

Learning Grace

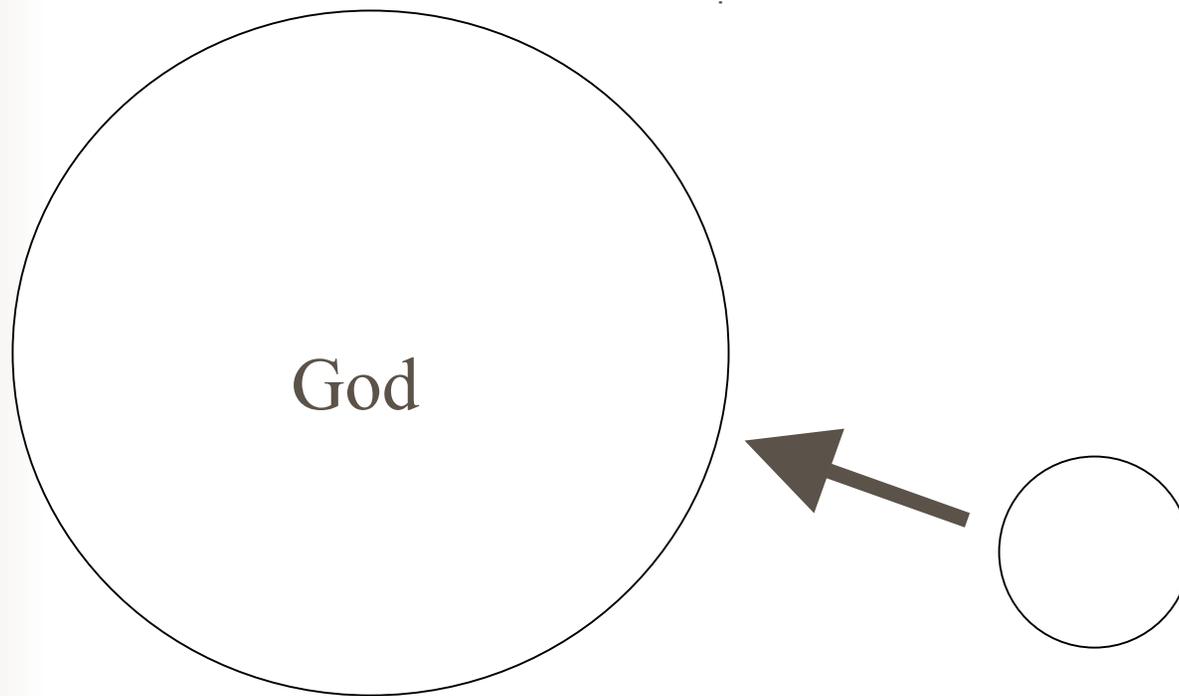
by living nakedly....

Irene Alexander May 2004



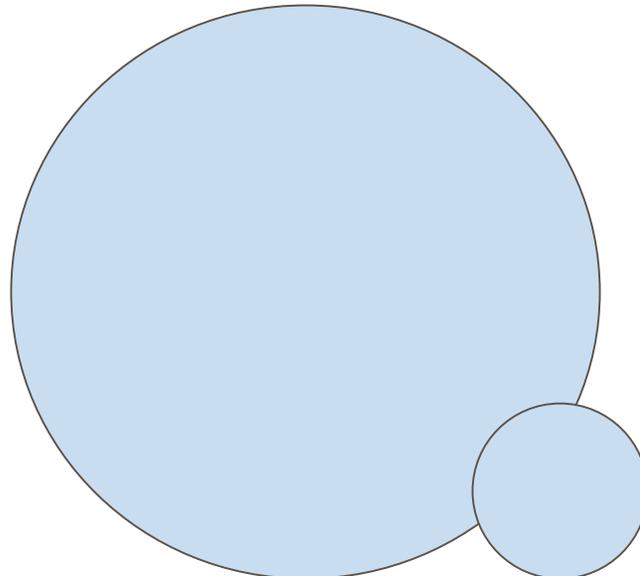
Once you accept the existence of God - however you define Him, however you explain your relationship with Him – then you are caught forever with His presence in the centre of all things. You are also caught with the fact that [humans] are creatures who walk in two worlds and trace upon the walls of their cave the wonders and the nightmare experiences of the spiritual pilgrimage. (West 1981, p 10).

