

A Tree Full of Monkeys (Fr. John Garvey)

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Moses taking of his sandals

In the earliest years of Christian teaching, dogma was proclaimed only when a denial of something (Jesus' humanity or his divinity, for example) made it necessary. The articulated doctrine of the Trinity emerged slowly, from the more important domain of silence into the lesser domain of words. Words, even at their best, are inadequate and prone to misunderstanding, leading to concepts and imaginary constructs that can get in the way of participation in the mystery.

We need words, but we need them to take us to the place where we realize their inadequacy. They point us in the right direction, but they are never sufficient.

In dealing with other religions—or for that matter with serious agnosticism—we should at once maintain fidelity to our deepest belief while realizing that our belief cannot exhaust or fully describe the mystery we are trying to point to. I believe that the fullness of what can be found in Christ shows us the relationship between creation and God in a way nothing else can. But as we sit together before the silence at the depth of everything made, I cannot say that a Buddhist or Jew or agnostic might not also be able to tell me something he or she has found there, something I need to hear and might never have been able to discover on my own.

Even in its inadequacy, however, language is an indicator of the reality of the spiritual. Language points to a world beyond the merely material and quantifiable. To have a word for something is a kind of miracle.

In “God’s Grandeur,” Gerard Manley Hopkins speaks of the things that get between us and a clearer sense of our true condition:

*And all is seared with trade; bleared,
smeared with toil;
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s
smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.*

When I read the poem I think of Moses being told to take off his sandals because he stands on holy ground, the point being: let nothing get between you and this, this being a crucial moment, a place, even the feeling at the soles of your feet.

This is a good argument for contemplative and meditative practice, seen not as something reserved for monks, nuns, and other people who are expected to pray seriously and meditate, but for all of us. It takes an effort to be clear about the moment we are in. It requires taking time—time a lot of people claim they don’t have; but they can surf the Web, read the Styles section of the New York Times, watch CSI: Des Moines (is that on yet?), etc. We need, through practice, to be made aware of what is wrong about ordinary waking consciousness, and it takes an effort to learn this.

Ordinary waking consciousness swarms, pops, bubbles up with reactions, opinions, lines of thought, and is generally swept along in this stream. It interests me that every serious religious practice encourages us to resist this swarming, while nearly

all our current practices (Twitter, Facebook, Blackberries, texting, etc.) encourage nearly constant distraction. I think of Ramakrishna's metaphor for the way the mind is: a tree full of monkeys jumping from branch to branch. Or I think of the fathers and mothers of the desert. They compare the way our minds ordinarily work to a hive swarming with bees, or a small pool of stirred-up muddy water that needs time to settle. It says something strange about our culture that even the value of stillness now needs to be explained.

Most churches, most places of worship, ignore this. Morality and "our teaching" (whatever that may be) are pushed, at the expense of how we absorb, or fail to absorb, anything at all.

Our understandable inclination to follow ideas and currents of thought that appeal to us is something almost no religious community is willing to contend with seriously; but it matters, especially at a time when distraction and ideological reinforcement matter more to the culture than sober clarity does. This inattention disrupts our lives at every level, religious, political, and aesthetic. Serious prayer, in the form of prayer of the heart (the repetition of the name of Jesus, in one of several forms, done with attention over a period of time) or serious meditation (sitting still, quietly, not following the scramble), or simply spending lots of time in silence can reveal this—can begin to make us feel what's directly underfoot. Prayer, meditation, and silence can begin to help us understand where we really are, in the presence of the sacred, before the burning bush, before a God who says "I will be what I will be." It's a beginning.

By Fr. John Garvey

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