

# Spiritual Accompaniment and the Mystery of Interiority

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## *Abstract*

Noticing, looking to one's interior is an avenue to consciousness. And this is living the spiritual life: consciousness of holy mystery. A friendship that is deep, mutual and that shares common values can be an anchor of good sense, a challenge when we have lost our way. Human authenticity is not some pure quality, some serene freedom from all oversights, all misunderstandings, and all sins. Rather it consists in a withdrawal from unauthenticity, and the withdrawal is never a permanent achievement. It is ever precarious, ever to be achieved afresh.

Murder mysteries are certainly not the ordinary domain of spirituality. Yet, PD James' novel *The Black Tower* presents a murder scene that led me to a very fruitful reflection on the nature of the spiritual life. Let me set the scene. While recovering from a serious operation, Adam Dalgliesh, Scotland Yard Detective Inspector, receives a letter from Canon Baddeley requesting that Adam come for a visit to offer some professional advice. Adam replies to the old man by postcard simply saying that he will come visit him on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October. Dalgliesh, whose father was an Anglican priest, knew Father Baddeley as a young boy, when the priest had come as a curate to Dalgliesh's father.

Eleven days have elapsed since Dalgliesh replied to the letter. He decides to go straight to the Canon's home in Toynton. Upon arriving

at Fr. Baddeley's cottage, Adam discovers a service sheet from Fr. Baddeley's funeral and realizes, to his great dismay, that the priest has died and been buried. The grieving detective takes a closer look at the Canon's belongings. Had the old man received his postcard? If so, why hadn't he telephoned? The detective begins looking for Father's diary and finds the same green exercise books that he had seen the man using over twenty-five years earlier. The sight of Fr. Baddeley's old black cloak and its musty ecclesiastical smell reminds Adam of a conversation which he had with the Canon about his diary when Adam was only ten years old:

"It's just an ordinary diary then, Father? It isn't about you spiritual life?"

"This is the spiritual life; the ordinary things one does from hour to hour."

Adam had asked with the egotism of the young.

"Only what you do?"

"No, just what I do. Do you remember what time the Mothers' Union met this afternoon? It was your mother's drawing-room this week. The time was different. I think."

"It was 2.45 p.m. instead of 3.00 p.m., Father. The Archdeacon wanted to get away early. But do you have to be accurate?"

Father Baddeley had seemed to ponder this question, briefly but seriously as if it were new to him and unexpectedly interesting.

"Oh, yes. I think so. I think so. Otherwise it would lose its point."

James continues: "The young Dalglish, to whom the point was already lost beyond ken, had wandered away to pursue his own more interesting and immediate concerns. 'The spiritual life' it was a phrase he had often heard on the lips of his father's more ultra-mundane parishioners although never on the Canon's own. He had occasionally tried to visualize this mysterious other existence. Was it lived at the same time as the ordinary regulated life of getting up, meal times, school, and holidays; or was it an existence on some other plane to which he and the uninitiated had no access but into which Father Baddeley could retreat at will? Either way it had surely little to do with this careful recording of daily trivia.

He picked up the last book and looked through it. Father Baddeley's system had not been changed. It was all here, two days to a page,

neatly ruled off. The times at which he had daily said morning prayer and even song; where he had walked and how long it had taken; the monthly trip by bus into Dorchester; the weekly trip to Wareham; his hours spent helping at Toynton Grange; odd treats baldly recorded; the methodical account of how he had disposed of every hour of his working day year after unremarkable year, documented with the meticulousness of a book-keeper.

“But this is the spiritual life; the ordinary things that one does from day to day.” Surely it couldn’t be as simple as that? (*The Black Tower*, 1975:27-28).

“Surely it couldn’t be as simple as that?” wrote P.D. James. Perhaps our living is a bit like the Canon’s - fidelity to duty, conscientiously lived “day after unremarkable day.” But isn’t there more to the spiritual life than that? What was it that made the Canon a remarkable man, a good man, a servant of the gospel?

