

THE FIRE WITHIN

Discovering Adult Freedom Before God

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A soul rises up, restless with tremendous desire for God's honor and the salvation of souls. She has for some time exercised herself in virtue and has become accustomed to dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge in order to know better God's goodness toward her, since upon knowledge follows love. And loving, she seeks to pursue truth and clothe herself in it.¹

IN FOURTEENTH-CENTURY ITALY, St Catherine of Siena began her *Dialogue* with this description of herself – dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge. Her conversation with God, shared with readers over the centuries, could be a primer for developing a sense of self and an adult freedom under God.

Another Dominican, Johannes Tauler, found silence and stillness vital to knowing one's true self and to the active life. In Tauler, the emphasis is on a union with God realized in one's interiority:

Anyone who wants to find this kingdom – that is, to find God, with all His riches and in His own being and nature – must look for it where it is, in the very depths of his soul, where God is infinitely closer to the soul and more integral to it than is the soul itself.²

In one's depths, one finds God and emerges prepared for activity that is not merely pious practice but that is marked by truth. Tauler writes, 'We must do all we can to scrutinize the depths of our souls; it is so easy for us to live a lie . . .'³

While classic figures such as Catherine and Tauler write about the importance of entering into the depths of one's self to live out truth, contemporary figures in psychology and spirituality tell us how difficult this can be. The self, as experienced by so many people in the late twentieth century, is variably divided, saturated, lost, false, fractured, silenced, undiscovered, alienated, scattered or hidden. Finding one's true self, Catherine and Tauler intimate, will bring about action marked not by these terms but by unity and truth.

This article will deal, not with the complexities of the self in terms of psychological disorders, but with a method of the spiritual life by

which a human being can gain consciousness of his or her human experience and then act with freedom. The thesis of this article is that one can come to a sense of self and to a self communicated to the world in freedom through an interplay of four moments or co-ordinates of the spiritual life: experience, expression, explanation and communication.

In order to describe these four moments, this paper draws upon insights from art theory, the writings of St John of the Cross and specifically *The spiritual canticle*, and the scholarship of Michael J. Buckley SJ. The method of the four moments of the spiritual life provides a holistic understanding of the term ‘spirituality’.

A definition of spirituality

Theology is faith seeking understanding. Spirituality is the practice of that faith and, as such, begins in experience. Karl Rahner, John Dunne and Max Jacob are twentieth-century theologians or mystics who elucidate the meaning of spirituality in our time. Rahner writes that spirituality will always be related to the living God, revealed in the history of humanity and situated in the heart of the world and the heart of humankind.⁴ The living God is, of course, at the core of our theological and spiritual enterprise.

A spirituality revealed in the history of humanity is defined by John Dunne as the ways in which human beings relate to the circumstances, events and persons of our lives as we journey from childhood, to youth, to adulthood, to old age – all the while deepening the life of the Spirit; and in the end, returning to a new and deeper childlike time of life. For Dunne, the transitions of life may mean a loss that is a sort of death, and that leads to new life. What one discovers by enduring these passages is ‘something indestructible’.

What may one hope to find? ‘Man cannot live without an enduring trust in something indestructible in himself,’ Kafka says. ‘Yet while doing that he may all his life be unaware of that indestructible thing and of his trust in it.’ If one enters one’s inner darkness, it seems, one may hope to penetrate the unawareness and find that indestructible something within oneself and also one’s continual reliance on it.⁵

Max Jacob, twentieth-century French Jewish-Christian mystic and poet, gave advice to younger poets and artists saying, ‘I am not trying to make you a mystic, only a man’.⁶ Max’s advice on the spiritual life included the constant refrain that one must have the courage to descend to one’s *ventre* (or gut), to feel, to be human. The base of that descent, for Max Jacob, is the place where the human heart meets the heart of

God, giving rise to a great fire out of which comes expression marked by unity and truth. As to the definition of spirituality, Max Jacob wrote,

I am not a man of scientific definitions. It is not a matter of knowing what the soul is . . . It is a matter of MAKING THE SOUL LIVE. A definition? What does that mean? It gives us nothing. A method, Ah Yes! Now the 'interior life' is a method. I don't have a definition for the 'interior life' but I have its reality. You must live the things and not define them.⁷

(Nevertheless, he went on to define the spiritual life.)

These words of Max Jacob are akin to the following words of *A dictionary of Christian spirituality*: 'What then is spirituality? It is by no means to be confused with theology, which is chiefly an elaboration of concepts. It is a life. All human existence has a spiritual aspect.'⁸ The definition of spirituality might be articulated in the simple statement that our spirituality is the way in which we relate with God, with one another and with our deepest selves. The question of this paper is how a human being might act with freedom out of that deepest self.

