

BEST CATHOLIC SPIRITUALITY WRITING

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25

INSPIRING ESSAYS

FROM THE EDITORS OF THE **NATIONAL CATHOLIC** **REPORTER**
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We hear God with the same ear God hears us

By Michael Leach

[This essay appeared in the Jan. 4-17, 2013 edition of the National Catholic Reporter.]

“Be still and know that I am God!” (Psalm 46:11).

Growing up Catholic nobody taught me to listen to God. Parents and teachers taught me to talk to God. They said prayer was praising God, telling him you love him or you're sorry, asking God for something and then thanking him whether you got it or not. The only person who suggested that prayer was listening to God was my Uncle Barney, who was a Protestant, and I didn't pay attention to him because he was Protestant, what did he know?

In the seminary our spiritual directors taught us about meditation and contemplation, the latter a gift of wordless prayer reserved for mystics and saints whose palms bleed, so forget about it. They trained us to meditate by thinking about a scripture or imagining ourselves in Jesus's time but they never taught us to be still and experience the love of God that's here and now. Our first spiritual director, Fr. Skippy Krost, was a contemporary of St. Ignatius. (He dragged his right leg as he swept down the aisle of the chapel each night, and thus in their charity generations of seminarians had dubbed him Skippy.) I dreaded when Skippy would have us close our eyes and clench our foreheads into fists and imagine looking up at the foot of the cross with all our might. The purpose was to feel Jesus' blood falling on our heads and burning our eyes, reminding us of how much we made him suffer for our sins. That was one of our meditations before trying to go to sleep.

Fortunately, once a year we had a five-day silent Ignatian retreat. How peaceful it was to walk around the lake with the encouragement to “listen for God” and “find God in all things.” Suddenly, the monkey brain would stop chattering and you'd stop in your tracks and know what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins knew: “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.” Somehow, if only for a moment, everything was where it was supposed to be. It was moments like that that stanch the bleeding.

Vinita Hampton Wright in her book *Days of Deepening Friendship* encourages everyone to “spend a few moments each day quietly listening for God. Don't say anything or ask for anything. Or if you do ask for something, may it be, ‘God, help me tune in to your voice.’”

It's taken me a lifetime to appreciate that prayer is not about pretending to be in the past or asking about the future but about being awake and aware in the presence of God. Slowly, yearly, through a little bit of wisdom and a lot of suffering, I am coming to realize that the most beneficial prayer is listening.

Listening to “the still, small voice” that is “not in the wind, not in the earthquake, and not in the fire” (1 Kings 9:11-12) but in our very being.

God is talking to us all the time but we're either too busy talking to God or obsessing on our own thoughts to have “ears to hear” God's soothing voice (Mark 4:9). I have spent a major portion of my life thinking about what other people are thinking about me, and feeling guilty about anything related to being alive. And all that time God has been saying to me, gently, softly, persistently, “I don't want to kill you, I want to heal you, give you

peace, assurance and joy.”

When I meditate now, here is how I meditate: I sit straight and watch my thoughts without evaluating them. I can do that for up to two seconds at a time now. So when that falls apart, I just ask God a question, and listen for the answer. The question I ask the most is, “What do you want me to know, God?” And the answer is invariably the same: “I am here for you.”

If “we see God with the same eye that God sees us,” as the mystic Meister Eckhart says, then it must be also true that we hear God with the same ear God hears us.

“I am here for you!”

God is here for me, and I am here for God. It’s like walking around St. Mary’s Lake all over again.

[Michael Leach is editor of Soul Seeing and editor at large of Orbis Books.]

Beyond this time and this space, God has not abandoned us

By Melissa Musick Nussbaum



Illustration by Margaret Scott

[This essay appeared in the Jan. 4-17, 2013 edition of the National Catholic Reporter.]

I was talking to a young friend about prayer. She said, “I don’t believe that petitionary prayers are answered.”

She began to talk about recent deaths: two mothers whose toddler sons had died, a friend who recently died from cancer. She said of the mother of one toddler, “She went to daily Mass. Her whole life was prayer. She can’t bear to enter a church now.”

She spoke of her friend’s mother, a woman who has now buried her husband and her only son, all within a period of months. She said, “J’s mother is a faithful woman, a holy woman. She may be the best woman I know. She prayed very specifically. She asked God to heal J. And if J had to die, she asked that he might be spared terrible suffering at the end. But he did die. And he did suffer. It wasn’t an easy death. He struggled. He suffocated. Her prayers weren’t answered.”

I told her the truth. I don’t understand the pain people bear. I don’t know why some are healed and others are not. I don’t know how people go on living with the loss of a beloved child. I don’t know how dying parents leave their beloved children.

