THE PERSONAL AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

All Too Human, All Too Divine

Terry Veling

AS A THEOLOGICAL EDUCATOR, I have always considered teaching to be a form of spiritual direction that is concerned with 'the love of learning and the desire for God'.[1] The practices in which teachers and students engage—reading, writing, reflection, conversation, discovery, insight—can all be spiritually formative. As the Rule of St Benedict notes, they guide us in 'the school for the Lord's service'.[2]

One of the great spiritual educators of our times, Martin Buber, tells of an event that became a fundamental turning point in his life. He was sitting in his office, enjoying the delights of studying and reading, when an unknown young man came to see him. Buber responded with friendly conversation, but was not really present to the young man 'in spirit'. Later, not long after this visit, Buber learnt that the young student had taken his own life. 'I learned that he had come to me not casually', writes Buber, 'but borne by destiny, not for a chat but for a decision. He had come to me, he had come in this hour.'[3] Reflecting further on this event, Buber says that he finally came to realise that religious experience is not meant to 'lift you out of the world', but to lead you into the world. He writes:

> Since then I have given up the 'religious' which is nothing but exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up. I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken …. I know no fullness but each mortal hour's fullness of claim and

I would like to dedicate this essay to the memory of Daniel Stoerr, a unique personality who departed this world at the age of thirty.

[1] See Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham UP, 1961).
[2] *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, edited by Timothy Fry (Collegeville: Order of St Benedict, 1981), 5.
[3] Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Collier, 1965), 12–14.

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> responsibility …. I do not know much more. If that is religion then it is just *everything,* simply all that is lived in its possibility of dialogue.[4]

Buber goes on to give the example of prayer. Prayer does not remove us from life; rather, when we pray, we 'yield' or refer our life to God. We seek to align ourselves with God's will, with God's heart, with God's good intentions for the world. 'You are called from above', writes Buber, 'you with this mortal bit of life are referred to … required, chosen, empowered, sent'.[5]

According to the Jewish philosopher and Talmudic commentator Emmanuel Lévinas, life is *vocational.* Life addresses me, calls out to me, asks after me. Life asks me to respond, to answer, to say: 'Here I am … for you … in the Name of God'.[6] 'The invisible but personal God is not approached outside of all human presence', writes Lévinas.[7] 'Going towards God is meaningless unless seen in terms of my primary going towards the other person.'[8] As St John says:

> Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen (1 John 4:20).

A spirituality that cannot accommodate humanity is probably no spirituality at all. It is our spiritual duty to become human. This 'becoming human' is not a task we set ourselves to achieve; rather, it is a task given us by divine life. Everything *of God* is ultimately concerned with everything *of humanity.* To hallow God's name is to hallow each other. 'I consider the human person', Martin Buber says, 'to be the irremovable central place of the struggle between the world's movement away from God and its movement towards God'.[9] *Divinitas* can never be separated from *humanitas*; they must always be related in their mutual concern. As it is with God, so too with us. As it is in heaven, so too on earth.

It is our spiritual duty to become human

[4] Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 14.
[5] Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 14.
[6] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, tranlstaed by Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), 75.
[7] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), 78.
[8] *Face to Face with Lévinas*, edited by Richard Cohen (Albany: State U. of New York P, 1986), 23.
[9] Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 70.

This essay is a reflection on 'personality'—as unique, as holy, as natural—and suggests that the duty of religious faith is to 'humanise' our world or to 'personalise' our world: to overcome the world of 'It' and welcome the presence of 'Thou'. This is also what it means to 'divinise' our world—hallowing each other and each created life as sacred and holy.

Personality

The philosopher and religious writer Erazim Kohák asks us to consider the following question:

> Shall we conceive of the world around us and of ourselves in it as *personal,* a meaningful whole … bearing goodness—or shall we conceive of it and treat it, together with ourselves, as *impersonal,* a chance aggregate of matter propelled by blind force …? That answered, all else follows.[10]

The world is propelled by many impersonal forces: forces that we ourselves have made, forces that make the 'world go round'—economic systems, political structures, laws and jurisdictions, programmes and agendas, what St Paul calls 'the rulers, the authorities, the powers of this age' (Ephesians 6:12; 1 Corinthians 2:6).

