

FRAGMENTATION AND DIVINE TRANSFORMATION

Meditation on the Compost Heap

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FRAGMENTATION, crisis of identity and meaning, touch the lives of each one of us. Yet the potential for growth and transformation inherent in life's struggles and breakdowns evades most of us. We fail to realize that dark times condition us for God—that they invite us to a transformed identity through a deeper faith, hope and love. Fragmentation is the underside of solidarity-communion with one another and also with our planet earth. In fact, nature is a paradigm of the process of inner transformation which brings us to the more of ourselves. Something as simple as the compost heap, familiar to organic gardeners, powerfully symbolizes the reality of God at work in human life crisis.

Years ago I became interested in organic gardening. I soon discovered that essential to it is the compost heap. To build a compost pile, one gathers organic material like leaves, weeds, vegetable and fruit peelings—manure if available. These are heaped up with layers of soil. In a short time, heat is generated from within, and steam rises from this conglomeration of cast-offs. Gradually, the contents begin to break down. First the banana peels turn dark, then in time they become less and less recognizable, as do all the other ingredients of this fascinating heap of refuse. Occasionally turning over the pile with a pitchfork hastens the process. After a few months the pile settles, and before us is rich, dark earth. The compost ingredients have risen to new life! The best of organic nutrients are now available for use in the garden. In dying to its own life, the banana peels, and all the stuff of the compost heap, can now enrich other plant life. We who enjoy the fruits of the garden also benefit.

Often I look at the compost and marvel at its mystery. I do the same in autumn as I watch the leaves fall to the ground to decompose into new layers of top soil. Whenever I walk through wooded areas, I love to dig the toe of my shoe into the earth knowing that many an autumn's yield of leaves is beneath my feet nourishing the trees overhead. As year after year I meditate on the compost heap, increasingly it opens up its secret. It unfolds the reality of life, death and resurrection as the heart of creation's mystery. Everywhere it is proclaimed: as a seed buried in the ground sprouts a tree; as leaves in the forest decay into soft earth; as a caterpillar becomes a butterfly; and as an infant child is released from the body of a woman. Something always gives way, dies, so it appears, for new life to emerge.

Personal experiences of disintegration—illness, problems in a relationship, meaninglessness in a commitment—incline us to want to opt out. When dark times come our way, we quickly seek escape. Instead, as T. S. Eliot says,

We must be still and still moving
 Into another intensity
 For a further union, a deeper communion.¹

Solidarity, deeper communion, inevitably begin with a breakdown of what is. The comfortable, the familiar, what we cling to, give way. The seed in the ground, the breakdown of the compost, tell us that if we are to realize the more of life, we must also accept, even befriend, life's seeming diminishments.

In his writings, Eliade, the philosopher, demonstrates that the life, death, resurrection cycle is the deepest myth of all of reality.² With this perspective, the death/resurrection of Jesus Christ is not a phenomenon new to the universe but a divine, unique manifestation of what already is. The death/resurrection of Christ holds before us the truth of God's abiding presence and transforming activity in all of life. Particularly this is true in human relations. When we allow another to become part of ourselves in loving communion, inevitably we enter the process of dying and rising. Birth actually begins this universal process, which has its symbolic ending as our body decomposes in the earth and becomes sacred compost.

From the vantage of Christ's and our own death and resurrection, as well as nature's mysterious life cycle, we can conclude in

faith that all of life's troubles and crises contain an experience of God. God is present calling us forth to new life. What creates the difficult situation is analogous to the ingredients of the compost heap. Breakdowns in relationships, in job situations, in ministry call us to greater consciousness and self knowledge, to forgiveness and compassion toward ourselves and others, and therefore to deeper communion with God. Our temptation, especially in relationships, is to quit, to give up, to part company, right at the most creative moment of the relationship, that of breakdown. To stay with it as process, means bearing the stench of the smelly compost and so opening oneself to the creative energies of God's indwelling Spirit. This does not mean that we endure the unendurable, that we become a door mat or allow another to abuse and deaden our life potential. Some relationships or situations appear beyond redemption because of human limitations. But even in such instances, God is present in the midst of our pain with the offer of a fuller life.