“Their value depends on what they have, what they do, what others – especially significant providers, real or potential – think of them... This is the construct of the false self”
(Pennington 2000, p31).

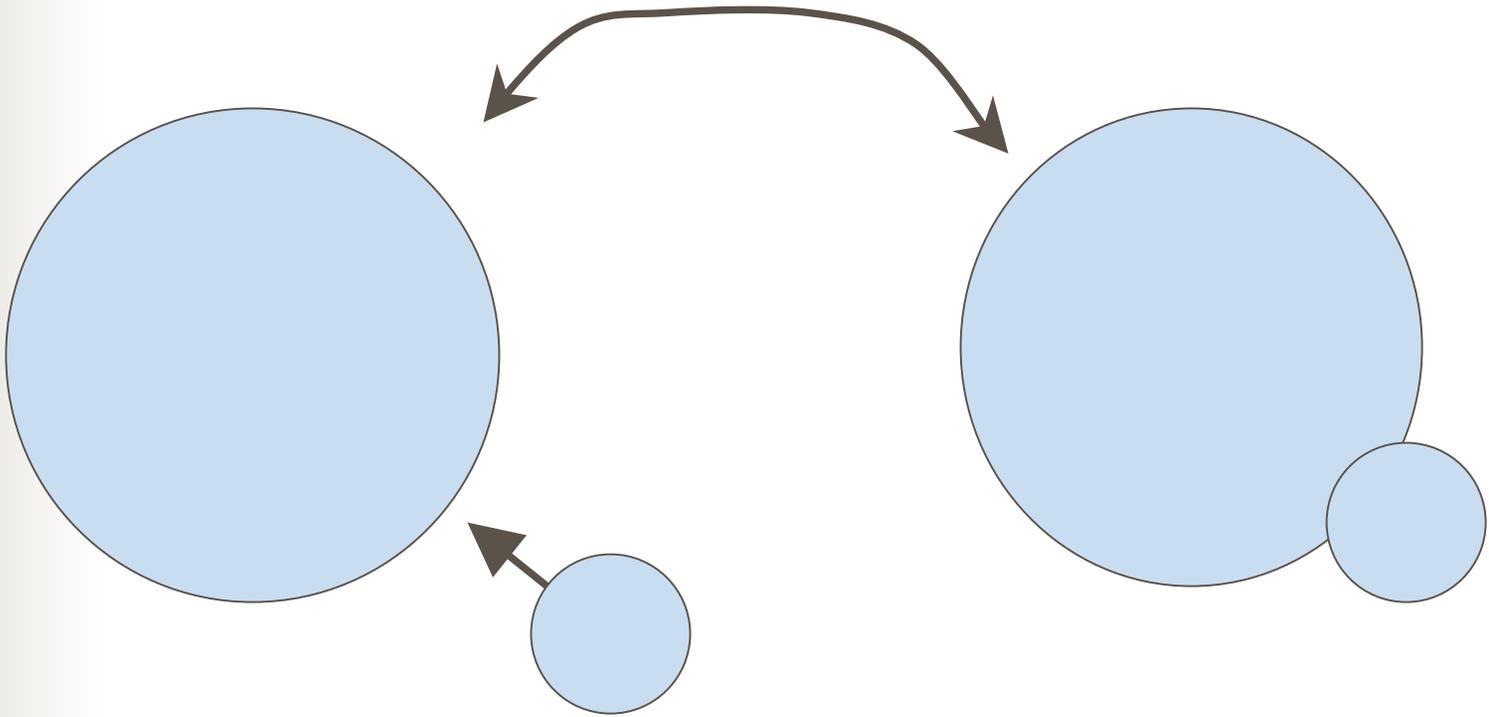




“One of the great experiences of life is that first experience of being in love and being loved. Of course our parents love us. They have to, or so it seems, and siblings, too. But the first time someone loves us for no other reason than that that person has in some way perceived our true beauty, our true loveliness, we float. We are ecstatic. For we have seen in the eyes of the lover something of our own true beauty. The only way we really see ourselves is when we see ourselves reflected back to us from the eyes of one who truly loves us” (p46).



True self



Luke 18

Jesus told the story “to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance” – the Pharisees – who stood in the temple and said I do this I do this.



Whereas, Jesus said it was “the taxman, not the other, who went home *made right* with God”. And in Luke 16:15: “You are the very ones who pass yourselves off as virtuous in people’s sight, but God knows your hearts.”

“God be with the mother. As she carried her child may she carry her soul. As her child was born may she give birth and life and form to her own, higher truth. As she nourished and protected her child, may she nourish and protect her inner life and her independence. For her soul shall be her most painful birth, her most difficult child, and the dearest sister to her other children.”

Leunig, M. (1990). The book of common prayer.



John O'Donohue “Our lives would be immeasurably enriched if we could but bring the same hospitality to meet the negative as we bring to the joyful and pleasurable...The negative is one of the closest friends of your destiny... You can only befriend the negative if you recognize that it is not destructive...One of your sacred duties is to exercise kindness towards [these qualities]. In a sense, you are called to be a loving parent to your delinquent qualities” (1997 p151).