To speak of life's inherent personality is difficult. John Macmurray, a Scottish philosopher writing in the 1930s, raised his voice in the name of personality, yet he always found his task frustrating. 'It is a shallow civilisation we've got', he wrote in a letter to a friend, 'people do not seem to know what I mean when I talk about a *personal* life. "What's the use of it?" they ask.'[11] Speaking of the personal life, he writes:

> It is amazing how blind we are to this simplest and commonest of all our fields of experience, and to the manner in which it determines and conditions all the others. The last thing we seem to become aware of in our conscious reflection is one another and the concrete ties that bind us together in the bundle of life.[12]

To think about personality—to write and speak of it—is difficult, because personality does not like to be called an 'it' at all. Personality is

[10] Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 1984), 125.
[11] John Macmurray, *Reason and Emotion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), xi.
[12] Macmurray, *Reason and Emotion*, 153.

not a concept, something that can be conceptualised or pinned down (or, even less, something that can be utilised), because personality refuses to be treated as a 'thing'. Nevertheless, Erazim Kohák attempts a definition of sorts, saying that personality 'is the decision to treat the Person, the Person-al mode of being, as the ultimate metaphysical category'.[13] He goes on to say that personality is concerned with the relationships between us, relationships that are marked by respect and responsibility for each other and for the world in which we live. Personality reminds us that the moral and interpersonal categories of love, care and goodness lie at the very heart of life.

Personality does not begin in 'thinking about', but in 'feeling with'. While it is always possible for rational thought to compare and to analyze, to judge and determine, this is not possible for personality. Rather, personality is before thinking, before all the reasons for or against, before all the schemas and thoughts of the world. Personality is unique and incomparable, holy and without precedent.

Incomparable and Exceptional

The Russian religious philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev writes, 'Personality is the exception, not the rule'.[14] We tend to operate 'according to the rule' more than we do 'according to the exception'. Rules represent the ordering of things, the systems we construct, the processes for the smooth running of society and its institutions. Most of us live somewhat unthinkingly in the context of social arrangements and cultural norms that shape the way we inhabit the world. Yet, according to Berdyaev, personality is the exception to all of this. He continues:

> In human personality there is much that is generic, belonging to the human race, much which belongs to history, tradition, society, class, family … much that is 'common'. But it is precisely this which is not 'personal' in personality. That which is 'personal' is original …. The secret of the existence of personality lies in its absolute irreplaceability, its happening but once, its uniqueness, its incomparableness.[15]

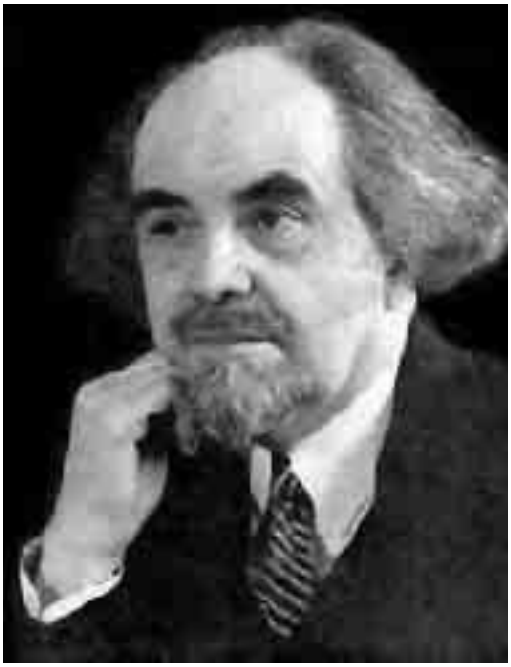
'That which is personal is original': this is to say that human personality is not interchangeable, but rather incomparable and unique.

[13] Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, 126.
[14] Nikolai Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, translated by R. M. French (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1944), 23.
[15] Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, 23–24.

Berdyaev calls this the 'secret of existence' that belongs to each and every person. It is a secret because no human personality can ever be fully known by systems of thought, or subsumed by social processes, or reduced to any other form of contingency or conditioning.

I still recall learning in my younger days, as a student of philosophy, that the etymology of the word 'existence' means 'to stand out'. 'Existence', in other words, is always exceptional rather than generic—it 'stands out' and it matters—your existence, my existence, the existence of a tree, the blooming of a flower, the birth of a child. Personality resists being absorbed into the flow of world processes, but rather interrupts or 'stands out' with a dazzling brilliance of singular expression. Nothing better honours life and existence than to say that each and every living being exists as a splendour of incomparable wonder.