I remember so many of us praying for my brother’s healing. His younger son was 3 months old when my brother’s cancer was diagnosed. His older son was 2 years old. They needed their father. My sister-in-law needed her husband. My brother wanted to live, to raise his children and watch them grow. He wanted to be a grandfather.

My brother fought to live. He died. At his funeral, a Franciscan sister said, “I have one question I want answered when I stand before God. I want to ask why we pray for healings and healing is not granted. I want to know.”

I wonder, too. And yet, even so, I believe that every prayer — every prayer — is

answered. I told my young friend that, as well.

“How can you say such a thing?” she asked. “Where’s the evidence?”

As we talked, her infant son played at our feet. I said, “T cries when you leave the room. He doesn’t whimper or protest. He wails. He has no concept of ‘the rest of the house’ or ‘past’ or ‘future.’ He’s learning those concepts, but, right now, all he knows is here, this room, and that when you leave this room, you are gone. Disappeared. Vanished from the Earth. And he mourns. He grieves. He’s not being dramatic, or trying to get your attention. He’s bereft. His mother is no more.”

I said, “But you know that you haven’t abandoned him. You know you have just gone around the corner and that you are coming right back. You’re probably going to the other room to get a diaper or to do something to help him, but he only knows he’s been left behind. You know where you are going and where you are; you know that every action you take is for his good. But he doesn’t know.”

I have difficulty seeing beyond this time and this space, too, but I am neither so foolish nor so proud as to believe that my tiny corner is the whole. In terms of the universe and of the great flow of time, past and future, I think we are closer to babies than to adults.

There are other rooms. Jesus spoke to his disciples of many rooms, and he spoke plainly. He said, “When I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”

This passage from John’s Gospel reminds me of nothing so much as the comforting tone of a mother to a crying baby, “I’m not leaving you. I won’t leave you. I’m just going to answer the door. Or to get you a bottle.”

Every mother knows the look of delighted wonder on the baby’s face when you do reappear, the smile on the mucus-smear, tear-stained face. And every mother knows the trust that develops. A 2-year old may go screaming, “Mama!” through the house, but at least she knows that her mother is there, somewhere, even if she can’t yet see her, even if the child hasn’t yet entered the room where she can be found.

It’s the reason peek-a-boo is such an important game for babies.

Sometimes I think prayer for us is like peek-a-boo. We have moments when the light is restored, when we glimpse the beloved face. They are moments, but they build our trust. We cling to these moments when we are plunged into darkness.

Jesus tells his disciples, “If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”

That is the language of one who is trusted, whose trust has been earned. It is the language of a good father, whose children know that he will do as he promises.

“Didn’t I say I would come back?” we say to a child as we take her from the babysitter.

This is not pious talk. This is practice. Somewhere in one of the many rooms, good work is being done: laundry and cooking and cleaning and writing and singing. Somewhere, in one of the many rooms, bricks are being laid, weeds pulled and land cleared.

I cannot see it, but I trust the One who told me I would not be left orphaned. And I have

those moments when I have seen the face of my Beloved.

Somewhere, in one of the many rooms, God is working, answering our prayers for healing and wholeness, our prayers to be re-membered. Somewhere, in one of the many rooms, the world is being put to rights.

I cannot see my brother. I want to see him. I want to talk with him. I want to see him hold his grandchildren and kiss his wife and sons.

I do not want to have my belief tested anymore than it has already been tested, because I know my words and my beliefs do not take away the pain. T will not be comforted when his mother leaves the room. The grief is real. It is an ache. It is a hole opened in his very flesh. The only relief comes when he sees his mother's face again and feels his mother's arms about him.

I know we must wait. While we wait, we look for the other rooms. We explore. We search. And like children mimicking our parents, we work, too, to put the world to rights.

[NCR columnist Melissa Musick Nussbaum can be found online at NCRonline.org/blogs/my-table-spread and thecatholiccatalogue.com.]

Cops, cons and grace

I volunteer so that I can keep breathing and keep believing

By Brian Cahill



A view of the front tower of the San Quentin State Prison in California (Photo: Newscom/EPA/John G. Mabanglo)

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In my retirement I spend most of my time writing. I have written a few pieces about the failed leadership of our church, but most of my writing is about my oldest son, a police officer who took his life four years ago. I have learned about cops and suicide, and I have learned about pain and grace. I try to write four days a week, but on Tuesdays I don't write. I volunteer.

