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EXPLORING THE PROCESS OF MY SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Journey through the darkness of faith and "letting go"

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ABSTRACT

Our journey to God really is one of being stripped down and approaching in our vulnerability and weakness, in our disgrace (lack of grace). The important thing to understand is that, when we feel "in control" we are inevitably putting up barriers, making it more difficult for us to be aware of graciousness of God. It is when we are conscious of our own shortcomings and fragility, not a morbid self-pitying way but consciously acknowledging the totality of our personality that we tend to be mostly receptive to the promptings and presence of God's spirit. This is a personal account of one such journey.

INTRODUCTION -- SETTING OF MY SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Under the guidance of our spiritual *sensei*, Dr. Chris Brown, and in the company of my friend and brother, Rob Jones, we spent a *Reflective Day* at Chris' quiet little retreat place in Caloundra. I found the surroundings quite comfortable and Chris and Marilyn incredibly hospitable; they made us feel right at home from the moment we arrived. The entire day had been graciously planned for us, and our participation was the only thing asked of us (as every other detail had been meticulously catered for). The couple literally oozed "spaciousness"; so much so, that by the end of the day I didn't want to part their company.

Although the entire day was planned out, Chris made it clear that our time was our own to do with what we pleased; and then offered individual 'sessions' to personally sit with us to explore any themes that might emerge out of the *lectio divina*. Chris' narrative approach to spiritual direction tends to engage the directee "... in a process of self-understanding in light of his experience of God" and it was evident to me that Chris follows "... a hermeneutical process, namely, understanding the directee's account of his life story and experience of God." (Ruffing, 1989, 45)

EXPLORING THE PROCESS

Chris suggested a quasi-structured program following four simple movements (themes) that would offer us direction, guidance, and "entry points" into our personal "descent journey": (1) *separation* from what occupies us, (2) "*letting go*" of that which occupies us, (3) having the time (and sacred space) to "*hide our life with Christ in God*", and finally (4) find a *celebratory word*, metaphor or symbol to provide us with a re-entry into everyday existence. The first thing I noticed was this huge knot in my shoulders and neck muscles from the night before, and the chronic headache I arrived with. As we were ushered into the first movement of separation (through quiet, reflective music), I began noticing the tensions in my body draining away, and my mind gradually clearing from its previous chaotic, cluttered state.

Chris prefers a contemplative stance, using *lectio divina*, reflecting on passages from John 12: 23-28. On first blush, these scriptures offer up many rich metaphors like: death; letting go; burial, and abiding. I struggled to hold mental gyrations at bay, while seeking to "quiet my soul".

SIGNIFICANT THEMES AND BLOCKAGES

Aside from the four significant themes already mentioned, other sub-themes emerged: (a) 'releasing' [along with dying/"letting go"], imagined like a stone dropping into a still, motionless pond – juxtaposed to the "storm-tossed" imagery revealed in John 12:27, and; (b) 'His giving and our receiving' [along with "hiding our life with Christ"] seen as the peace/joy I received from Him as a child (and adult), perched atop my favourite fallen log (my favourite place of respite) near my family's home juxtaposed to what Christ experienced on the Cross at Calvary.

Blockages took several forms: first and foremost, unresolved pain and past hurts and my many feeble attempts to suppress these created blockages, as I began "dancing with my shadow". Like unwanted apparitions, head *versus* heart tensions (a form of dualism) waged war on my soul. On the one hand, my deep desire to engage with my God with all my heart (soul) was held in tension with the other hand... paying homage through the pursuit of knowing Him in my head. This tension created a blockage to descending. According to Riso (1990, 146) as an "average Type Five" on the Enneagram, what really counts for me is "...the life of the mind, the excitement of pursuing and possessing knowledge..." This then manifests into the "classic tension between introverted honouring and anointing and extroverted worship..." (Goldsmith, 1997, 99) The tension intensified when I tried turning away from rationality (intellect and reflected upon experiences) and instead sought to focus upon "the still small voice" – the inner conviction which takes over from the demands of the "ought to's" in my life. I imagined doing this as a conscious process of "casting off the mind", but this only served to promote further performance anxieties.