Personality is exceptional; it often calls into question many of our systems and structures by saying, 'except for this one'. Personality asks us to think exceptionally rather than routinely. It requires an almost saintly attention to the often unnoticed—the singular one amidst the multitude. There may well be a hundred, but there is also the one. Personality asks us to act with the exceptional in mind, rather than according to customary norms or conventions. It represents a great difficulty for anyone who seeks all-encompassing theories or all-embracing standards. Even before the law and the court of justice, there is always the exceptional one. Personality is not made to measure or made to fit. Rather, it is immeasurable and cannot be contained. Personality is not even about 'equality', in the sense of weighing or measuring the equality of one with another.



Nikolai Berdyaev

'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.' (Mark 2:27) This is a key principle in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. Like a good rabbi, like a person well-schooled in the Torah, Jesus was always sensitive to the exception before the law. Jesus gave preference to the errant one, rather than to the righteous or

law-abiding one. He spoke of leaving 99 behind to go in search of the one who had strayed (Matthew 18:12). He preferred the exceptional one rather than the well-placed or well-positioned one (Luke 18:9–14). He often came to the defence of the one accused before the law, as with that exceptional story of the woman 'caught in adultery' (John 8:1–11). He 'welcomed sinners and ate with them' (Luke 15:2).

Personality does not compare because it is incomparable. Personality is freed from all forms of judgment that calculate and measure, and all forms of competition that contest and compare. Personality is peace, freed from the conflict of one over another, one against another, one in judgment of another. Personality welcomes the peace of each and every incomparable uniqueness. 'In everyone is something precious', Rabbi Pinhas says, 'that is in no other'.[16]

According to Berdyaev, 'personality is like nothing else in the world'.[17] When speaking of the person, Berdyaev stresses this 'like nothing else'.

> When a person enters the world, a unique and unrepeatable personality, then the world process is broken into and compelled to change its course …. Personality finds no place in the continuous complex process of world life, it cannot be a moment or an element in the evolution of the world. Personality presupposes interruption; it is inexplicable by any sort of uninterrupted continuity …. Personality is a break through, a breaking in upon this world; it is the introduction of something new.[18]

It is worth noting Berdyaev's words: *unique*, *unrepeatable*, *interruption*, *breaking in*, *something new*. These are difficult and yet beautiful words. There is nothing quite like encountering the beauty of uniqueness, yet the difficulty is that this experience is not repeatable or programmable; it is one-off, happening only once, and cannot be replayed or revisited in quite the same manner again. It really is like nothing else. And yet, this means that newness is always possible, interrupting the otherwise routine and repetitive chain of events. Personality persuades me that history need not repeat itself. Rather, there is always the possibility of newness and interruption—novelty and creativity—something unrepeatable, something that thereby does not repeat what went before, but instigates a brand new future, a change of course in the otherwise unrelenting drone of history.

[16] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, translated by Olga Marx (New York: Schocken, 1975), 127.
[17] Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, 21.
[18] Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, 21.

While each of us is caught in the flow of historical time, situated within the world and shaped by society and culture, Berdyaev insists that human personality can never be reduced to its conditioning environs, to 'the continuous complex process of world life'. Rather, human personality also opens on to the unconditional, 'breaking in upon the world', such that in the life of the human person 'the form of unconditioned being is reflected'.[19]

Personality is incomparable and unprecedented. This sense of being without precedent conveys a sense of the newness or 'newbornness' of the created world. As Hannah Arendt notes, with the creation of humanity, the principle of beginning came into the world. She cites St Augustine: 'That there be a beginning, man was created'.[20] The birth of a new human being is always unprecedented: 'The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, "natural" ruin is ultimately the fact of natality'.[21] The world is not doomed to the inexorable forces of history. Rather, with the birth of each person, a new world is made possible:

> It is this faith in and hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their 'glad tidings': 'A child has been born to us'.[22]

Holy

Each person is created in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26). Edward Schillebeeckx tells us that 'the great symbol of the human as *imago Dei* is the one permissible image of God that is not an idolatry'.[23] According to the US Catholic Bishops, the *humanum* represents the foundational symbol of the Holy:

> We believe the person is sacred—the clearest reflection of God among us ….
>
> Human personhood must be respected with a reverence that is religious. When we deal with each other, we should do so with the

[19] Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, 21.
[20] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), 157.
[21] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 222.
[22] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 223.
[23] Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Schillebeeckx Reader*, edited by Robert Schreiter (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 174.

> sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred.[24]

The liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez maintains that human beings are most prone to inflicting violence upon others when the other person is considered as anything but human—indeed, as a 'nonperson'. History abounds with examples, and the times have not changed very much. We continue to depersonalise and dehumanise our fellow human beings. 'The majority of peoples today are still nonpersons', Gutierrez says, 'they are not even considered as human persons'.[25] I am often reminded, for example, of a striking image from a civil rights march of the 1960s, in which African-American men are walking down the streets with placards declaring, 'I am a man'.

To disparage the human person—or any living creature—is to make a mockery of God, rather than to respect the image of God. The Hebrew prophets constantly inveighed against idolatry and false worship. They always spoke in the name of the living God who is concerned for creation and the welfare and *shalom* of human persons.

[24] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 'Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy', available at http://www.usccb.org/upload/economic_justice_for_all.pdf, accessed 20 November 2012, 13, 28.
[25] Gustavo Gutiérrez, 'Bartolomé de Las Casas: Defender of the Indians', *Pacifica*, 5 (1992), 272.

I recall attending a Passover meal with a family in Jerusalem. One of the readings during the meal was the following passage from the Psalms, which made quite an impression on me:

> Their idols are silver and gold,
> the work of human hands.
> They have mouths but do not speak,
> eyes but do not see.
> They have ears but do not hear,
> noses but do not smell.
> They have hands but do not feel,
> feet but do not walk,
> and no sound rises from their throats.
> Their makers shall be like them,
> all who trust in them. (Psalm 115:4–8)

God is not to be identified with dead and lifeless things, with idols that have no soul, no sense of the human, no living *personality*. God is not a faceless, impersonal God, but the God who is face-to-face, the God of the living.

Attention to the beauty and singularity of personality magnifies, rather than diminishes, our apprehension of the Divine. 'The creator must be sought through the creatures', St Teresa of Ávila says.[26] Everything that lives is holy, filled with unique personality and distinctiveness, yet also deeply related and connected, each uniquely bound to another. Abraham Heschel writes: 'To sense the sacred is to sense what is dear to God'.[27] God's concerns are personal. The personal and the relational have everything to do with the holiness of life. Personality draws us continually into the realm of real human living, where there is both joy and sorrow, and where we find that our thoughts and our actions are most real when they are engaged with another, rather than aloof and indifferent, or arrogant and blind. The concerns of God are personal. If not, then I do not know how we can speak of God's relationality, or God's communication, or God's justice and mercy. These concerns are either matters of personal concern, or empty 'matter-less' theories.

If the God of the theologians and the philosophers were suddenly to step down into the field of experience, I doubt many would recognise

[26] St Teresa of Ávila, *The Prison of Love: Selections from St Teresa of Ávila*, edited by Catherine Hughes (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1972), 8.
[27] Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1965), 49.

'him'. For most people, God is not a theory or a problem, a treatise or a dogma, a speculation or a doctrine, a *this* or a *that*. Do not bother proclaiming your theories or 'sounding your trumpets', Jesus said. Rather, 'go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret' (Matthew 6:26). For most believers, God is their deepest and most secret hope, the one they talk to, the one they pray to, the one who listens and understands. Amidst the hardships of life, God is the miraculous one. God can do what seems impossible, can change what seems hopeless, can soften even the hardest heart. God is personal, relational, mysterious and intimate.

The concerns of God are personal. It is difficult for systems and constructs to capture these concerns, because much of our systematic and abstract thought is empty of personality. Our ways of thinking and systematizing often take their shape in the impersonal worlds of detached thought and rational knowledge. We always think about, about, about … and what is personal eludes us. Do not think that personality is an easy thing, something you already grasp and already know. Do not be deceived by its simplicity. If we turn personality into a concept, we will have lost it straight away. Personality can only be experienced in relational encounter, yet in our lives we are often distracted by the structures and routines of impersonal existence. It takes an attentive soul and a responsive awareness to embrace God's personal concerns.