I spend part of each Tuesday at the San Francisco Police Department doing suicide prevention training. For the last year I have been speaking to 25 cops every week who are required to go through 40 hours of advanced officer training every two years. Two hours are devoted to behavioral health issues, including alcoholism, substance abuse, marital issues, depression and suicide. I am given 30 minutes to tell these officers about my son and how he lost his way, about the high rate of police suicide, and about current research in this area. I tell them that if this can happen to my son, it can happen to any officer. I remind them that the very things that make them effective and safe on the street can destroy them in their personal life, and that asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength. I think they are listening, first because they respect me for doing this, and second because SFPD lost three officers to suicide in 2010. A number of officers have told me that I have helped them.

When I finish the training and I am back in my car, I usually fall apart because I have not been giving an academic lecture, but rather talking about the suicide of my son, my firstborn, my rock. I sit in my car revisiting the horror of four years ago. And yet at the same time, because I do this training to honor my son and hopefully to help other cops, I feel God's grace working in me, not eliminating the pain, but allowing me to feel some satisfaction and a sense that life is still worth living. I am always amazed at the intimate, symbiotic and still for me, mysterious relationship between pain and grace.

When I leave the police department I drive over the Golden Gate Bridge to San Quentin State Prison in Marin County. Every Tuesday night for two hours I co-lead a spirituality group with 18 inmates. I have been coming into San Quentin for more than seven years as a volunteer, going to Mass with the men on Sundays and being with a group of them on Tuesdays. I have never been in a place where God's presence is more tangible.

Most of the men I have come to know have been convicted of second-degree murder and were sentenced to 15 years to life. They have not received a sentence of life without the possibility of parole. On the contrary, their sentences specifically include the possibility of parole. Many of them were convicted in their teens or early 20s. According to the sentencing guidelines, if they fulfill all the criteria for rehabilitation, they could be paroled in 12 to 15 years. Most of the men I know in this situation have served more than 20 years, and in some cases more than 30 years, because parole boards and governors have been politically reluctant to release them. Unlike fixed-term prisoners, where the recidivism rate is 70 percent, the recidivism rate for these inmates when they are released is 1 percent.

The men I have come to know, these "lifers," are men of deep spirituality, full of insight and remorse for the crimes they have committed and the great harm and pain they brought to others. They are completely rehabilitated and qualified and capable of returning to the free community. In many cases when they get out, they will serve others.

Should they have been held accountable and punished for their crime? Absolutely, but they have done their time and then some. They are not the same men they were when they did their crime. We need to see them and know them for who they are now, not who they were 20 or 30 years ago. We need to see them as living witnesses to the transforming power of faith. If we are followers of Jesus Christ, then we believe in forgiveness and redemption, and we need to live that belief.

During our Tuesday night sessions, based on the topic selected, we start with a brief Scripture reading. Topics have included forgiveness, perseverance, empathy, spiritual dry spells and how grace manifests itself in prison. The guys know about my son and they pray for him each year at Mass on the anniversary of his death. One night after the concluding prayer, one of the newer members of the group who had only just learned about my son came up to me, gave me a hug and said, "You know, he is with God."

For a few weeks we covered those psalms that refer to God as our "rock." A very thoughtful lifer who has been in prison a long time recounted the years he spent in the special housing unit at Pelican Bay State Prison, and told us that reading those psalms and holding on to the thought that God was his rock allowed him to survive that terrible time.

For another few sessions we discussed Mathew 25, "What you did for the least of my brothers you did for me." Each inmate shared his thoughts on the meaning of the passage and how it would apply in prison. At the end of the last session, one very tough, but very wise lifer said, "I think it means if you screw over your brother, you are screwing over God."

Usually when I come into San Quentin on Tuesday, I am tired, depressed from thinking about my son, and feeling sorry for myself. Almost always when I leave at the end of the session, I'm grateful that I get to walk out of that place and I realize that I should stop whining. I am in awe at the faith, insight and spiritual journey of these men, who in their

pain, isolation and suffering are closer to God than most people I know on the outside. And I know that God's grace, not always obvious, is flowing inside those walls, and it also touches those of us who are privileged to come in there once in a while.

When I first started coming into San Quentin, I would talk about it with my son who wasn't sure he approved. I agreed with him that there are some individuals in prison who need to be there, but when I told him who these men were and how they were unjustly serving time far beyond their intended sentence, he gave me his blessing. Now when I get home late each Tuesday evening, I can say that I have honored my son, covered both ends of the criminal justice system, and experienced tangible signs of God's grace in both those worlds.

The secret of volunteer work is that it is a very selfish and rewarding activity. I do this for others, but if I'm honest, I do it so I can keep breathing, I do it so I can keep believing. I do it so I can experience God's grace.

[Brian Cahill is the former executive director of San Francisco Catholic Charities.]

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