angelus Silesius, *The Cherubic Pilgrim*, ‘The Cross on Golgotha cannot redeem you from evil unless it also be set up within you’—to redeem *for* rather than *from*. Where have we experienced inner death (our prompt to pray) *and* resurrection (its potential fruit), a small moment when something came out well against all odds? We do not then need to *believe* in the resurrection, for, following Silesius, living into the relationships between inner deaths and their inner resurrections, we do indeed set up the Cross within and begin to be touched by resurrection. Death-and-Resurrection manifests as a love that strengthens our inner self.

It is good to start by making an inner image of the subject of our prayer. In this exploratory and open way of praying, our feelings of concern fire these images and bear them out beyond ourselves, within this relationship of indestructible certainty. Through thinking and self-monitoring along the way, a sense of *self* within a cosmos of being arises. By giving up all thoughts *about* it in favour of the reality of engaging *with* it, we have moved from assuming or intuiting a divinity to *experiencing* one, thus linking our own inner self or ego to the ‘self’ of the cosmos, the ultimate reality of being. We are also using an aspect of meditation: to exclude wishes. We draw close to the Zen experience of the super-personal ‘it’ that is active in our doings when all ‘ego’ has been purged away; yet through Christ the It has become a *person*, the second person of the Trinity. We move from an almighty but transcendent It to a Thou who ‘knows what is in man’ (John2:25)... because he incarnated here.

Whilst meditation is our own free decision, Jesus, as he taught his disciples the Lord’s Prayer, said to them, ‘Pray then like this.’ He gave guidance but no reasons, commenting, ‘He knows what you need before you ask’. So why pray? Does his instruction suffice for the enquiring modern soul? God apparently wanted this of mankind, and the Lord’s

Prayer includes the phrase ‘Thy will be done.’ Yet, in my early search for the sense of such things, I was reluctant to hand over to God the free will taught me by nuns at the age of six as our distinction from animals. With time, however, it seemed to me that as an earthly father wants his children to grow up as free mature adults, so too does the heavenly father. We need his will, as power rather than prescription, in order to do our own considered best on our own responsibility—not in splendid isolation but within the divine will. Our life is then embedded within the cosmic whole, yet in freedom. God’s will is that we do *our own* will, but he does give us an aim for it, the all-transforming quality, ‘love one another.’ We borrow His cosmic will to make our own will work, and he even allows us to act against the cosmic order, so that we might ponder this later and evaluate its results. There lies the problem of sin within a modern, self-developed morality. It is hard to love without the help of this will.

In pre-Christian times, one had to go out of one’s earthly self and enter *into* the ‘ultimate’ in order to find true being, and was forever dependent upon it; but since part of that ‘ultimate self’ reached out to become human, the process is different. Since Christ became man, we can connect with a higher self freely. There is of course still a kind of dependency, for although this Other is *human*, it is so in an ideal, *macrocosmic* sense whereas we are human in a microcosmic one, an image on the way to becoming reality. It is in the *relationship* to the archetype that we find our true being, not *with-in* it. We and ‘he’ meet in the middle of the way. ‘I in my Father, you in me, I in you’ (John 14:19). It is dynamic, not a resting in the ‘eternal’.

The ritual expression of prayer is incense. Resins are kindled upon a hot base and smoke rises. The light that shone upon the incense plant and became resin is released and disperses finely into the periphery. With it, our thoughts (that according to Jesus are shared by the Father even before we pray. Matt 6:8), rendered into prayer by the heat of our heart, are carried aloft as light. The more our heart is free from egoism and devoted to the good of the whole, the further will the prayer expand.

This is depicted in the Apocalypse, where, at an altar, angelic beings mix the prayers of the saints with incense that carries it to the throne

of God (Rev. 8). The saints are those on earth who are able to grasp this reality in their *feeling*... 'who feel the Christ within...' (Creed in The Christian Community). The Psalmist says, 'I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever' (Ps. 23). As the smoke expands, so does prayer fill that house and is used by heavenly powers as raw material for their work for humanity, their 'spiritual *economy*' (from *oikos*, Gk 'house').

But does the *world* change thereby? We cannot force grace but we can help to give it direction. Grace is God's reply to our prayer. It always flows somewhere in the world, even if we never discover its touching down. Reading the news touches us more deeply if we have prayed—our own being starts to radiate out into the whole world. And if there *are* guardian angels, we can imagine joining them around the altar in heaven—as aspiring 'saints' with those already having gone before us: 'together with Angels and Archangels and all the company of heaven' (Anglican Eucharist). Then we notice miracles in the world that have no obvious cause.

Feeling

Praying deepens and objectifies this by joining us more closely to the life of the world beyond us. In the Communion prayers, we learn that this life is carried by Christ. Understanding this deepens our sense of being, in prayer, a co-worker in a higher order. Our will 'feels' engaged with the greater will even without comprehending it.

Meditation, fostering a clarity and ever-widening awareness of the flow of evolution, carefully thought through and enhanced by inspiration, develops our feeling life from the other side. We feel engaged in this evolution, in fellowship with the rest of the world. Feeling colours and enlivens our thoughts.