Community requires the confession of brokenness. But how remarkable it is that in our culture brokenness must be “confessed.” We think of confession as an act that should be carried out in secret, in the darkness of the confessional, with the guarantee of professional priestly or psychiatric confidentiality. Yet the reality is that every human being is broken and vulnerable. How strange that we should ordinarily feel compelled to hide our wounds when we are all wounded! Community requires the ability to expose our wounds and weaknesses to our fellow creatures. It also requires the ability to be affected by the wounds of others. But even more important is the LOVE that arises among us when we share, both ways, our woundedness.

M. Scott Peck (1987). *The different drum*. New York: Simon and Schuster



kenosis = the self-emptying of God.

The heart of Christianity is the self-emptying, kenotic humility of God expressed in Jesus the Christ... At the heart of God's humility is this: God willingly is wounded ...a kenotic living God who is unceasingly self-outpouring, compassionate, and engaged with the creation.... God's inviolable vulnerability, God's unswerving commitment to suffer with and within the creation, to go to the heart of pain, to generate new life, hope, and joy out of the cry of dereliction, out of the pain to utter self-denudation, utter self-emptying, utter engaging love.

Ross (1988) *Pillars of Flame*



“Suppose the only God that exists is the descending God. Suppose the only way we can know God is to go down, to go to the bottom...If God is going down and we are going up, it is obvious that we are going in different directions. And we will not know him. We will be evading God and missing the whole purpose of our existence.(Cosby 1998, p. 31)

The descending God is one who serves, one who lets go of position and status and power, in order to touch the lives of those around him. “We have seen what Jesus was like. If we wish now to treat him as our God, we would have to conclude that our God does not want to be served by us, he wants to serve. (Nolan cited in Sims 1997 p. 16).



And now let the revolutionists of this age choose a creed from all the creeds and a god from all the gods of the world, carefully weighing all the gods of inevitable recurrence and of unalterable power. They will not find another god who has himself been in revolt.

Nay (the matter grows too difficult for human speech), but let the atheists themselves choose a god. They will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation; only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist.