To return to the image of the compost, bacteria generate heat and energy for its transformation. Similarly, the Spirit of God, like a divine fire, energizes us in our messiness that we too might realize transformation and the fullness of our potential. Difficult life experiences provide the stuff of inner transformation. We find this exemplified in the lives of the mystics. The ecstasy of communion with God has its comparable low points in trouble and suffering. A paradigm of the compost reality at work in human life is found in Teresa of Avila—mystic of sixteenth-century Spain.

Ups and downs characterize Teresa's life story. At times, she seems absorbed both in God and in the many troubles and conflicts of founding reformed monasteries. We get a special sense of this double-edged dynamic from the concluding chapters of each of Teresa's major writings. They indicate that her life's struggles become increasingly meaningful as she grows in her relationship with Christ. The *Life* ends with the following reflection:

Since I have been living in this house, the Lord has been pleased that all my desires converge upon this one desire. And He has given me a kind of sleep in life, or it almost always seems to me that I am dreaming what I see. I am aware in myself of neither happiness nor pain, however great. If certain things do give me either of these, the happiness or pain passes so quickly I marvel, and the feeling left me is that it was like a dream. This is the complete truth; for even though afterward I may want to rejoice

over that happiness or be sad about that pain, it is not in my power to do so; just as a prudent person is unable to delight in or grieve over a dream he has had (*Life* 40.22, p 284).³

Teresa elaborates her relationship with Christ through the use of images. Christ is in the centre of her soul like a brightly polished mirror through which she sees her Lord, herself and also human life in all its fragility (*Life* 40.5; 40.10). From this perspective happiness and pain seem relative, and each time the clock strikes Teresa is consoled; 'for at the passing away of that hour of life it seems to me I am drawing a little closer to the vision of God' (40.20). *The book of her life* ends with Teresa perceiving all of human reality through the prism of life beyond this life. But is this the entire picture?

The way of perfection, written only a year later, immediately shows Teresa enmeshed in conflicts and difficulties. So much so that *The way* concludes with Teresa's lengthy, impassioned prayer for deliverance. What follows is but a section of her ardent plea to Christ for deliverance from her many concerns.

Deliver me, Lord, from this shadow of death, deliver me from so many trials, deliver me from so many sufferings, deliver me from so many changes, from so many compliments that we are forced to receive while still living, from so many, many, many things that tire and weary me, and that would tire anyone reading this if I mentioned them all (42.2).

Yet, in the midst of these trials, Christ is ever present in Teresa's soul as an intimate friend. In a single mysterious way, she experiences him as a fire which enkindles love, and as living water, the flow of which further ignites the fire. The fire and the water are like the compost which creates enrichment even as it destroys.

When we turn to her masterpiece, the *Interior castle*, we know that Teresa is now in the last stages of her life journey. The soil of her soul is like rich earth. Christ's presence is so real that Teresa experiences her soul as a reliquary which Christ opens at will. 'He shows it clearly His most sacred humanity in the way He desires' (9.2-3), observes Teresa. 'The brilliance of this inner vision is like that of an infused light coming from a sun covered by something as transparent as a properly-cut-diamond' (6.9.4). Teresa's inner being reflects the divine Sun. Her transformation is fully realized. Commenting later on the image of the cocoon

and butterfly, she writes: 'Now then we are saying that this little butterfly has already died, with supreme happiness for having found repose and because Christ lives in it' (7.3.2). She goes on to describe the forgetfulness of self she now experiences. No longer does she seem to live more in heaven than on earth. Instead, she writes: 'Everything is such that this soul doesn't know or recall that there will be heaven or life or honour for it, because it employs all it has in procuring the honour of God' (7.3.2.1). Teresa now looks after what is Christ's just as Christ looks after what is Teresa's. Neither does she pray for deliverance; trials now have new meaning.

You have already seen the trials and afflictions these souls have experienced in order to die so as to enjoy our Lord. What surprises me most of all now is that they have just as great a desire to serve him and that through them He be praised and that they may benefit some soul if they can. For not only do they not desire to die but they desire to live very many years suffering the greatest trials if through these they can help that the Lord be praised, even though in something very small . . . They do not desire at that time to be in glory. Their glory lies in being able some way to help the Crucified, especially when they see He is so offended and that few there are who, detached from everything else, really look after His honour (7.3.6).