Put simply, meditation is at home in the realm of thinking; prayer lives in the will for good; but because the working of human will is below consciousness, it is only 'felt' in our feeling. It is also that middle realm through which our thoughts ideally pass to become deeds. Feeling is our core; our heart is the place where prayer and meditation can at times join hands, once well established in their own sphere. This is where our spiritual experience, already progressed from the Father-It to the Christ-Person, now, with Silesius, can become Christ *crucified*

in me, and I with him. Paul describes it, 'For we are baptised into the *death* of Christ' (Romans 6:3). This death is ever-present, but leads, through his deed, to an *ever-present* resurrection that can periodically come forth. He becomes alive again in our heart (Service for Children). Faith and knowledge unite. We experience It-Thou-I, for the Thou feeling becomes closer still: I, in Spirit.

In the Act of Consecration we pray that Christ *feel with blessing* our relationship with him. In the Offertory it is the soul of the congregation, united in feeling for this wider world, which can then pray as one being. One of the miracles of today's world of religious strife is the working of small groups, made up of opposing factions, who reject animosity in favour of joint work towards peace. They do this through seeing the truly human in each other, bridging the gulf between them. Communal prayer, whether in a congregation or in inner contact with others, realises that the others have an angel (too) and that another *group* has an archangel. We are 'with Angels and Archangels' around the altar in heaven, joined by the living, the dead and the unborn, creating a healing influence upon world affairs.

As we make our way through a life of good and evil, starting from nothing, prayer and meditation help us join in the work of redemption of everything, including even ourselves, if grace allows. Our world's catastrophes could be far worse without these so very human activities.

Suggestions for prayer and meditation for each month can be found in Festivals of the Year by the author, Rudolf Steiner Press.



Detail from *The Unicorn is Found*

The Fate of the Earth

Peter van Breda

Our modern freed-up consciousness is needed when we look into the very real dilemmas of the world. One such massive challenge is everything connected to climate change and the environmental situation of the earth upon which we live as human beings. Much of what is said by the millions of people who are deeply concerned about climate change is accurate. The manner in which we have abused nature over the last four hundred years is baleful in the extreme. Since the time of the discoveries we have taken up the earth with all its resources and used it as we saw fit, often with disastrous consequences. We have only to think for a painful moment of what artificial fertilisers in the last hundred years have done to our living earth, turning vast tracts of land into desert. There is no gainsaying that unless we radically change our attitude towards what is left of the living earth we will bring it into a state of premature death.

However, there is another fundamental question about the destiny of the earth to which less attention is given. This is the fact that the earth itself has a place in the divine plan. It is not just some place where life happened to evolve millions of years ago. The earth has its own unfolding destiny, just as we do, as spiritual/physical beings. The destiny of the earth is inextricably bound up with the human story and it is affected by how we live out our lives as human beings. There is much talk today about how future generations will be affected if we use up what is called the pantry of the earth. Very little is said though about the actual situation of the earth as a living being which as Paul tells us groans and sighs for its redemption. But what though is the redemption that the earth longs for? In the Bible, Christ himself prophesies: 'Heaven and earth shall pass away.' The earth is destined to die. Like everything in the sense-perceptible world, it is subject to the law of entropy.

What does this mean we should do, when we hear this sorrowing lament of our dear earth? What is our task? It seems to me that we have a task that goes

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beyond conserving or indeed preserving the earth, vital though such endeavours may be. The earth needs to be transformed in love. How though shall we begin? A first step is to attend to how we cultivate the earth. Bio-dynamic farming and any other agricultural method that seeks to transform and redeem the substances of the earth is what the inner being of the earth longs for with every breath.

In a further step, transformation can become what we know as transubstantiation. Here, substances of earth are lifted up into another sphere of being-ness. During the course of the Act of Consecration as we enter into the living sphere of the christened spirit, bread becomes the body of Christ and wine his blood. This should not be thought of materialistically but in a new, living way. If transubstantiation is to take place when we come together before the altar and also in life when our deeds take on a sacramental character, something needs to die. What we bring as our sacrificial offering dies within us. It is destined through Christ's resurrection to be recreated on a higher level. A new finer transparent expression of life comes into being. The earth's longed for redemption comes to life in this process of dying and becoming.

In time the earth will pass away; it will surely die. However, its destiny in this dying process is to become a beaming star. Our planet wants to radiate the aura of Christ's love in cycles of time to come. Through Christ, who died into all earthly existence, and who is in us, the re-enlivening of the dying earth-existence is possible. Christ waits at the threshold of our hearts for us to become willing co-celebrants in his ongoing deed of consecration.

Counterpoint—an inner journey through the festivals II

Summer's Bliss

Lars Åke Karlsson

*Most High, all powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honour, and all blessing.*

*To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no man is worthy to mention Your name.*

*Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures,
especially through my lord Brother Sun,
who brings the day; and you give light through him.
And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendour!
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.*

ST. FRANCIS

Summer is the time when Nordic people try to get as far away as possible from what we call civilisation. It is like a primitive instinct within us. At least once a year we want to be 'natural'; we make our way to the lakes and forests, dig around in the garden, and chop wood for the sauna. We want to tear down all the walls that civilisation has built between ourselves and nature. Rousseau's 'noble savage' lives within each and every one of us!