What young Adam was too small to understand can be put into one word: *interiority*. The Canon was not just living a psychological existence. He was living an *inner life*, a contemplative life. And all that he noted and noticed in his daily travels in and about Toynton, as unremarkable as it seemed, was the arena of his experience of God.

The key to living the mystery (not necessarily the mystery book or thriller) is noticing. Noticing, looking to one’s interior is an avenue to consciousness. And this is living the spiritual life: consciousness of holy mystery.

Listen to this poem by the Welshman, R. S. Thomas, an Anglican priest, “The Bright Field”

I have seen the sun break through  
to illuminate a small field  
for a while, and gone my way  
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl  
of great price, the one field that had  
the treasure in it. I realize now  
that I must give all that I have  
to possess it. Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after  
an imagined past. It is the turning  
aside like Moses to the miracle  
of the lit bush, to a brightness  
that seemed as transitory as your youth  
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

The narrator recalls a scene when the sun breaks through a rather dull sky. It shines on a small field for a while. Then the narrator recalls leaving that sunlit field and forgetting about it in his hurry. At a later stage the realization comes that the sight of that bright field was really very precious image. The field held a treasure in it and yet he hurried away. Now, he says, I must give all I can to possess it. No, life is not hurrying to a future or yearning for the past. It is being caught in the moment - turning aside like Moses did to see the burning bush. Noticing the sun breaking through on the small field, noticing this brightness, though it disappears from view immediately, "you" whom the poet addresses, gain a glimpse of eternity.

Notice this glimpse of light. Notice the lit bush. Notice what it does to you. You are captivated by the Light. It is a treasure that you will give all to possess. Its fleeting brightness is enough to make you stop in your tracks.

*In our ministry of accompaniment, what captivates us? What makes us stop in our tracks?* It is good to reflect on these things because the pressure of the rat-race can rob us of our deepest desires. The insidious cycle of all work and no play, not only makes Jack dull, but dulls us too. It dulls our memory of God's graciousness, nearness and kindness. It dulls our sensitivity. It saps our energy. It keeps us from seeing the bright field in front of us. And it does not permit our supervisee or directee to have the best of our insights and good humor.

*How do we nourish our spiritual life? How do we stay captivated by that light?*

I have often thought over the years that I am actually a functioning atheist - saying my prayers, going to Mass, doing some good to other people, feeling bad when I don't, and often times living as if God were absent. What is it that happens? How do things become so routine that they lose their meaning? I'm sure this is a problem shared by nearly everyone. Whether it's God we're talking about or a spouse, a good friend, or a close relative, distancing happens. And this is the result of the mystery of our consciousness and its tides of dormancy and awakening. As a Christian, I ask the question: How can my consciousness become more authentically rooted in and influenced by the Word of God?

How can we be renewed in mind and spirit as Paul says in Romans 12:2? Michael Casey, the Australian Cistercian monk, uses the expression holy reading with particular reference to *lectio divina*. He contends that what makes the reading holy is the welcome that it receives in the believer's heart (Casey 1996). Holy reading, such as scripture, but also

biographies and journals can be resources that invite us into a gospel milieu. Both Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington have described *lectio divina* in their books. Taking the Word of God into our hands in a cycle of meditation, reflection, prayer and resting in the Word allows us to penetrate to the meaning of the sacred text and to prayer itself.

Casey's emphasis is on the attitude of deference and surrender to the Word and he reminds us that the Bible should be a good edition and that it ought to be respected, not scribbled in, 'as if to impose our own poor thoughts upon the sacred text.' The Word of God deserves great attention and deep reverence, a reverence commensurate with that given to the Blessed Sacrament. He quotes from the writings of St. Caesarius of Arles: "Brothers and sisters, here is a question for you: Which to you seems greater, the Word of God or the Body of Christ? If you want to give the right answer, you will reply that God's Word is not less than Christ's Body... One who listens negligently to God's Word is just as guilty as one who, through carelessness allows Christ's body to fall to the ground" (Casey 1996).

