

Looking Inwards

A personal reflection with Teresa of Avila, Walter Rauschenbusch, Thomas Merton, D.H. Lawrence, S.T. Georgiou, Isaac of Nineveh and J. Brent Brill

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Introduction

It is often during times of turmoil and despair that our eyes are well and truly opened and we learn something profoundly important. As Thomas Merton so perceptively wrote in *No Man is an Island*:

Only the man who has had to face despair is really convinced that he needs mercy. Those who do not want mercy never seek it. It is better to find God on the threshold of despair than to risk our lives

in a complacency that has never felt the need for forgiveness. A life that is without problems may literally be more hopeless than one that always verges on despair.¹

It is against such a backdrop that I offer my own story – battling with bouts of clinical depression – but also looking for, and finding, meaning in such suffering. This journey has involved much prayerful reflection on scripture, but also ruminat-

ing on the wisdom offered by ancient and contemporary writers alike.

Looking Inwards

The mystic Teresa of Avila wrote of 'the Divine Presence' in her *Way of Perfection*:

Remember how St. Augustine tells us that, after seeking God everywhere, he found him within himself. It is no small matter for those of us who are often distracted to grasp this truth and to find that, if we want to speak to our Eternal Father and to enjoy his presence, we don't have to go to heaven or to speak in a loud voice. The softest whisper is heard. He is so near: we need no wings to fly in search of him but have only to be alone and look upon him present within us.... We must talk to him very humbly, ask him for what we need as we would ask a father, tell him our troubles and beg him to put them right.... Those who are able to enclose themselves like this within the little heaven of their soul, wherein dwells the creator of heaven and earth, and have formed the habit of looking at nothing and staying in no place which will distract them, may be sure that they are walking on an excellent road and will without fail drink of the living water.²

Despite the 'dark night of the soul' periods that seem to last interminably long and where God seems remote, indifferent to our woes or even absent, I repeatedly found solace in the above words. I also found hope in the simple, yet moving, words of the theologian, Baptist Minister and key figure in the Social Gospel Movement, Walter Rauschenbusch. His poem *The Little Gate to God* is a reminder that God is not some far off deity that requires advanced notice in order to be accessed. Rather, his love and presence are a timeless and unchanging reality; he was here yesterday, he is here today and he will be with us forever, grounded in love and compassion. All we are required to do is to look within. His presence is within each one of us.

Rauschenbusch visualised his interior 'soul' as a Castle, somewhat akin to Teresa of Avila's beautiful description, and he wrote: 'In the castle of my soul is a little garden gate,/Whereat, when I enter, I am in the presence of God./In a moment, in the turning of a thought, I am where God is,/This is a fact....//When I enter into God, all life has meaning./Without asking, I know; my desires are even now fulfilled,/My fever is gone. In the great quiet of God/My troubles are but pebbles on the road,/My joys are like the everlasting hills....//So it is when my soul steps through the postern gate/Into the presence of God./Big things become small, and small things become great./The near be-

comes far, and the future is near,
The lowly and despised are shot
through with glory..../God is the
substance of all my resolutions;
When I am in him, I am in the King-
dom of God/And in the Fatherland
of my Soul.’³

After much reflection I realised that I was trying too hard, in sheer desperation, to pass through the 'postern gate' that Rauschenbusch talked about. In a fit of anxiety it struck me that I was swimming furiously against the tide of God's will. Whereas my eyes were rapidly scanning and re-scanning the spiritual horizon looking for something to cling too; not until I slowed down and took a deep breath was I able to focus on where God was leading me. It is incredibly difficult to let go, and to give up what superficially appears to be some semblance of control. Even although the feeling of control is ultimately illusory, it exerts a powerful influence on the mind; to be in control is everything; to lose that control, or so I reasoned in my own mind at the time, was to embrace chaos. But over time, and by increasingly placing my trust in God, my perspective changed. Now, as S.T. Georgiou explained so movingly in his wonderfully thought-provoking book, *The Isle of Monte Cristo*, I understood that the logical approach was to let go. Georgiou writes:

When the dark night comes,
we do not resist it, however
long and desperate its course,

but like the sky-born hawk we spread our wings – that is, open our hearts – and ride whatever comes our way, for we dwell on a higher plane; we soar on the spirit-currents of love. We trust in the almighty God who ascended from the greatest darkness and gave life to those in the tombs, that with him, the dead might also arise, and wing their way back home.⁴

In order to truly open my heart to God, I soon realised that I needed silence and solitude. Thomas Merton writes beautifully of solitude in *Song: If you seek...*

Follow my ways and I will
 lead you
To golden-haired suns,
Logos and music, blameless
 joys,
Innocent of questions
And beyond answers:
For I, Solitude, am thine own
 self:
I, Nothingness, am thy All.
I, Silence, am thy Amen¹⁵

Exquisitely magnificent though those words most certainly are, in the depths of depression, being alone with my thoughts was almost too frightening to contemplate. At times I would gravitate towards loudness and activity as a means of drowning out the deluge of negative thoughts that were at risk of flooding my mind and overwhelm-

ing it completely. With anxiety came the inability to sit in one place for any length of time; the adrenalin of the 'fight or flight' response pumping through my bloodstream was not conducive to any form of quiet reflection – it was simply impossible. So quietness and solitude was out of the question. But then I realised once again, I was not listening to God's prompting. The whole point of my call to solitude was to tune in to God and away from my own negative, and at times, distressing thoughts. By truly turning inwards and uncovering the treasure within I would be displacing the self with the divine. Replacing narcissistic introspection with a focus on God was and is a movement away from 'self-centredness' to 'other-centredness'. In the words of D.H. Lawrence: 'Are you willing to be sponged out, erased, cancelled, made nothing?/ Are you willing to be made nothing, dipped into oblivion?/If not, you will never really change./The phoenix renews her youth only when she is burnt, burnt alive, burnt down to hot and flocculent ash./ Then the small stirring of a new small bub in the nest with strands of down like floating ash/Shows that she is renewing her youth like an eagle,/Immortal bird.'⁶ And, so, to fully understand how to realize this precious goal in practice, I returned repeatedly to verse ten of the 46th Psalm, where the psalmist famously exhorts the faithful to 'Be still, and know that I am God'

I found out that the command to 'be still' in the original Hebrew is rooted in a verb which means to 'let go' or 'to release'. The psalmist, in using this command, was forcefully reminding the Israelites to avoid the strong temptation of relying solely on their military strength and resources. If they did, then it would lead to disaster. Rather, the psalmist calls on the faithful to persevere and above all, to 'surrender' their lives to God, safe in the knowledge that he is in control.

Likewise, for me, I knew that God wanted me to take advantage of the times in my life when the anxiety and depression were in abeyance, and to turn inwards, not for narcissistic reasons, but to really feel God's presence. When we still ourselves, when we give up the hustle and the bustle and the concerns of everyday life, then we can truly surrender to God's will. This fact is as true for the Israelites in the days of the psalmists as it is for us in our modern age and as it was for me in dealing with depression. It was also true for Jesus in his earthly ministry. Meditating on the sixth chapter of Luke's Gospel, where Jesus chose the twelve apostles, was a salutary reminder of that for me:

Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles:

Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. (Luke 6:12-16)

Jesus spent an entire night alone in prayer; he did this because he needed that solitude to still the storms around him and to reconnect with his heavenly Father. He needed to get rid of all the background noise and the interference generated by his simply being in the midst of people. The controversy he generated, the atmosphere of threat and recrimination that surrounded his every word and his every move...all of this resulted in a deafening cacophony of noise and frantic activity. And to make matters even more complicated, Jesus had before him the important task of selecting the twelve apostles, the people who would accompany him throughout his ministry and beyond. His mind and his thoughts were heavy with the burden of expectation and threat; the responsibility that rested on his shoulders was enormous. And so Jesus retreated to the solitude and quietness of the mountain; there he would find no crowds anxious to follow his every word or to receive healing; there he would simply be alone with God the Father.