Teresa's life has been so transformed that the inner and outer are now at one with the Divine Presence. No longer is she ambivalent over conflicting values. Her on-going struggle with regard for honour is put to rest. God is the central focus of her heart's desire and she sees everything through the prism of God's all absorbing love. The honour of Christ now motivates her. Teresa no longer desires the glory of heaven; her glory is in helping her Beloved, the crucified Christ. The rich soil of her life fertilizes the Church, Christ's living members.

The life of mystics such as Teresa connects with ours. Christ, who transformed Teresa, is present and active in us and in all the events of our life today. In the gospels Jesus speaks to us of the kingdom through the language of symbol. The kingdom is like a tiny mustard seed, it is like yeast in a mass of dough, it is a search for something of value; it involves pain of loss, and joy of discovery—like the woman who searched for her lost coin. The kingdom of God, like the human/earth reality, is a process which

entails life and death. The seed dies for new life to emerge. Such is the continuous process of everyday life.

Like ourselves, Teresa was a woman who lived in a particular moment of human history. The creative energy of God's abiding presence transformed her life. All that constituted life for Teresa provided material for her spiritual compost heap. God, the divine light—fire and water—was the energy which generated heat and steam for the process of transformation to get underway. Teresa reached many a spiritual threshold where to go on meant surrender to the darkness and pain of not understanding. She struggled with being a woman at a time in history when women were not considered worth much. She felt the anguish of having her relationship with God judged illusory by her confessors, and she carried the secret of her Jewish ancestry. When she felt held in the palm of God's hand, nothing in life was troublesome. But as the process continued and Teresa again felt the pain of breakdown, she prayed for deliverance. Finally, as the heap settled into a pile of rich earth, Teresa, fully sensitized to the generative value of suffering, no longer prayed for deliverance, but for the gift to serve the Crucified. Her entire being was now one with the living energy of God and a source of enrichment for others. The cycle had completed itself.

What about us? Dare we hope that the energies of God within the depth of our being are transforming us as they did Teresa? Is this the meaning of our dark times when we seem to be loosing our grasp on all we hold dear? Teresa's life experience and gospel spirituality can help us understand what is taking place as the seeds of our hopes and desires fall into the ground and die. At such times we can turn not only to the gospels but also to her writings to find meaning and encouragement. We can also turn to the compost, watching it through the months as the process of breakdown happens. At its final settling, we can marvel at the mystery of the rich, dark, earth before us, knowing that it is our own mystery that we contemplate. The compost, like the Eucharist, proclaims the death of the Lord until he comes.

From fragmentation to solidarity and communion

The life/death/resurrection cycle impels us toward discovery of our true selves. Our contemporary culture, especially through advertising, spells out much of our identity. We seldom reflect on the deeper reality that is ourselves. Openness to the transcendent

identifies us as human persons. What makes us human beings is that we are always, already on the way to God. We may not expressly know it nor will it, but the reality remains.

The Christian scriptures describe human beings as 'image of God' (*imago Dei*). As we become aware of our true identities, it is like the awakening of a long lost memory of our authentic selves. We experience the love of God forming us into a unique reflection of the divine. John of the Cross, in his *Spiritual canticle*, describes this reality in its fullness:

The soul resembles God. The thread of love joins and binds God and the soul so strongly that it unites and transforms them. The soul seems to be God and God seems to be the soul (31.1).

The soul united and transformed in God breathes out in God to God the very divine spiration which God . . . she being transformed in Him . . . breathes out in Himself to her (39.3).

Accordingly, the soul possesses the same goods by participation that the Son possesses by nature. As a result, they are truly God by participation, equals and companions of God (39.6).⁴

What John here describes is not for an elite few, but is in fact the human invitation. The person of Jesus affirms God's intimate presence to every human person. Christ's indwelling Spirit stirs us continually to greater awareness of our tremendous human potential.

Religious imagination tends to identify the presence of God with ecstatic experiences alone, and the last chapter of Teresa's *Life* leaves such an impression. But we saw that a further dynamic operates—the action of God in Teresa's pain and suffering; the darkness in her life was intense, (her compost heap). Here we attempt to further describe those special, painful times when we, like Teresa, are being offered deeper union with God. From our reflections on the compost heap, we saw that nature has a way of imaging the soul's inner reality. Therefore, another example from nature which images self-discovery through fragmentation and breakdown comes to mind. It pertains to the changed perception of things that inner transformation brings about. The sun rising behind a steep ascending mountain slope illustrates this reality.