The Cistercian monk makes still another point: that we should not manipulate the Word of God, but accept the truth of what we read without thumbing through for a nicer passage. The scripture itself is not a 'nice milieu' as we see in the progression of the Lenten readings, for example. The milieu in which Jesus lived was threatening and cruel. The prophetic words of Jeremiah ring in our ears, "They have hatched plots against me." Indeed, the whole milieu of the scriptures is one in which we see the mystery of evil and human freedom played out against the backdrop of the goodness of God.

To find ourselves within a gospel milieu is to discover, sometimes in a shocking way, the depths of our own unbelief and our indifference to Jesus. To live within the gospel milieu is to keep trying to find the coin or the treasure, though we get tired, frustrated or bored. To live within the gospel milieu is to hear the words *forgiveness, trust, joy, and peace* when we are confronted with their opposites either within our own souls or within our families, communities, parishes, and our society. For Michael Casey the key to this kind of gradual transformation of consciousness is to approach the reading of scripture with an attitude of reverent passivity allowing the Word of God to work on us, as it is. There are other types of reading that Casey would consider under the rubric of holy reading. The criterion for their acceptability is whether or not they lead the reader to prayer. These books include biographies of holy people, those that offer encouragement in prayer, help in its difficulties, and support for our efforts at adoration.

### How can we sustain our capacity for the Infinite?

Echoing the ideas of Rahner and Augustine before him, Ron Rolheiser says, “Our spirit is restless because it’s divine and insatiable. We’re overcharged...We humans are infinite spirits in a finite situation (Rolheiser 2007). The thirst for God, says Rolheiser, can only be satisfied by “real religion” of incarnation and creation, of grace building on nature and not by the surrogate pseudo-religions that use the language of religion and the sacred, but do not lead believers beyond this world of ego-consciousness. Nor does the quasi-religion of an ideology or a good cause fully satisfy anyone.

### How can we tend the holy within us? How can our obsessions short-circuit our transcendent desires?

Recently, I was on a plane and as we neared our destination, the stewardess said, “Please turn off anything that begins with an I”. There is no doubt that we are obsessed with being connected: I-pods, I-pads, I-phones, laptops, notebooks, netbooks - all in the service of keeping us connected. Yet these very connections wear us out and often cause us *disconnection*. A single e-mail or text, even a twitter can cause untold worry and upset, at times even anger, or discouragement, a let-down, a disappointment. Inasmuch as we derive joy and pleasure from our many modes of communication, we derive equal parts sadness and dis-ease from communications gone wrong. And we cannot easily step away from the demands that our obsession with technology place on us.

In the system of thought of John of the Cross, the Spanish mystic of the sixteenth century, our deepest self, our soul hungers for knowledge and love of God. In the poem “Living Flame of Love” John of the Cross writes about wounding and healing:

Flame, alive, compelling,  
Yet tender past all telling,  
Reaching the secret centre of my soul!  
Since now evasion’s over,  
Finish your work, my Lover,  
Break the last thread, wound me and make me whole.

Burn that is for my healing!  
Wound of delight past feeling!  
Ah, gentle hand whose touch is a caress,  
Foretaste of haven conveying  
And every debt repaying:  
Slaying, you give me life for death’s distress.

O lamps of fire bright-burning  
With splendid brilliance, turning  
Deep caverns of my soul to pools of light!  
Once shadowed, dim, unknowing,  
Now their strange new-found glowing  
Gives warmth and radiance for my Love's delight.

Ah, gentle and so loving You awake within me, proving  
That you are there in secret and alone;  
Your fragrant breathing stills me,  
Your grace, your glory fills me  
So tenderly your love becomes my own.