Even just a cursory glance at the Gospels will leave the reader in no doubt that Jesus frequently chose silence and solitude during his life and ministry. This is just one of many examples. And he did this proactively, not because he was tired of people – that was not part of his reasoning. He did not want to get away from the commotion and thronging crowds because he was an introvert; he loved being in the presence of people, being amongst them and ministering to their needs. Rather, Jesus used that time to seek God's will and therefore to be more effective in ministering to his people. During this time of reflection he opened his ears and his heart, ready to imbibe the wisdom and the love that flowed naturally from God the Father; he sought to hear the Father's voice and to bask in his presence. And that, in essence, was what I sensed God calling me to do. But I didn't know how, so I turned to those who did.

Looming large on the spiritual horizon was a seventh century Syrian monk, Isaac of Nineveh, who explained what happens when we practice silence:

Silence will illuminate you in God . . . and deliver you from phantoms of ignorance. Silence will unite you to God . . . In the beginning we have to force ourselves to be silent. But then from our very silence is born something that draws us into deeper silence.⁷

When Isaac of Nineveh writes that we often have to force ourselves to be silent, I think he makes an important point. Silence is often not easy; when we are not used to it, it can be frightening and unsettling. It forces us to confront our innermost selves with all of our insecurities and fears. But the greater prize – realising that we are in God's presence – that is what awaits us when we can sweep away those barriers and move from 'negative' to 'positive' silence. Thomas Merton, put it like this:

Silence has many dimensions. It can be a regression and an escape, a loss of self, or it can be presence, awareness, unification, self-discovery. Negative silence blurs and confuses our identity, and we lapse into daydreams or diffuse anxieties. Positive silence pulls us together and makes us realize who we are, who we might be, and the distance between these two.⁸

As someone who is steeped in the tradition of Presbyterianism, I often think that I am not too well acquainted with silence! Within the Presbyterian tradition there is a strong focus in worship on the word of God and the sermon as central to the experience. And it is right that this should be the case; through reading or hearing God speak to us we can enter into his presence and discern his will for us

in our lives. But perhaps we also need to re-discover the gift of silence? In that sense, I am cognizant of the fact that I have much to learn from my brothers and sisters from other Christian traditions – the contemplatives and the Quakers for example. We can even look to those of other faiths – in his book entitled *Holy Silence: The Gift of Quaker Spirituality*, J. Brent Brill in his survey of silence in religion wrote:

The faiths born in the East – Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism – have long cultivated an appreciation for silence. They believe silence is essential to spiritual life. They see silence as a mark of spiritual maturity. The Chinese scripture called the Tao Te Ching says, 'Those who know do not talk. Those who talk do not know.' Those revered as the holiest people in the East – gurus, bhikkhus, and Zen Masters – are people of few words. They speak little because they believe, as Gandhi said, that 'In the attitude of silence the soul finds the path in a clearer light, and what is elusive and deceptive resolves itself into crystal clearness'.⁹

Indeed. I understand now what the gift of silence and looking into the soul means. Despite the internal turmoil characteristic of depression, God is still there, waiting patiently in the midst of the storm.

Conclusion

Living a life of faith is always exciting, but there are times when depression and despair are very much part-and-parcel of that pilgrimage. When that time comes, wisdom abounds in scripture and throughout the plethora of ancient and contemporary sources; the experiential writer is always the most perceptive. That is where writers as diverse as Teresa of Avila, Thomas Merton and S.T. Georgiou come into their own – elucidating the beauty of silence in the midst of suffering and opening a glorious gateway to God.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oats, 1993), pp.17-18.
2. Ruth Burrows, *The Wisdom of Teresa of Avila* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1998), p.22.
3. Reproduced in Paul Rauschenbusch, *My Faith May be Doomed to Failure*.
<http://www.rauschenbusch.org/documents/paulraddress.html>.
4. S.T. Georgiou, *The Isle of Monte Cristo: Finding the Inner Treasure* (Toronto: Novalis Publishing, 2010), pp.169-170.
5. Lynn R. Szabo (ed), *In the Dark before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 2005), p.96.
6. Reproduced in:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Phoenix
7. Reproduced in Kenneth Leech,

True Prayer: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality (Norwich: Morehouse Publishing, 1995), p.58.

8. Thomas Merton, 'Creative Silence', *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Bulletin* 67, 2001. <http://monasticdialog.com/a.php?id=268>

9. J. Brent Brill, *Holy Silence* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2007), p.12.

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