As the summer progresses, the colour scheme of nature changes. The cascades of colour in forests and meadows, which shone out in spring and early summer, are dampened down and against the varied shades of green, the gardens flaunt grand roses, dahlias and clematis. Roadsides and ditches, where shovels have once broken ground, are scattered with bluebells, knapweed and daisies. Now the most vibrant colours shine where human beings have left their mark.

A little later, once darkness has begun to encroach, the reddish-purple fireweed stands against the spruce forest's green wall. In Swedish this flower also goes by the name of *rallarros*, 'navvy's rose', because it followed

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in the wake of the railway builders up through the wilderness as they cleared land for the new railway. It could stand as a humble symbol of nineteenth century human progress.

Summer's face

High summer's processes of ripening, which become steadily more visible, can easily create a duality in people who want to experience the natural shifts in a little more depth.

We can enjoy the abundant extravagance of colours and shapes and follow nature's path towards maturity and perfection. Sun, rain, wind and all the invisible processes that take place in the earth interact, and after mysterious transformations eventually create seeds, fruits and roots which are filled with so much of the sun's power that they are able to withstand the long winter. Of course, we can influence some of these processes, but on the whole one has to admit, as the Danish poet Piet Hein did, that what happens in nature is nothing short of a miracle:

*We glibly talk
of nature's laws
but do things have
a natural cause?*

*Black earth turned into
yellow crocus
is undiluted
hocus-pocus.*

In the face of this one cannot help but be amazed by it, admire it and gratefully receive it. As one can see, nature seems to be able to create almost anything. Every year there is a new harvest, sometimes more plentiful, sometimes more scarce, but there always is a harvest. But other kinds of feelings can also sneak their way in.

Guilt

When in ancient times human beings gradually began to intervene in the natural processes and manipulate them in order to ensure and in-

crease crop yields, their feelings were mixed. Along with their joy and pride in the new discoveries, they felt like intruders, a disturber of the cosmic order of things. This compelled them to appease the powers that are ultimately responsible for everything that grows. This experience was the basis for many of the rituals and sacrificial acts that permeated life in ancient cultures.

Although modern human beings have difficulties with terms like forces and powers, the growing environmental awareness of our times is not far removed from the classic experience of a bad conscience, which was also seen as a responsibility towards nature. Ancient cultures saw nature as a great cosmic being, both whimsical and erratic. Human beings were only a small actor in her great drama, and if the gods were not on their side, success in hunting and harvests was in danger. Their whole existence was at stake.

Modern humanity has developed technologies that are able to penetrate the mysterious forces quite independently, yet we are still unable to suppress the guilt we bear towards nature.

A hundred years ago we still seemed to be heading for a glorious future at full throttle: just study the paintings of the Futurists from the early twentieth century. They celebrated tractors, ocean liners and aircraft with childlike joy—all these achievements heralded the new free human being. The new inventions seemed to be able to do everything that humankind was previously only able to dream of.

In 1905 the physicist Ernst Mach wrote:

Science has taken over the task of replacing tentative and unconscious adaptation by a faster variety that is fully conscious and methodical. If we reflect on the agonies that our ancestors had to endure under the brutality of their social institutions, their legal systems and courts of justice, their superstitions and their fanaticisms, if we consider the circumstances of our ancestors, we find in all this a sufficiently powerful incentive to cooperate, zealously and vigorously, with the help of our psychological and sociological in-sight, for the realization of an ideal moral world-order. And when we have once created such a moral order, no one will then be able to say that it does not exist in the

world, and no one will have the need to seek for it in mystical heights or depths.

Indeed there was no doubt.

Not even two World Wars seemed to be able to quell the enthusiasm for technological progress, in spite of the destruction the 'ideal moral world-order' had caused. Who would have had the time to be concerned about the air, the water and the forests?

And the wheels of progress kept turning.

The water began to suffer and fish died. Smog forced city inhabitants to wear surgical masks. Progress came at a price.

Responsibility

A few decades ago, a bad conscience was still a pretty private matter. Some young people chained themselves to trees and bulldozers in order to prevent logging or the construction of a power plant. Police had to cut them free, while the public looked on rather indifferently.

Much has happened since then, although a lot of things still follow the same tracks—especially in the poorest parts of the world that we westerners see as remote. There, we can dump all the things we do not want to see.

However, there is hardly a successful business today that would not take the issue of climate change seriously. The ecological footprint and life-cycle calculations have become factors that have to be considered when companies are creating their brand. An enterprise with a marketing strategy that does not take these factors into serious consideration and openly declare them will quickly find itself left behind by the competitors.

St. John, the awakener

Against this background, it is no wonder that midsummer, the major Christian festival of the summer season, is celebrated in the name of St John the Baptist.