A few years ago, I made my retreat at a monastery in the mountains of Pennsylvania. Most mornings, before dawn, regardless of snow or freezing weather, I would venture out to watch the

sun rise. As the darkness lifted, the trees, meadows and surrounding mountains could gradually be seen. However, immediately as the sun's fire appeared behind the mountain directly before my view, a remarkable phenomenon occurred. The sky was brilliant with colour, yet the mountain slope directly beneath the sun's appearance again became shrouded in darkness. The variety of trees and the sharp rise of the land were no longer visible. I was faced with a patch of darkness and heavy mist. Only as the sun mounted higher in the sky, did the mist and darkness gradually give way and the trees again take shape. Something similar happens in the domain of the spirit. Our inner being is unconditioned for the Light that is God. At the same time, the presence of God is as vital to us as the light of the sun is vital to our planet earth. God is the horizon of human consciousness, present to all our knowing and loving.⁵

Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross describe for us what happens when the rays of the Divine Sun penetrate the horizon of finite consciousness. We become blinded by the intensity of the light. The immediate experience is darkness; the inner eye is not conditioned for God. God alone can condition us for God, and for divine intimacy. The interaction of God with human finitude elicits a response in faith, hope and love. Through faith, hope and love, God empowers us to go beyond the horizon of human finitude into communion with God as Mother, Father, Beloved. But like the mountain sunrise, the Divine Otherness is like night to the soul. It is faith which gradually enlightens the inner eye, as love, born of hope, gives speech to the heart.

For many persons today, faith, hope and love have lost their dynamic and need rediscovery. Their meaning is not in adhering to rigid structures, but in commitment—love, trust—faith, and surrender to God—hope. Faith is a highly personal word addressed to God in prayer. 'Faith is the experience of living before, in and around the presence of God'.⁶ In fact faith, hope and love are a single dynamic which gather human experience, with its feelings, activities and encounters, around God as the transcendent centre of one's entire life. As we respond to God in the darkness of faith, the darkness seems further to envelop us. This can feel like disintegration while, in fact, all of life's diminishments contain God's invitation to greater wholeness and inner transformation. Those of adolescence, midlife and the aging process, are the movement of God inviting us to the more of ourselves. If we cling

to past ways of being, knowing and choosing, transformation—the brilliance of sunrise—cannot happen. Crises therefore prepare us for self-surrender. Through a process of self-acceptance and self-possession—having confronted the false self—we are now ready for self-giving in loving surrender.

The compost heap in human terms can be seen as a movement from self-possession to self-surrender. In this process, the self is not lost but finds its fullness in God. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are God's affirmation of this mysterious process. Jesus is our assurance that God is creatively present in all the events of life, even the most tragic—provided we cease trying to be our own saviour. If our being is enlivened by faith, hope and love, crises will truly manifest the Holy at work in us. As the caterpillar sheds its skin so that the butterfly can form within the chrysalis, we surrender to God in faith, hope and love, so that growth and transformation can occur.

Continually we are invited by God to find our true identity in God-relatedness. A child is uncertain and insecure; gradually it grows to a kind of certitude and self-possession. But as a person comes to greater maturity, certitude gives way to the experience of life as transcendent mystery. Throughout life we work toward self-possession so that we can stand secure in our gifts and talents. We choose the direction our life is to take. But self-possession is only one dimension of the human potential. God's self-communicating love moves us toward self-transcendence. The other side of self-possession, then, is God's invitation to self-surrender by which, through confident hope, we see in faith and speak in love.

Faith is our sure access to God but faith, as we have seen, darkens the mind's eye. We lose certitude about ourselves, about God and about the meaning of life. Life's meaning breaks down so that its depths and richness can be better understood and realized. The presence of God to human life is like the dynamic of the compost heap. Something gives way as the truth of ourselves and the truth of God meet in loving embrace. What that 'something' is, is unique to each person. If we listen carefully, our times of trial and crises will reveal to us that which we need to let go of. It may be worn-out images of God left over from childhood, images of the self untrue to our present experience, patterns of behaviour destructive to ourselves and others.