INITIAL RESISTENCES

I knew engagement wasn't even likely unless I sat silently with the "words/phrases of significance" from the John passage: these for me were, "*buried*", "*reckless in your love*", "*follow me*", "*right now I am storm-tossed*" and the most significant, "*...this is why I came*". As I let my imagination run wild, pregnant with anticipation, I found my natural inclination to be toward a dominant *kataphatic* orientation; seeking "deeper realization of God [and Self] through visions, feelings, imagery, significant words and other symbolic forms of expression." (May, 1982, 10)

To try and overcome my "fear of dark places", I immediately turned to artistic expression; finding solace in rendering my experiences. I've always held a strange fascination with my propensity for using art and poetry to aid me on my spiritual journey. Forced to survive within a dark cavern most of my days, I now wished to encounter God without knowing all the right words

or being able to name all of my feelings, emotions and body sensations. Maybe this is my way of vomiting up my anguish? In either case, it has become for me the most profound way of “side-stepping” my imperial ego in order to go “in & down” into the very core of my existence. I’m reminded by Dr. Pokea (2006, 2) that the “descent into darkness” always relinquishes – “All duality perpetrated by the ego is being dissolved and disintegrated during this most painful emptying process. Out of this lonely internal battle deep within, begins to flow the wisdom of living... free of the previous ego’s distortion that everything you do must be rewarded.” My stubborn self-reliance and strong ego has never allowed me to descend into my own darkness, my own despair, my own tears, my own losses, and my own emptiness. Instinct tells me it’s the only way to meet with the divine Other.

Once the contemplative stance found me, I began noticing yet another resistance welling up – the resistance to just “let go” and let it have me. Maybe desires to seek what May (1982, 11) refers to as “a more substantial experience, a sensate assurance of [my] relationship with the divine... through the usual [mental] imagery and thoughts” vied for supremacy; and so the thought of moving into a more *apophatic* orientation actually struck terror in my heart. Or maybe my resistance to ‘just be’ relates more to my insecurities; and my continual need to control, fix and explain happenings in my life. As I wondered this, I began to thirst for an ability to pass through a number of kataphatic phases, only to finally achieve a full, meaningful apophatic experience. Then, inexplicably, I was reminded of Johns’ insightful words “unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never more than a grain of wheat... if any of you wants to serve me, then follow me”. My heart said descending into darkness has already been taken by Jesus (before and after the Cross). In seeking & following Him, we make our own descent into darkness. Maybe there is encouragement to look further into our dark caverns because it “can become luminous with the hidden presence of the Lord, for whom no darkness is impenetrably dark...” (Mogabgab, 2002, 3)

THE “CLOUD OF THE UNKNOWNING”

The “cloud of unknowing” formed as I began movement into the “dying” theme, which seemed almost void of the divine. As this cloud thickened, the truism “descending hearts can often be broken open, and sanity hangs by a thread” became a reality. People often speak of experiences of free-falling, spinning, totally out of control down a bottomless black hole. It took the necessary leap of faith and finally “let go”: symbolically drawing my notions on black pieces of paper – as I did, a frightening notion enveloped me. My mind was flooded with fears: What do human hearts break into? Does some semblance of sanity return? Is there a safety net at the bottom of my black hole? I recalled Chris’ reassuring instruction “... *should you encounter fears, distractions or*

random thoughts, one need only to acknowledge them respectfully, address their urgency, and then simply let them pass by". I tried acknowledging the 'cloud' – and when I did I discovered something even more disturbing inside it: ANGER.

Fighting to repress this ominous feeling, knowing that it wanted to overwhelm me, an even greater storm cloud beset me. What would happen if I "lost it" and started venting my rage uncontrollably? What was this anger all about? What were my motives behind the rage? Like a clarion call, a quote by Rohr (2002, 2, 3) sprang to mind, helping me to recognize and comprehend the anger as disguised (denied) sadness:

IF YOU ARE NOT trained... to entrust and wait—you will run—or more likely you will "explain." *Anything to flee from this terrible "cloud of unknowing."* Few of us know how to stay in liminal space — on the threshold ...where the biblical God is always leading them... *It is the cauldron of transformation, the belly of Jonah's whale.*

It seems that the pain associated with liminal space is the only thing strong enough to destabilize the imperial ego and the cultural certitudes. When it comes, most of us will flee to quick formulas to avoid that destabilization. Suffering is... the most efficient means of transformation, and God makes full use of it whenever God can. Grief... has unparalleled power to open our eyes and open our heart... This is [true] liminal and transformative space. *Much of our understandable anger is actually disguised and denied sadness.* [Italics mine]

I didn't like what God was asking me to do... to open my heart and wait in vulnerability! Liminality caused me to question all my motives and struggle yet again with the tension this created – in Enneagram terms, tensions of "living in my head" as strong "type Five" with the fear of my wing "Six" only to face the energy of the "Eight". Often my fears prompt me to pull a Jonah routine, and "run" from engaging my shadow – yet I struggled not to run away. Why I wondered? Does this liminal space, the 'sacred (safe) place' offer me the freedom to explore my "cloud of the unknowing", the true cauldron of spiritual transformation?

Could it be that the 'storm amidst the stillness' threatened to break up my ship (my perceived world), and like Jonah, did God send this storm – something I couldn't control nor fix – so I'd finally realize how very much I needed Him? Was I ultimately left to confess that maybe God did send *this* storm at *this* time because of my insubordination; because of my hubris and pride, and because I insisted on searching in my own way, instead of obeying Him?