Who is this 'voice crying in the wilderness'?

John has withdrawn to the desert and lives as a hermit, surviving on the bare minimum. One could not get any closer to nature than he has. He lives in a cave; his food consists of locusts and wild honey

and he is dressed in camel skins. Crowds stream out into the desert to listen to him.

Far from the image of a gentle, humble recluse, his appearance in the gospels is powerful. His fiery message has cosmic dimensions.

When he calls the scribes a *brood of vipers* it is not their human shortcomings that he is criticizing. He is referring to something bigger than mere human happiness or well-being: it concerns the earth and everything that lives on it and from it, human beings included.

According to many mythologies, the primary task of man is to take care of the creation, to be a gardener of sorts in the service of the gods.

The Bible is no exception. From the beginning it gives man the crucial role as the 'image of God,' and is given a place in the Garden of Eden. Even after the Fall, man is still acknowledged as being 'like us (the gods), able to distinguish between good and evil' and we are given the earth to take care of in our exile.

The voice in the desert has only one message: *change your thinking*. St. John can be seen as the protector of all those today who, despite strong opposition and limited resources, with strong hearts want to take responsibility for Mother Earth, our home.

In old paintings John is often pictured much taller than the people around him. 'I say to you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John.' It is as if he carried in him everything on earth that existed from the very first beginning and developed into what it is today: the earth and plants, the animals, mankind. In short, one could say that in him the whole Old Testament is crystallised. Jesus, who was baptised by John, saw in him the last and greatest of the prophets, the one who prepared for the coming of God's kingdom.

We can follow John the Baptist—the patron saint of summer—and the 'greatest of men' ascending to become an angelic human being through one of the humblest paradoxes in Christianity: 'He must increase, but I must decrease.'

When summer ripens and turns into autumn, an archangel, Michael, approaches us. He is descending from his high spheres to become a human angel and reach out to us so that we can almost touch him.

When the shadows deepen we can feel the power of the two angels in us: one carrying us from below and the other opening up the heavens for us.

Summer's sweetness

It is as if the warmest season of the year is made for sheer enjoyment. When schools resume after the summer holiday, children and teachers alike seem to be filled by the warmth, the fragrances, smells and tastes of the summer that will last them well into the autumn and winter. Many cultures saw nature as an ever-flowing cornucopia, whose life-giving forces never ran out, and summer was the time of abundance.

Those who are able to experience and enjoy the fullness of summer—the biblical *pleroma*—as a child does, are probably better prepared to take responsibility for the living in a completely different manner than those for whom sheer pleasure is unnecessary or even forbidden.

To awaken this responsibility within the young generations, everyone engaged in education would do well to take the breathtaking educational creed of Italian author Natalia Ginzburg seriously:

*As far as the education of children is concerned I think they should
be taught not the little virtues but the great ones.
Not thrift but generosity and an indifference to money;
not caution but courage and a contempt for danger;
not a desire for success but a desire to be and to know.*

True responsibility and care can only grow from this soil.

Translated Sheila Iveson

I am the Light of the World

Douglas Thackray

In November of 2019 a terrorist attack occurred at the Fishmongers Hall near London Bridge. The perpetrator was a prisoner attending a conference on offender rehabilitation. In a tragic irony, the two people who were fatally wounded in the attack were both graduates of Cambridge University who were attending the conference.

This incident took place during the run-up to the general election in Britain. Our now Prime Minister promised that if he were elected, he would ensure that all convicted terrorists would in future serve the full term of their sentence in jail. The father of the young man who was murdered retorted that this was not the moment to score political points, and furthermore, that his death would be an even greater tragedy if this were to be the outcome, as this would contradict the ideal of his son to do everything possible to integrate those who had been marginalised back into society, believing as he did that everyone had the right to a second chance.

Early on in his ministry Christ proclaimed to the disciples that they were 'the light of the world' and that this light should not be hidden but should ray out into the world (Matt 6:22). I felt that the two young people who were so cruelly murdered did just that. They were among those special souls who walk in Christ's footsteps. They reveal to us the deeper meaning of the seven 'I Am' sayings, which can become part of us when we follow Christ and believe in his light. By contemplating the 'I Am' sayings on a daily basis and making them our constant task, we may also be drawn near to his living presence as they work on in us and change us. They can act like a shield which will strengthen us and protect us. However we can only reach to where Christ is in these sayings when we see these sayings as a way to what St. Paul proclaimed: 'If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come. Humanity is evolving towards becoming anew. Those who believe in his light

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will in time become light-filled' (II Cor. 5). In the Act of Consecration of Man our becoming is evoked by the words which are spoken directly to us eight times: 'Christ in you!' When we contemplate these words, we may in time experience more strongly the mystery of his working in us.