Crises tend to surface one's imperfections. These are not causes for panic. The shadow in front of the mountain is created by the

nearness of God. What seems undesirable in ourselves is material for the compost heap. If we can surrender ourselves and our startling imperfections into the hands of God, God's all-embracing love will energize the heap and transform our lives. We may also need to surrender to the help and guidance of a spiritual director or psycho-therapist at such times to insure that the breakdown of meaning is indeed towards a fuller life. This step can hardly be by-passed.

The Chinese word for crisis is made up of two characters. One stands for danger, the other for opportunity. Danger lies in self-pity and in the unwillingness to face the pain of growth inherent in difficult situations and so in never becoming our true selves. Since others' use of their freedom is not within our control, we may be unable to change the circumstances that adversely affect us. Yet we can grow in self-knowledge and be more in touch with the fears, anxieties, hurts and angers that erode human growth and prevent us from responding to our life-situation with love, compassion and forgiveness. We can also grow in our relationship with Christ whose life, death and resurrection offer meaning for our own dark days. Growth in self-knowledge and in love for Christ open inner well-springs from which creative solutions issue. Our life then, like soft, rich soil, can become life-giving for others.

Beneath all of life's pain, is God inviting us to deeper communion with herself, the Divine Mother Earth, who nurtures all of life. Seasons of storm and uprooting remind us we are not yet finished. Our transcendent potential, union with God, is still in process. As the work of inner transformation continues, God bids us to accept the pain of our incompleteness. Our fears and anxieties, our lust, jealousies and competitiveness become gracious reminders that God is at work in us. Instead of generating frantic efforts to suppress such unwelcome feelings, they lead us to prayer and openness to God in self-surrender. To the extent that we are able to recognize and peacefully accept our own limitations and imperfections are we able to embrace others in compassion and love. Present to each other in God, we stand not in judgement, but in compassionate solidarity and loving communion.

A scene from a prize-winning Broadway play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, by Lorraine Hansberry, powerfully illustrates compassionate solidarity. The only hope of a poor, black family is a sum of money Mama receives from social security. Her son, wanting to

be a success, is swindled in a business deal and loses some of the money. Undaunted, Mama uses the rest to buy her dream house.

Unfortunately for her, the house is in an all-white neighbourhood. The neighbours are upset because a black family is moving in. They offer the real-estate agent twice the amount paid for the house, to entice Mama to re-sell to the agent. Her son Walter, shamed and upset at his own failure, wants to accept the offer. In a mock scene, Walter cowers before the agent as he takes the money. Beneatha, Walter's sister, despises and rejects him for his behaviour. But Mama, in a powerful response, which I quote in part, says to Beneatha:

Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most; when they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well then you ain't through learning . . . because that ain't the time at all. It's when he's at his lowest and can't believe in his self 'cause the world done whipped him so. When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you don taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is.⁷

As a descendent of slaves and sharecroppers, Mama knew the mystery of the compost heap. Out of her pain she learned compassionate love. God worked divine transformation in Mama and the fruits are the same as we find in Teresa who, in her autobiography, thanked God for cultivating so many delicate flowers out of the dungheap of her life.

Our lives too, are the place of God's transforming activity. As the days pile high, every facet of our life can be energized by Christ's indwelling Spirit into a marvellous compost heap. If we respond in faith to God's loving presence, she, the Divine Mother, will enrich others with the sacred compost of our lives.

NOTES

¹ Eliot, T. S., 'East Coker', *Four quartets* (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York, 1943), p 32.

² See Eliade, Mircea, *The sacred and the profane* (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. New York, 1959). Also, *Myths, dreams and mysteries*, (Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 1960).

³ All references to the writings of St Teresa of Avila are from *The collected works of St Teresa of Avila*, vols one and two, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez O.C.D. (ICS Publication, Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington, D.C., vol 1, 1976; vol 2, 1980).

⁴ *The collected works of St John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez O.C.D. (Doubleday & Company, Inc. Garden City, New York), pp 557-59.

⁵ Karl Rahner made a major contribution toward our understanding of the presence of God to human life. See: 'Experience of self and experience of God', *Theological investigations*, vol 13 (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1961-1976), pp 124-25.

⁶ Lane, Dermot A.: *The experience of God* (Paulist Press, New York, 1981), pp 124-25.

⁷ Hansberry, Lorraine: *A raisin in the sun* (A Signet Book, New American Library, Times Mirror, New York, 1951), p 125.