ENGAGEMENT AND GRIEVING

Engagement accompanied the shift in modality (rendering) and movement into grieving. Vivid images began to flood my mind; first an image of my ego and prideful nature, harbingers of my false self, which both needed to die, and then, almost immediately, another image, that of the Mount Saint Helen eruption. Rage plumed out of its funnel like breccia and tuff, initially as a violent release; then fuming anger was ejected upward, like steam from a fumarole. As I sketched the pictures from my “mind’s eye”, I began paying attention to the something outside myself, fully realizing what Barry & Connolly (1983, 49, 50) describe as the contemplative stance:

Contemplation leads to... transcendence – that is, of forgetfulness of self and... of everything else except the contemplated object... [and] helps a person to forget himself and his problems and look at the Lord. The help may begin with assistance in looking and listening at something other than himself – music... art... or anything else that will absorb him. Contemplation leads to an attitude of reverence and wonder before the Other... then all we can do is to ask Him to reveal himself and then wait for it to happen.

Sitting almost motionless in liminal space, the sadness welled up and emerged as tears... and I began experiencing the real pain of grieving. I grieved the loss of Self; as if my ‘true self’ were weeping huge tears for the ‘false self’ that died; in the same way Joseph of Arimathea must have wept over Jesus, upon taking his lifeless body down from the Cross (Mark 15:46). A conscious choice to use white paper signalled, for me, a change; perchance a lifting of the cloud? Scenes of an actual burial came to me, like Jesus’ body being laid in the tomb, essentially putting to rest my victim hood (from my “father wounding”), my ‘righteous’ rage from my sadness / unresolved grief and my insecurities & confusions. I had taken a significant step toward descent into the “dark night”; with its unparalleled powers to rend open my heart like the curtain of the Temple, so that Jesus could right a ‘new message’ upon it (Matt. 27:51).

Afterwards, a renewed sense of freedom emerged from images of Jesus, brandishing His sword of Truth (Eph. 6:17) severing all the chains that held me captive (Romans 6:6; 8:15, 21). I was mysteriously transported back to a time and place in my childhood’ sitting on an old cedar log where I often sought solace after experiencing injustice. Jesus was there with me, as always — sitting next to me with His arm around my shoulders, comforting me.

BREAKTHROUGH, RESOLUTION AND INTEGRATION

Breakthrough came as I sat with this last image, trembling at what might happen if I finally “let go” of my debris for the last time; and in complete vulnerability, finally surrendering it all to the Light of the World. Something Goldsmith (1997; 91, 94) wrote reminded me of what I needed to do:

In our journey to God, we slowly but inevitably become aware of the fact that, when we say that we want to offer our all to God, this must include those parts of our being which we have spent such a long-time burying, hiding, ignoring, and denying. Our journey to God really is one of being stripped down and approaching in our vulnerability and weakness, in our shyness, embarrassment, and disgrace (lack of grace). The important thing to understand is that, when we feel “in control” we are inevitably putting up barriers, making it more difficult for us to be aware of graciousness of God. It is when we are conscious of our own shortcomings and fragility, not a morbid self-pitying way but consciously acknowledging the totality of our personality that we tend to be mostly receptive to the promptings and presence of God’s spirit.

I chose to hide with Christ in God; to offer my all to Him – so I prayed, “Jesus, I’m ready to drop all my junk, abandon myself to You/in You, and seek You with all my heart; as You are my only hope. You died for me. You came back from the grave. You’ve shown me the way forward. I belong to you – I am yours.” Waiting expectantly, I found meandering towards Jonah’s prayer in the belly of the fish; “When my life [false self] was ebbing away, I remembered You, Lord, and my prayer rose to You ... salvation comes from You, o Lord.” My heart began to resonate with these words, and out of the echo came a voice, clear as any I’ve heard. It told me that the greatest storm of all has been going on in me for a long time now - this storm in my heart. Each time I’ve sought Jesus and invited Him into that stormy heart, He brought something wonderful with Him – his Sabbath rest. I began again sensing his Sabbath rest.

As this ‘rest’ enveloped my entire being (senses), I began imagining my mind linking with the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:11-16), and as it did, I envisioned my childhood “solace log” morphing into the Cross of Christ! In my vision, I began to look hard at it, just like in the refrains of the old hymn. As I fixated on each member, something compelled me to suspend all my patterns, as an intuitive thinker. That was really difficult for someone like me, who *prides* myself on the power of rational thought; and to trust reasonable, coherent, and intuitive approaches to life. Christ chose to reveal my greatest stumbling block of all: PRIDE. All my sophistications of thought, all the awareness of theories, all my intellectual and critical faculties, left me helpless and de-skilled in the face of the Cross of Christ; and I was left only to pour contempt on all my pride, that which was exposed and found sorely wanting.