Let us now return to the gospel. Before addressing the crowd Christ had spent the previous night on the Mount of Olives praying to the Father, as he always did before any major event. A crowd of people had come to listen to his teachings in the temple courtyard. The gathering was, however, interrupted when a group of Pharisees arrived. They brought with them a woman whom they alleged had been caught in the act of adultery. Placing her in the middle of the courtyard where Christ stood, they then said: 'This woman was caught in the act of adultery. The Law of Moses says we should stone such people, what do you say?' (John 8)

To give some context: the previous day the Pharisees had sent the temple guard to arrest Jesus but they had failed to do so owing to the fact that, as Nicodemus had pointed out, it was against the law to arrest a man before he had been charged. The fact that the lawmakers had forgotten the law gives us an inkling of the increasing sense of panic they must have felt in the face of Christ's growing influence amongst the people. Clearly, they felt that he posed a great threat. Now, more determined than ever, they brought the woman before him, hoping that he would be forced to make a judgment that would condemn him. This would enable them to bring a charge against him and thus put the matter to rest.

However, Christ does not answer immediately. Instead he kneels down and writes with his finger in the earth. Does he need time to think or is he trying to stir their consciences by giving them time to think again? We do not know. Finally he gets up and proclaims, 'Let the one who is without sin be the first to cast a stone!' and then he kneels down and writes again in the dust turning away from his accusers. This strange behaviour serves to emphasise his authority all the more. They can't help but be deeply shaken by his words and his powerful gesture as they begin to search their consciences. The tables begin to turn. They realise that this is no ordinary man, but someone with special powers. He seems too dangerous for them to confront. They retreat one by one,

the eldest leading the way and they leave the woman behind. Christ then turns to her and asks: 'Has no one accused you?' The woman replies: 'No-one, sir.' He answers: 'Then neither do I. Go and sin no more.'

We can hardly imagine the sense of terror the woman must have felt as she stood before her accusers, who were quite determined to stone her to death. What must it have been like when she then experienced the light of Christ's grace?

Christ goes on to proclaim: 'I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.' This saying puts this event into the context of the cosmic redemption by Christ as the creator of the world. 'Before the world began, Christ shone in His glory, Light of true Light, One with the Father, in all eternity' (from Adam Bittleston, *Meditative Prayers for Today*). The incident with the woman and her accusers shines out as a parable of his mission to restore man to the experience of God's love. In the Old Testament, sin was punished with stoning; now through Christ's blood, mankind is given a second chance to redeem their sin by becoming anew. To all who confess their failings, repent and seek to make amends he offers his grace. This is the Christian way forward. Nowhere is this more clear than in what St Paul has to say in his open confession in Romans 6: 'I do the things that I do not want to do and I do not do the things that I want to do; who will save me from myself?' (Free rendering) Thank God for Jesus Christ our Saviour. Every true Christian should have the humility to accept their failings and moments of being lost, seeking to confess them as a matter of course, for these are the signs that he or she is searching for the true self.

The light of Christ seeks us out, shining into our darkness, but it is only through our humility that we can become free. We are unable to find freedom if we become overly dependent on his forgiveness; on the contrary, we are required to grow up and take responsibility for our part in what has occurred. He says 'sin no more', implying that the woman brought before him has the ability to change, to realise herself. He affords her his protection as long as she is led by her own inner light, received from his divine and cosmic light. As we may have experienced how difficult it is to shake off the darkness in us we may seek help from the Sacramental Consultation of The Christian Community. This can

be the place of confession that is spoken out to the world of spirit in the presence of the priest. The supplicant, humbled by the weight of conscience, has come in an act of faith to receive guidance about how they might learn from their personal experiences. At the end of the Consultation, the priest reads the sacred words from the book, words that have the light of Christ shining through them. They indicate the way that we can receive a second chance. This takes the place of absolution, because Christ knows that when we take on the task that he gives us, we can come to the path of personal development in freedom.

As was mentioned in the beginning, Jack Merritt's father in making his pronouncement spoke as though from beyond the threshold with the voice of his son that said that to forgive was to give the other person another chance. This is what Christ shows us that when we do this we also become part of the Light of the World.



Detail from *The Unicorn is Found*

Christ in the middle

A Contemplation on the 'Hundred Guilder Print' by Rembrandt

Bastiaan Baan

Time and again we find pictures in the New Testament that show Christ 'in the middle.' He himself spoke more than once about this place among people that makes Him a true central person: 'For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them' (Matt. 18:20). Or: 'But I am in your midst as one who serves.' (Luke 22:27). Other people also recognise the place he occupies: 'But in your midst stands one whom you do not know,' says John the Baptist of Him (John 1:26). John the Evangelist shows him at the crucifixion in the middle between the two robbers, and uses the word *midst* twice more after the Resurrection: 'Then Jesus came and stood in the midst and said to them: 'Peace be with you!' (John 20:19 and 20:26). Finally, the writer of the Apocalypse sees Him as the Son of Man in the midst of the seven lampstands (Rev. 1:13).

A well-known etching by Rembrandt makes an extraordinary statement with the picture of Christ in the middle. It is an etching that has become known by several names: 'Christ heals the sick,' also: 'Christ to whom little children are brought.' The best-known and most prosaic name is the 'Hundred Guilder Print.'