The search for self

This question is particularly pertinent today where we inhabit a world that is increasingly global, close and fast, so much so that Kenneth Gergen describes the 'self under siege':

I had just returned to Swarthmore from a two-day conference in Washington, which had brought together fifty scholars from around the country. An urgent fax from Spain lay on the desk, asking about a paper I was months late in contributing to a conference in Barcelona. Before I could think about answering, the office hours I had postponed began. One of my favorite students arrived and began to quiz me about the ethnic biases in my course syllabus. My secretary came in holding a sheaf of telephone messages, and some accumulated mail, including an IRS notice of a tax audit and a cancellation notice from the telephone company. My conversations with my students were later interrupted by phone calls from a London publisher, a colleague in Connecticut on her way to Oslo for the weekend, and an old California friend wondering if we might meet during his summer travels to Holland. By the morning's end I was drained. The hours had been wholly consumed by the process of relating – face to face, electronically, and by letter. The relations were scattered across Europe and America, and scattered points in my personal past. And so keen was the competition for 'relational time' that virtually none of the interchanges seemed effective in the ways I wished.

I turned my attention optimistically to the afternoon. Perhaps here I would find moments of seclusion, restoration, and reentering . . . In effect, I was immersed in and consumed by social connection, and the results were numbing.⁹

If an increasing number of people are experiencing this self under siege, it seems all the more important to find a method by which one can find and express one's spirituality, with both mind and heart.

'It is the whole soul which gives rise to the free decision.'¹⁰ Raïssa Maritain draws upon this conviction of Henri Bergson in corroborating her own view that 'the acts which are truly free, truly "human" are rare, because in general we live on the surface of ourselves, where automatic action, habit, convenience and suggestion take the place of liberty'.¹¹

Providing one example of a solution to this living on the surface of ourselves, Teilhard de Chardin writes that we must try to penetrate our most secret self, and examine our being from all sides. He offers his own experience:

. . . And so, for the first time in my life perhaps (although I am supposed to meditate every day!), I took the lamp and, leaving the zone of everyday occupations and relationships where everything seems clear, I went down into my inmost self, to the deep abyss whence I feel dimly that my power of action emanates. But as I moved further and further away from the conventional certainties by which social life is superficially illuminated, I became aware that I was losing contact with myself. At each step of the descent a new person was disclosed within me of whose name I was no longer sure, and who no longer obeyed me. And when I had to stop my exploration because the path faded from beneath my steps, I found a bottomless abyss at my feet, and out of it came – arising I know not from where – the current which I dare to call *my life*.¹²

Akin to the word of Teilhard and using his own metaphor of journey, John Dunne writes,

If I enter the darkness of my own heart, however, I am entering the region of my being where I am ordinarily inaccessible to human beings; I am entering where God enters. I am using the sense of being accessible to God to become accessible to myself and to others.¹³

It seems that the free act is preceded by a descent. The question remains, how can we today enter the depths of our soul, the abyss, the

ventre, or our whole heart and be liberated to act with a new freedom? How can we live the creative tension of contemplation and action?

The four moments of the spiritual life

The question of the relation between contemplation and action is not new, but it continually calls for resolution by people living in every historical era. If these two seemingly opposite aspects of a human life can be seen as a part of a whole, involving the whole person, creative and intellectual, body and spirit, then there may be a way to integrate them into a synthesis and to increase one's conscious freedom as one lives. The 'four moments' is a method that seeks to do just that – to move one from mystery to action and back again.

The 'Prologue' to *The spiritual canticle*, a lyric poem of the dynamic love between the poet and Christ, points to the overarching mystery, the expression in images and words, the conceptual explanation in which the thinking of the community is brought to bear, and the resulting action or communication emanating from these other three moments. St John of the Cross writes,

. . . The wisdom and charity of God is so vast, as the Book of Wisdom states, that it reaches from end to end, and a person informed and moved by it bears in some way this very abundance and impulsiveness in his words. As a result I do not plan to expound these stanzas in all the breadth and fullness that the fruitful spirit of love conveys to them. It would be foolish to think that expressions of love arising from mystical understanding, like these stanzas, are fully explainable. The Spirit of the Lord, who abides in us and aids our weakness, as St Paul says, pleads for us with unspeakable groanings in order to manifest what we can neither fully understand nor comprehend.

Who can describe the understanding He gives to loving souls in whom He dwells? And who can express the experience He imparts to them? Who, finally, can explain the desires He gives them? Certainly, no one can! Not even they who receive these communications . . .

. . . The saintly doctors, no matter how much they have said or will say, can never furnish an exhaustive explanation of these figures and comparisons, since the abundant meanings of the Holy Spirit cannot be caught in words. Thus the explanation of these expressions usually contains less than what they in themselves embody.¹⁴

Here, St John of the Cross poses three questions:

- 'Who can describe the understanding He gives to loving souls in whom He dwells?'
- 'And who can express the experience He imparts to them?'

◎ ‘Who, finally, can explain the desires He gives them?’

These three questions touch upon the three co-ordinates of experience, expression and explanation, by which one comes to know one’s own relation with God. To these three co-ordinates St John of the Cross adds a fourth, that of communication.