I want to focus on the third stanza for a moment. The lamps of fire are the many attributes of God - wisdom, goodness, mercy, justice. These attributes are experienced by the person transformed by God. The fire from these lamps inflames the soul in a gentle, life-giving manner that John likens to the waters of life, satisfying the soul's thirst. Within us there are "deep caverns of feeling" which he identifies as intellect, memory, and will. Yet, when these caverns are temporarily satisfied with something finite, they are not aware of their vast capacity, the "depth of human desire" (Welch 1990).

By filling these caverns of feeling with the finite, people lose their thirst for the living water of the infinite. They settle for an humanistic reply to needs of their transcendental nature - whether it's the concept of "wellness," or the gadgets that begin with an "I" or ways of short-circuiting my deepest desires through addictions of any kind - whether it is food or drink, shopping and hoarding, gossiping or overworking, the wounds of an unhealed life context. Anything finite can quench the fire of the living flame, but "nothing can ever come between us and the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:38-39).

### **How can we remain authentic?**

This is certainly the purpose of spiritual direction and supervision. And it's also the domain of the *anamchara*, the Celtic term for a soul friendship. Soul friends do not depend on each other alone, but root their friendships in God (Sellner 1994). A friendship that is deep, mutual and that shares common values can be an anchor of good sense, a challenge when I have lost my way. Lonergan writes that "human authenticity is not some pure quality, some serene freedom from all oversights, all misunderstandings, and all sins. Rather it consists in a withdrawal from unauthenticity, and the withdrawal is never a permanent achievement. It is ever precarious, ever to be achieved afresh" (Lonergan 1971). And here's where we need a friend: at the moment when we want to run

from ourselves. We need the freedom to be who we are before God with our wounds, our unhealed life contexts.

### **What about our life of prayer? Where are we now? What do we wish we could say to God?**

Francis de Sales, in writing to one of his directees somewhere between 1605 and 1608 said: "So when you come before the Lord, talk to Him if you can; if you can't, just stay there, let yourself be seen, and don't try too hard to do anything else" (Wright & Power 1988). In the same vein, Brother Roger writes: "To come before him, with words or without, is to know where our hearts can find rest. It is to respond to him in poverty. Here is the secret incentive for a whole lifetime. Here is the risk of the Gospel. 'O Christ, even if sometimes I do not know anymore whether I love you or not, you know everything and you know that I love you'" (Roger 1990).

Perhaps we can take the words of Margaret Rizza's chant:

Let your beauty shine in me, Lord.  
Shine in my heart, my mind, my soul.  
Let your beauty shine in me, Lord.  
Shine and make me whole.

Again, we can make our home in the words of the scriptures and let the psalms express our true desires:

As a deer yearns for running streams, so I yearn for you, my God.

I thirst for God, the living God;  
When shall I go to see the face of God? (Ps 42:1)

O God you are my God for you I long,  
For you my soul is thirsting.  
My body pines for you,  
Like a dry, weary land without water. (Ps. 63).

We can echo the yearning found in Isaiah:

My soul yearns for you in the night, O God,  
My spirit within me longs for you (Isaiah 26:9a)

In the difficult work with our own shadow, we can find consolation from the words of this Taizé chant:

Lord, Jesus Christ, your light shines within us.  
Let not my doubts or my darkness speak to me.  
Lord, Jesus Christ, your light shines within us.  
Let my heart always welcome your love. (Taizé).

Or, when the circumstances of our lives - our own suffering or the sufferings of those whom we love - leave us without hope, we can take courage from these words:

Within our darkest night, you kindle a fire that never dies away,  
That never dies away.  
Within our darkest night, you kindle a fire that never dies  
away,  
Never dies away.

### Conclusion

In summary, tending the holy within is essential if we are to continue this great work of spiritual accompaniment. This is the spiritual life then: living our daily lives, unremarkable and ordinary as they may seem. It's as simple as that - all the while conscious that alive within our interior God tends the flame that will never die away, even within our darkest night.

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