When we contemplate this picture we discover a remarkable constellation of people around Christ, which brings the power of the middle to expression in a singular manner. The arrangement, however, did not arise from the imagination of the artist but was derived from a passage in the Matthew Gospel. In Ch. 19, the gospel describes several groups of people who have come together around Christ: sick people, Pharisees, children and His disciples. 'He went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. And a great crowd of people followed him, and he healed there also. Then Pharisees came to him to test him ... And children were brought to him, that he might lay his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuffed them.'

In Rembrandt's picture, these groups of people may be distinguished. One group is gathered on the right of the picture. These are the sick,



The Hundred Guilder Print, etching by Rembrandt van Rijn

weak and lame who are turning to Christ. None of them has the strength to stand upright. Bent, kneeling or lying down they turn to the middle.

Another group congregates on the left. Several of them turn away from Christ. They are talking to each other. They show no trace of illness or weakness. Except for one who is sitting and listening, they are standing straight. In this second group we recognise the Pharisees on the left and, closer to Christ, some of his disciples and followers. The disciple who stands next to Christ makes a gesture with his right hand to rebuff a woman who is carrying a child in her arms.

In the picture, light and darkness are spread over these two groups in a notable way. Those who no longer have the strength to stand upright, who have to live in a condition of humiliation, are more or less enveloped in darkness. By contrast, the Pharisees have been put in a shrill light. In the expressions of the faces and positions they demonstrate scepticism, pride, arrogance, and even scorn.

Christ stands between light and darkness, on the border of these two extremes, in the middle. However, around Him we do not find a

grey mixture of light and darkness. His shining form gives off a bright light. Where there is an open area between the groups of Pharisees, disciples and the sick, another group comes to Christ: the children with their mothers.

Only one of all the people who are assembled here is visible in his full human form: Christ is pictured in His entirety from head to toe, his countenance open to the observer. All the others are only partly visible. Their attitudes indicate human one-sidedness, in contrast with the figure in their midst.

When we develop a feeling for the very different groups of people who have come together here, the gestures of Christ become remarkably eloquent. What would the sick, those who directly suffer human inadequacies and incapacities in their own bodies, experience from Christ? If we try to put ourselves in their shoes, we would see the impressive gesture of his raised hand that is turned toward them. It is as if he wants to lift the sick out of their humiliation.

The group of Pharisees knows no feelings of impotence or humility. On the contrary, their weakness lies in an excess of self-esteem and pride. Christ's gesture to them points down, as if he wants to reject the temptation of arrogance. For the disciples, this gesture is connected with a task: to serve rather than to reign. 'And whoever would be first among you, must be your servant.' (Matt.20:27)

Those who are caught too deeply in suffering, who are captives of darkness, are raised up. Those who have turned away from earthly grief and live in an ivory tower are pushed back to earth. When we take these gestures of Christ seriously, we may gain the impression: here in the middle stands the Son of Man, who bears and orders the lives of these people. What emerges is a higher order in these groups of people. Christ creates a balance, a counterweight for the one-sidednesses of these human beings.

The French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) knew this experience of the middle in the tension between temptations. In his *Pensées* he summarised it in a few sentences: 'Knowing God without knowing the distress of humanity creates pride. Knowing the distress without knowing God creates despair. Knowing Jesus Christ creates the middle, because there we find both God and our distress.'

And the children? They simply approach Christ. In their innocence they are allowed to see the Son of Man who opens his arms to them and says: 'Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 19:14).'



Detail from *The Hundred Guilder Print*

The Plague

An existential novel; an existential experience

Luke Barr

A few weeks ago, it was quite easy to find a copy of Albert Camus' existentialist novel *The Plague* for 1p plus postage. Now, it is difficult to find a copy for under £10. A sudden surge of interest in the Algerian philosopher's book has been stimulated by the Corona crisis.

The Plague is indeed about a violent epidemic that erupts in a large town in Algeria. The novel traces the inner reactions and lives of several (male) characters. It might be interesting to consider how the existentialist essayist and novelist, Camus, understood this phenomenon of a terrible plague. We might be able to see parallels with what is happening now.

For Camus, the plague that ravages the town is an expression of life's meaninglessness, or what is called, 'the Absurd'. Death is the ultimate absurdity; but life is absurd too. We live, and then some irrational force of nature comes, a plague, and sweeps life away. Why, Camus asks, do we live at all?

But Camus is not absolute in his condemnation of life. He is an optimist, and believes that there is a point to life; only we cannot grasp it. But death annihilates any meaning in life. This existentialist idea, which in some quarters has been the foundation of modern Humanism, is an expression of our modern collective psyche, because we all, as a collective western culture, now have an underlying doubt about the meaning of life.

The town where his protagonists are living is suddenly hit by a plague. The authorities at first refuse to acknowledge it. Then, there is 'lock-down' and the city is closed off. Everyone inside the city must live with the plague. They are trapped in their own existence. Like players on a theatre stage, they are unable to leave until the final act has been played out—and these players are confined by their author to the stage, unable to freely determine their own lives.