The concerns of God are personal. They are ever focused on the lost and the last, the unnoticed and the little one. In every crowd, in every bureaucracy, in every managerial and administrative system, God sees the personal one and lifts this one up, beyond the dark forces of impersonal being. Even when thronged by the crowds, Jesus never failed to notice the one who 'stood out', the one silenced and shunned by the crowds, like the blind beggar sitting by the road (Mark 10:46–51).

The concerns of God are personal. They are the concerns of dignity—the dignity of each human person and every living being—not as pieces in a system or players in a grand scheme, but as personal, living entities, unique and irreplaceable. God's concerns are the concerns of loving relationships, whereby we nurture friendship and respect—hallowing each other and each created life as sacred and holy.

Natural

Personality does not see inanimate objects; it does not see objects at all. Personality infuses everything with life and vitality. There is no need

to posit a divine world; the world is already naturally divine. 'There is no thing in the world in which there is not life', a Hasidic master says, 'and each has the form of life in which it stands before your eyes. And lo, this life is the life of God.'[28]

There is a holy spark in every living creature and every human being. Personality presumes energy and life, rather than cold or anonymous existence. Personality means that things are diaphanous and alive so that each living being blazes with intense singularity and uniqueness. Personality is a marvel and a miracle, and super, super natural. Personality requires an alert receptivity, a keen reflective attentiveness that, in the words of David Tracy,

> … embarks upon a journey of intensification into the concreteness of each particular reality—*this* body, *this* people, *this* community, *this* tradition, *this* tree, *this* place, this *moment, this* neighbour—until the very concreteness in any particularity releases us to sense the concreteness of the whole as internally related through and through.[29]

Can we say that the ocean has personality? I am sure a seafarer would say so—not only of the ocean, but of the wind as well. The geologist and the sculptor know the personality of rock and granite. The farmer and the gardener know the personality of soil and plants. The boy knows the personality of his dog, and the conservationist knows the personality of rainforests and wetlands. Indigenous people have long taught us that there is spirit and personality in all living creatures—in earth and sky, in land and ocean, in the natural ecologies of life that sustain us all.

In our arrogance, we sometimes forget there are beings that will live much longer than us. Think of trees, for example. Long after we have dropped and rotted beneath them, they remain, and whole future generations will hear the wind in their leaves. As Martin Buber notes, personality also finds expression in the natural world. 'I contemplate a tree', he writes. In doing so, 'I can assign it to a species'; 'I can overcome its uniqueness'; 'I can dissolve it into a number'. In all these ways, 'the tree remains my object and has its place'. However, Buber continues, 'it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the

[28] Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, 89.
[29] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Plurality of Cultures* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 382.

tree, I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an *It*. The power of exclusiveness has seized me.'[30] Personality is concerned with all that addresses and reveals itself to me in its 'thou-like' originality.

If we could let go of our arrogance, perhaps we could see that there is friendship in creation. Think of birds, for example. They are among the shiest of creatures, born of the air and distant from us, which is perhaps why I especially love it when they draw close and display amazing trust across the barrier of our strangeness, as though there were some primal part of them that recognised creation's friendship. I love this capacity for friendship expressed in the wild and the untamed. 'The man who looks only into himself', the Baal Shem Tov says, 'cannot but sink into despair, yet as soon as he opens his eyes to the creation around him, he will know joy'.[31]

Communion in creation is a wonderful gift. I believe we can 'talk to the animals', if you like, and to plants, and that they in turn will speak to us—and that, if we sit for long enough on a beach, eventually we will hear the voice of the ocean. There is personality in life which presumes communication and the very real possibility of dialogue, a not-so-silly sense of communion with the natural world, if only we could listen and be attentive, if only we could believe that there are, as George Steiner reminds us, 'real presences' in life, real signs of vitality and personality.[32]

[30] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Walter Kaufman (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1970), 57–58.
[31] Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, 71.
[32] See George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 1989).

Personality is perhaps another word for what the Catholic tradition calls 'sacramentality'. Sacramentality means that what we perceive as ordinary (it is only or merely this) suddenly becomes extraordinary (it is actually or really this!). Bread need not only be a packaged item that we buy in the supermarket. Or think of wine, or a meal, and how human beings always seem to discover a sense of communion when they eat and drink together. It is wondrous indeed that time can be shared between two, that we can enjoy time together in good company, with good friends and good wine. In the Christian tradition, wine meant much for the one who was about to depart: 'I will not drink of this wine again, until I drink it anew in the kingdom of heaven' (Mark 14:25).