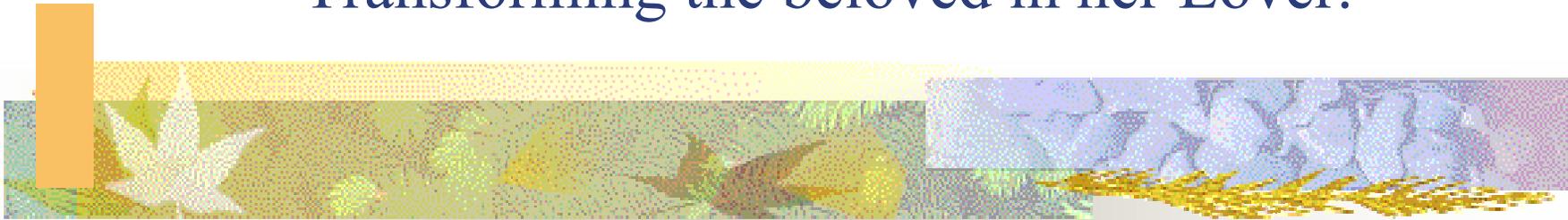
(Chesterton, G. K. (1908) *Orthodoxy*).

“Faith is not assent to doctrines or surrounding ourselves with props and propositions. It is trust that God – as Christ shows us – has been there before us, goes within us, **waits to find us beyond the edges of utter dark.** And, found by God, we become aware that God is closer to our being than we are”
(Ross 1988, p. 135).



“The pain of transformation is morbid [ie death-dealing] only if we choose it to be, only if we do not want to look beyond and through it. If only we allow, the pain itself is transformed and becomes Eucharist; and Eucharist deepens us until we burn with Love in God’s very heart. If we spend all our time trying to block out pain with illusion or to twist it to inflate our egos, we will stagnate; we will cause in ourselves the destructive pain of disintegration.”

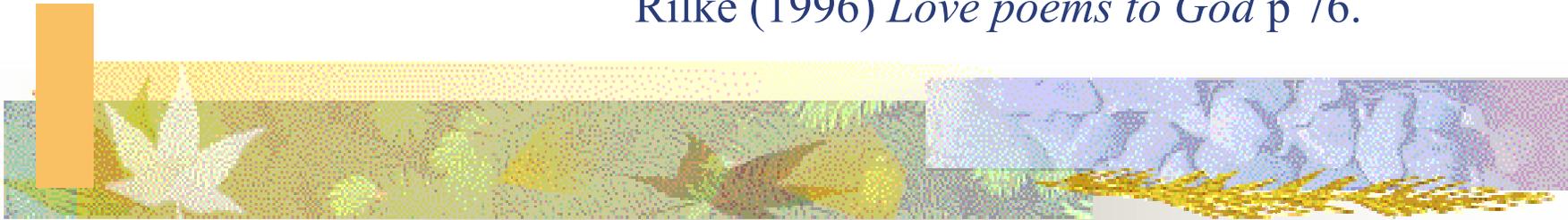
Oh guiding night!
O night more lovely than the dawn!
O night that has united
The Lover with His beloved,
Transforming the beloved in her Lover.



In *The Dark Night* St John of the Cross names the darkness, the absence of God's felt presence, as the very place that we will be united with the Beloved, and indeed transformed.

“Then suddenly you’re left all alone
With your body that can’t love you,
And your will that can’t save you.
But now, like a whispering in dark streets
Rumors of God run through your dark blood”

Rilke (1996) *Love poems to God* p 76.





Ruffing 2000, p 13

■ “I am convinced that many Christians never entertain their desires long enough to know what they really want. If we habitually suppress our wants [or habitually smother them with false comfort], we may not discover the true core of our longing that could lead us deeply into God.”

■ When was the last time you asked yourself what you really want? And how long did you allow yourself to entertain that longing? Thirty seconds, a couple of minutes? What inner or outer voices suggested that whatever it was, you ought not to be so foolish as to think it could be satisfied? At some point did you judge yourself wilful or selfish?