The citizens deal with it in a familiar way. They get used to the horror, and become desensitised, accepting

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conditions as the 'new norm'. Their existence which had previously followed stagnant patterns, adapts and assumes new ones, despite the terror of the plague. This prevents them from having to think about the consequences of their lack of freedom, their mortality, and (for Camus) the absurdity of existence.

For the main protagonist Dr Rieux, there is only action. One must do; save lives; act. In this sense, he is the paragon that is currently being extolled. However, he uses his science of healing, but must accept that it is useless here. He permits himself no rhetoric. He does not allow his 'heroism' to be politicised. For him, there must be absolute human integrity: 'it's not a question of heroism; it's a matter of common decency...the only means of fighting a plague is common decency.' In French, the word for 'common decency' is 'l'honnêteté', which connotes honesty, truth, and being true to oneself, being able to look at reality squarely.

Interestingly, his only enemy is a priest. Rieux likes the priest as a human being—but his faith is an escape from reality. For Camus and his hero Rieux, the rhetoric of a future existence where all will be well is a lie. For Camus, the traditional religious attitude is one of submission, despair and prevarication—which to him are repugnant and unworthy of the human 'spirit'. In Sartre's memorable expression, they are qualities of 'bad faith'. Rieux carries on with his work as a doctor caring for the dying, even though he knows that his medicine, his science, is useless. He carries on, because to accept the plague is to submit to it, and to inwardly (and probably physically) die.

Is the existentialist so different to us? All of Camus' hero's characteristics will be familiar to us: commitment, action, looking at reality as far as is possible for each of us, integrity and clarity. But we feel that we have a medicine that is not useless in the face of the plague. Because the plague that we meet on earth is just a symptom of something far more profound. It reveals a culture that does not accept death in any form anymore. Death is the great insult to this culture; it purportedly makes an absurdity of our lives; an absurdity that we are always trying to flee from.

And yet death is not our enemy. This is perhaps the fundamental difference between Camus and an anthroposophical Christianity. Camus had only the intellect to work with, the remorseless logic that could lead one only to a dead-end. In spite of this, despite his logic, he

still propounded a positive humanism. But we have something else, the experience of the threshold. For him, death was ‘the Absurd,’ rendering life meaningless. For us, death is...well what? Perhaps I need not say what it is. We experience the threshold in the Act of Consecration. In our everyday selves, we are like everyone else, struggling with our incomprehension, our fear and pain. And yet we cultivate a reality, based on a foundation which Camus could not be aware of.

In the face of the current perverted fearful relationship to death, we have a healing medicine. ‘Healing medicine’? ‘Cycles of time’? Camus would contend that religious language is obfuscating; it takes the human being away from their actual condition by promising a metaphysical future. At least, that is the danger or ‘temptation’ of religion—a luciferic temptation that pulls us away from our earthly responsibility.

Camus had fought with the Resistance in Nazi-occupied Algeria, and was aware that many ‘Christians’ fought by his side. He respected them—but felt that ultimately they avoided their actual reality. He was not anti-Christian; rather he thought that they were mistakenly ‘anti-human.’ His dismissal of Christian faith was because he felt that it fostered fanaticism and in itself was a totalitarian world-view with no room for individual freedom. His viewpoint is of course shaped by his encounter with conventional Christianity in the guise of Catholicism. Camus did not know of a Christianity which struggled as the Existentialists did, to find freedom, rather than sidestep it. I would hope that our movement is this Christianity which has parallels with its sibling cultural movement of the twentieth century, Existentialism.

Have we been able to combat the plague with ‘l’honnêteté’? Have we been true? Have we looked reality squarely in the face? This virus has brought deaths in its wake—(although the statistics as to whether one has died with or of the virus are subject to debate); but it has been the metaphorical plague that has surely been worse: the fear that has been propagated; the suspicion of manipulation of facts and of presentations of half-truths, or one-sided truths. The hysteria sparked by a media that has been out of control; the division in opinion between people, even splitting up friendships or good working relationships. Even individuals have felt divided in themselves, with contrasting moods rampaging

through their souls. And finally, there is the threat of spiritual death or the death of freedom in the individual.

This plague has served to reveal much to us. In this sense, it has been a Revelation, or Apocalypse. It reveals people to each other as never before. It reveals people to themselves. We are given a chance to ‘confess unto that which is *revealed* through’ Christ, for surely this is not just the working of the Adversary; but somehow, also the one who ‘bears and orders the life of the world’ is also part of this. Is this the empty rhetoric that Camus deplored? Or can we increasingly find ourselves in a more authentic fashion through these circumstances? Where the town in his novel reverts to routine and even boredom in order not to face up to their existential situation, can we face it without reverting to fantasy, fear or self-deception? Can we really get to know what makes us perceive things in a certain way, rather than deplore other people’s stances which might differ from our own?

Interestingly, the ‘bad faith’ that the Existentialists identified in conventional religion has relocated itself. It is now to be found in the dogmas of materialistic science. Anything that does not conform to this is ridiculed or ignored. It is the new (bad) faith, the new truth. Any heretical view that does not agree with it will be censored and taken off the internet, which recalls exactly how dissent of opinion is treated in Orwell’s *1984* with its oxymoronic Ministry of Truth.