Friendship

Personality is sometimes perceived as 'threatening'—especially to the 'powers that be' and especially when it comes to us in all its glory and strangeness—yet it is more life-affirming. Speaking of the real presences that come into our life, Elaine Scarry writes:

> You are about to be in the presence of something life-giving, something lifesaving, something that deserves from you a posture of reverence or petition. It is not clear whether you should throw yourself on your knees or keep your distance … but this is not an occasion for carelessness.[33]

Personality always carries greetings from a world beyond my own, beyond the sheltered existence of my own closely hugged truths. When I come into the presence of personality, I find that my own life is addressed.

Personality is greeting, welcoming and inquiring after each other, 'How are you?' Personality means that people of different cultures, people of different creeds, people of different nationalities, people of different social and economic backgrounds, can share friendship. It is not that the differences between us do not matter; indeed, they are the basis for the infinite variety of relationships that can be shared in the personal life. Yet when we cling to our differences or guard them in fear, we lose sight of personality and are living instead in a world of labels and name-calling: you are this, you are that; they are this, they are that. Personality helps us to find joy in living together, to seek mutual understanding, to share experience, to express and reveal ourselves to one another. This is all

[33] Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 27.

that is required of us—to put down our swords, surrender our defences and share in the spirit of friendship which is the essence of the personal and spiritual life.

The Sculptor's Garden

I was sitting on a country road, admiring the sunlit valley, listening to the wind. A stranger came up to me and we started talking. At first he was suspicious, and I felt myself under scrutiny. He came to inquire into this strange scene, this stranger sitting by the road. I commented on the beauty of the valley, asked him whether he lived in the house nearby, and if it was all right for me to sit a while. He smiled and I saw his suspicion ease.

We began to talk and I suddenly found myself involved in a personal and friendly conversation. He discovered that I taught theology at a Catholic university, that I had come to the mountains to sit and write for a while. He said he had lived in this valley for 25 years, since his retirement. He was now in his eighties. He spoke with a noticeable Czech accent, and I learnt that he had immigrated to Australia just after the Second World War.

Maybe it was because I was sitting there writing—I am not sure—but he said, 'I am a sculptor—would you like to see my work?' At first I thought of politely declining, but then I felt the wind's breath prompting me. So we walked up the road a little, talking about art and religion, his life and his work, until we approached the front gate of his property. I stopped in my tracks. Stunned. Before me was a huge granite stone with these words chiselled into it:

> *All knowledge begins with feeling.*

I immediately wanted to rush back to where I had been sitting, take up my pen, and practise this saying.

We followed the tree-lined pathway that led to his house, and along the way there appeared various statues—like ancient ghosts, with singular dignity, carved from solid rock, yet filled with fluid forms: women, dancers, dolphins, birds, children. In another part of his garden, where he set himself to work, I saw three or four solid masses of raw rock. From one of these emerged a half-formed figure as if breaking free from the stone.

I felt quite spellbound. I had ventured into a stranger's home. What was I doing here? I stood in this sculptor's garden full of bewilderment

and marvel. He then opened the door to a large shed. He asked me to take off my sandals, as his wife liked to keep the floors clean. The shed was filled with examples of his work. In his heyday, he had received various prizes. It seemed like quite an intimate moment to me. He was sharing his memories, his treasure. 'This is holy ground', I thought. I commented on a carving that caught my eye, the face of the suffering Christ. He said,

> Well, there's quite a story behind that … I carved it in 1955, and someone purchased it. Then, a few years ago, I was visiting a market fair, and there it was! Someone had found it while cleaning out a house, and now they were selling it. Fifty years later, my suffering Christ came back to me, as if resurrected.

What was it, I wondered, that brought two such strangers together? One trying to write, another trying to wrest shape and form from stone? Was it the wind? The strange and wandering Spirit that blows where it will? Did this stranger come to me as a teacher? How is it, I wondered, that a person who deals in rock and granite, in hard and solid forms, nevertheless inscribes at his gate: *All knowledge begins with feeling*. To carve feeling from rock, to let shape and form emerge from solid mass, to trust the chisel, to love, rather than fear, the raw beauty of ancient stone.

Perhaps he really did come to teach me, perhaps the wind was right: latent in every aspect of life, even in the difficulty of rock, there is spirit and there is friendship—if only we could feel.

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