You have not danced so badly, my dear,
Trying to hold hands with the Beautiful One.
You have waltzed with great style,
My sweet, crushed angel,
To have ever neared God's Heart at all.

Our partner is notoriously difficult to follow,
And even His best musicians are not always easy to hear.
So what if the music has stopped for a while.
So what if the price of admission to the Divine is out of reach tonight.
So what, my dear, if you do not have the ante to gamble for Real
Love.
The mind and the body are famous, For holding the heart to ransom,
But [I] know the Beloved's eternal habits.
Have patience, for he will not be able to resist your longing for long.

You have not danced so badly, my dear,
Trying to kiss the Beautiful One.
You have actually waltzed with tremendous style,
O my sweet, O my sweet, crushed angel

■ *Hafiz – 14th century. Trans. Ladinsky (1996) p131.*



This movement of the Mystery towards us forms the core meaning of revelation in Christian faith.. God awakens us to this divine-human love affair and initiates in us the search for the Divine Beloved.

No matter how confusedly we interpret this experience, no matter how many mistakes we make along the way, no matter how often this love for the Divine Beloved gets displaced onto other loves or other objects of desire, God continues to solicit and elicit our love.

As Sebastian Moore says “ All desire [is] solicitation by the mystery we are in...all human loves contribute to our capacity for this divine-human intimacy.”

(Ruffing 2000, p106)

Your life will have a kind of perfection, although you will not be a saint. The perfection will consist in this: you will be very weak and you will make many mistakes; you will be awkward, for you will be poor in spirit and hunger and thirst for justice. You will not be perfect, but you will love. This is the gate and the way. There is nothing greater than love. There is nothing more true than love, nothing more real. So let us hand our lives over to love and seal the bond of love.



Arnold. E. (1977) *Salt and Light* East Sussex: Plough



One day Saint Francis and Brother Leo were walking down the road.

Noticing that Leo was depressed, Francis turned and asked: "Leo, do you know what it means to be pure of heart?"

"Of course. It means to have no sins, faults or weaknesses to reproach myself for."

"Ah," said Francis, "now I understand why you're sad. We will always have something to reproach ourselves for."

"Right," said Leo. "That's why I despair of ever arriving at purity of heart."

"Leo, listen carefully to me. Don't be so preoccupied with the purity of your heart. Turn and look at Jesus. Admire him. Rejoice that he is what he is - your Brother, your Friend, your Lord and Savior. That, little brother, is what it means to be pure of heart. And once you've turned to Jesus, don't turn back and look at yourself. Don't wonder where you stand with him. The sadness of not being perfect, the discovery that you really are sinful, is a feeling much too human, even borders on idolatry. Focus your vision outside yourself on the beauty, graciousness and compassion of Jesus Christ. The pure of heart praise him from sunrise to sundown. Even when they feel broken, feeble, distracted, insecure and uncertain, they are able to release it into his peace. A heart like that is stripped and filled - stripped of self and filled with the fullness of God. It is enough that Jesus is Lord."



After a long pause, Leo said, "Still, Francis, the Lord demands our effort and fidelity."

"No doubt about that," replied Francis. "But holiness is not a personal achievement. It's an emptiness you discover in yourself. Instead of resenting it, you accept it and it becomes the free space where the Lord can create anew. To cry out, 'You alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord,' that is what it means to be pure of heart. And it doesn't come by your Herculean efforts and threadbare resolutions."

"Then how?" asked Leo.

"Simply hoard nothing of yourself; sweep the house clean. Sweep out even the attic, even the nagging painful consciousness of your past. Accept being shipwrecked. Renounce everything that is heavy, even the weight of your sins. See only the compassion, the infinite patience, and the tender love of Christ. Jesus is Lord. That suffices. Your guilt and reproach disappear into the nothingness of non-attention. You are no longer aware of yourself, like the sparrow aloft and free in the azure sky. Even the desire for holiness is transformed into a pure and simple desire for Jesus" (Manning 2001).



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