Further ponderings brought added illumination... affording me the opportunity to explore the inner darkneses of my personae, helping to develop in me a spirituality that is **honest** and attempts to offer God

the **totality** of my being. As I journeyed “in & down”, I found myself not so controlling or judgmental as I often am. Instead, I sought opposite emotions and as I did, I felt myself struggling to integrate the personal and the transpersonal, the emotional and the sacred. Paradoxically, the Cross became the pathway to the very nature of humanity and the Trinity both; and to the essence of unity, integration and wholeness. The Cross stood outside of me, so I approached it via ‘outside’ processes. Yet, like everyone else, I’m called to internalise it, so it can become a part of my very nature... my very soul.

CONCLUSIONS: TRUTH IN PARADOX

Spiritual direction assisted me to explore my inner, foreign landscapes and by doing so, helped me to discover new strengths and a renewed realization of “the giftedness in my woundedness”. Surprisingly, “shadow” became “teacher” offering a more in-depth, greater recognition of God’s immanence. I was fearful; yet somehow, my fears held a curious expectancy for “something” bigger. Fears eventually gave way to deeper yearnings for more of God; the subsequent thirst left me parched like in a drought stricken land. Suffocating drought, ironically, instilled an even greater desire for a whole new, more satisfying and spiritual life. Feeling separated from God, I didn’t necessarily doubt my faith and I didn’t give up my belief in Jesus or his love. I still believed in and sought His forgiveness, His grace, and solace in His never failing arms.

Suffering causes me to search the Scriptures for even deeper truths; and often these deeper truths are clothed in paradox... paradoxes such as Jesus' teaching, "if you lose your life you will find it" (John 12:24) and Saul's Damascus road experience, that it's only when we're blind that we truly begin seeing (Acts 9:3-20). I’m beginning to understand and appreciate that suffering brings both satisfaction and tears of loss; which often bring even greater tears of joy. This understanding prompts me to wrestle harder, like Jacob, to encounter the ‘real’ Truth (Luke 1:4; John 1:14, 17; 3:33; 8:32; 14:6). In my experience, engaging with this ‘Truth’ (John 14:6) always leads towards lasting change.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING AND THE COUNSELLOR/COUNSELEE RELATIONSHIP

My propensity to “make things happen for the Other” is my worst nemesis. People-pleasing tendencies and my desires for people to come to know Jesus makes me want to push seekers in ways that may not benefit them. In my insecurities, I project my own wounding onto others and automatically seek the “one up” position – one of authority – of “the teacher”. Instead, I must subsume a servant role; one which never sees myself as the “wise man with all the answers” (knowledge) thereby preventing my EGO from vying for control. “Be-ing still” in His presence, without thought, in the absence of self-judgement is all that’s necessary to loosen attachments to the Self (ego).

In non-activity, simply “noticing what was in front of me”, I was able to abandon myself to God – holy abandonment. Williams (1981), describes this non-activity best: “... in the darkness, when we seem to have no knowledge of God at all, and the blankness when our language about God is taken from us, as those times when God seems least like God, our tradition helps us to know that God is actually breaking in, through the barriers of language and prayer, through the neat models that we have constructed to keep God safe and to harness God for our own use.” This is very much the companioning space I seek – simply “being with” and receiving the Divine Companion. “*Joining and journeying*” with the Other with the intention to just sit with them; in a loving relationship with the Real, the Creator and Sustainer of life.

The biggest lesson learned here was the essential truth “*it’s not about me!*” I can’t generate spiritual desire for transformation in others. I can’t “control” them as I’m used to controlling many other areas of my life. Certitudes don’t cut it here! Nor can I (or anyone else) control their shadows! And because I’m not ultimately in control of my shadow there is a greater opportunity for God to use it to break through into my life and offer the healing, peace and create the overwhelming desire for Him that only He can. Once again, Richard Rohr’s (2002, 23) words bring clarity:

Jesus knew how to create spiritual desire, how to foster a longing for God, how to make communion possible. He is a teacher of vulnerability, more than anything else. I am told that he only answered three out of 183 questions that were asked of him! He left us on the threshold where we are never in control. I am beginning to see where that leads: to *participation*.

You see, the opposite of control is not non-control or giving up. The opposite of control is actually participation. Without our easy answers—and we have none now—we collapse into a deeper participation with the whole roller coaster of life and death. The suffered cycle of death and resurrection is itself the great teacher, and will in the long run produce the only wisdom that will get us through this dark time. I would call it “the contemplative stance.”

Out of this clarity came the *celebratory* word sought: **PARTICIPATION...**