Ultimately, the plague is just a symptom of an underlying sickness which we all have. Not a physical sickness—although that is what made the virus so dangerous to those with chronic illness. No, for Camus, the plague, the sickness was carried around in the hearts of every human being. One of the characters, Tarrou, recognises that he had always had the plague—it only came to expression when this plague broke out. It is an existential sickness, not unlike the Christian one. It manifests as duplicity, deceit, inauthenticity and selfishness—all the ways in which humanity can be ‘contaminated’.

These are the aspects of ourselves which the plague reveals: a dreadful sickness that we have long learned to live with, and which we mostly hardly notice. It challenges us to either succumb to the plague, to bury our heads in dishonest fantasies (for Camus, this was the church; today, it is more the ‘bad faith’ of hobbies, distractions or the call to ‘get behind the science’

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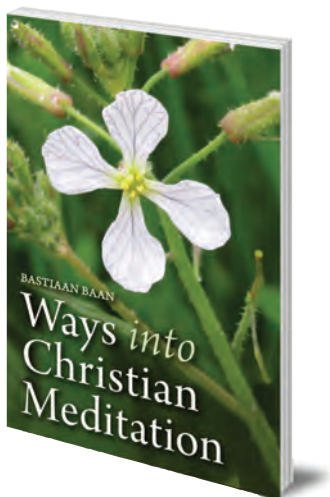
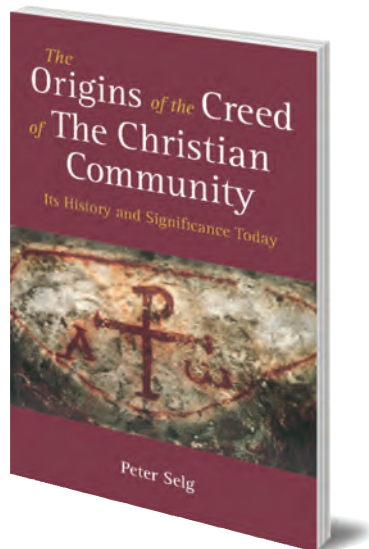
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without question or deeper examination); or to become more human, more true, what we might call in traditional vernacular, more Christian. For Camus, the plague revealed our attitudes about ourselves with regard to death and human ideals and freedom. We should applaud the existentialists for searching so earnestly for these. Even though part of their cultural heritage to us today has been the acquired belief in this life being a one-off in a meaningless universe, it at least cemented the importance of life, and that one should do all one can to live, as a Buddhist might say, right. But it is not the final answer.

Does the modern reader of *The Plague* recognise the issues Camus raises about freedom, our attitudes to death, our human ideals in our current circumstances? Do they ask themselves what is an authentic individual response to these questions, and not simply embrace the prevailing narrative? Do we really have to expend so much on a 'war against death', a war that we ultimately can never win? This is somewhat like the legendary King Canute who sat by the shore, and tried to order the tide back; or like Camus' own exploration of the 'myth of Sisyphus', who is perpetually bound to roll a rock up a hill, and never complete his task.

For Camus, death was the Absurd which placed all life in question. But a question is not a full stop. A question is always a beginning. It requires responses, it requires dialogue. Death, when it comes, always touches the human soul, and can bring out the best in people (just as it can also bring out the worst egoism as well). Death is not an enemy; it wishes to tell us something. We should really not allow fear to govern us here. Fear allows other beings to take their place in our heart. 'The grave is empty', we hear at Easter. We should take this to heart; 'the heart should be full', with this sentiment.

If in the forthcoming time, we see a reversal and relaxing of the current lockdown, then perhaps we can also re-evaluate how we have viewed death. Can we really see it clearly when our vision is so clouded by fear? Perhaps we can start with reversing and relaxing what appears to be an ever increasing straitjacket of the 'health and safety' culture which seems to me to have its roots in the fear of death, and fear of litigation. Camus would argue that the future must belong to free individuals using common sense, common decency, l'honnêteté, and not to ever more encroaching rules, laws and dogmas.

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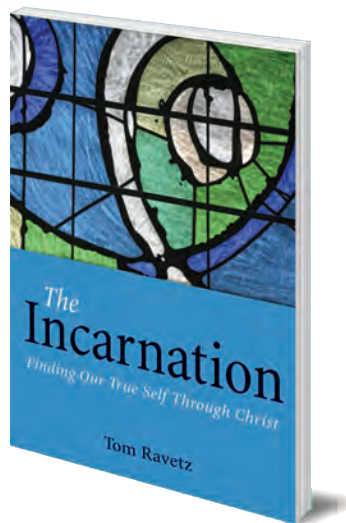
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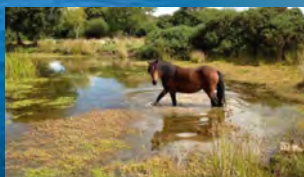
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