The first moment

The first moment, experience, is an understanding impossible to describe adequately. The experience is inexplicable for it is communicated interiorly with ‘such delicate and sublime delight that no mortal tongue can describe it nor human intellect understand it’.¹⁵ The experience of St John of the Cross is primarily a search for love, with the Bride (the soul) and the Bridegroom (Christ) seeking one another. The searching is marked by questions: ‘Where have You hidden, Beloved, and left me moaning?’ ‘. . . Tell me, has He passed by you?’ ‘Ah, who has the power to heal me?’ ‘How do you endure, Oh life, not living where you live?’ ‘Why, since You wounded this Heart, don’t You heal it?’ Amidst these questions is a hidden certainty. The Bride can say after drinking of her Beloved: ‘I no longer knew anything’, and in the next breath, ‘. . . He taught me a sweet and living knowledge’. The experience is a knowledge of love that is communicated and received in a secret, indescribable, and unexpected way.¹⁶

The result of this interior communication between the Bride and Bridegroom is the experience of restlessness, of a soul that has been wounded with love, and of a longing to know that same love again. Restlessness results from an awareness of how short life is, how vain the world, how uncertain the times and how difficult is salvation. The mercy of God has ‘wounded’ the soul, leaving it ‘with desires and sighs pouring forth from her heart’.¹⁷ The longing is the human desire to search everywhere for that love once glimpsed. Even while this experience remains more a glimpse than clear vision, it reflects a love that is immense, hidden and beyond word and thought. This is akin to the experience of falling in love or having a deep friendship. It is true, but far more so than one can express or explain or communicate to another. One can know it in glimpses.

The second moment

Oh living flame of love
That tenderly wounds my soul
In its deepest center!¹⁸

These are the poetic words that St John of the Cross gives to an experience he knows only in glimpses. The second moment of the

spiritual life, expression, originates in the 'unspeakable groanings' of the Holy Spirit, who, 'unable to express the fullness of His meaning in ordinary words, utters mysteries in strange figures and likenesses'.¹⁹ The meaning of these figures and likenesses, containing inexplicable secrets and mysteries, is so abundant that it 'cannot be caught in words'.²⁰ The paradox here is that out of the impossibility of communication actually comes the communication. Thus comes the poetry. The expression is that of intuitive knowing. Out of what one knows at one's depths one can pray, write poetry, dance, dream, draw. The very act of this expression enables one to understand that otherwise inexplicable experience that has propelled one to create. That is to say, the expression embodies the experience and what is otherwise hidden becomes accessible. For example, sometimes it is only in the act of writing a letter that one knows what one has to say. In the moment of expression, one can reach below emotions and confusion, making expression a revelation of a unity and of an interior truth.

The third moment

The moment of expression is essential, but it cannot fully render the experience understandable. Prayer, devotion, creative expression, can bring the hidden experience to light, a light that prompts the third moment of the spiritual life, that of explanation or conceptual understanding. Whereas expression provides a symbolic unity at a glance, explanation provides a conceptual understanding into the parts of the whole, and does so insight by insight. Even at that, St John of the Cross warns that 'it would be foolish to think that expressions of love arising from mystical understanding . . . are fully explainable'.²¹

Explanation, or the moment of theology, is linked with expression as expression is with experience. Poetry, for example, cannot say everything, but the rational explanation can say nothing without it. The experience, received in secret or darkness, gives birth to the poem which both embodies the experience and sheds light upon it. The poem, in turn, makes possible a conceptual understanding, shedding light on the poem and further light on the original experience. Out of darkness comes light.

There is an illumination here and also an expansion. If there is an innate drive or interior mandate to express the experience which is beyond words, the poem is written in obedience to that mandate. But this artistic and symbolic expression, embodying the experience, seeks yet further self-understanding – a self-understanding that will deepen one's experience and will enlarge one's world. Whereas expression is a

personal symbol of an intimate experience, the consequent conceptual understanding carries the personal experience beyond the individual and into the community, making the experience an interpersonal one, linking one to others through discursive thought as well as intuition and feeling. The third moment enables scholars to understand the poetry of St John of the Cross as the conceptualization of a mystical ascent. As a conceptual statement about the truth of the innermost experience and its symbolic embodiment, this third moment is a vital function of the entire creative process, and integrally related to one's experience of God.

The fourth moment

These three moments – experience, expression, explanation – taken together, are interpenetrating and expansive. An understanding of these three moments is important, for the fourth moment, communication, is shaped by the way one experiences God, consciously or not. For example, Dorothy Day's human experience of 'the long loneliness' gave rise to her establishing the *Catholic Worker* and houses of hospitality. St Benedict's image of God as gentle father resulted in his writing the *Rule*, which was marked by a moderation and gentle spirit unknown in the rules codified by Cassian, who had elucidated ascetical practices before St Benedict's day. St Thérèse of Lisieux saw herself not as great but as small, and her writings produced her influential 'Little Way'. The first three moments enhance one's self-understanding and the fourth moment opens one to the world.

Communication is the moment in which one's experience and understanding of God, self and community are extended into practice. Just as the Spirit of God is a Spirit communicated in freedom, so too must the recipient of this divine communication give it freely to others. 'All who are free/Tell me a thousand graceful things of You.'²² In the case of St John of the Cross, the commentary on *The spiritual canticle* was written explicitly for Mother Ann of Jesus, prioress of the Discalced Carmelite nuns of St Joseph's in Granada, in an effort to be a help to her and to her community.

The circle of the four moments

As intrinsically interrelated, these four moments may be seen as moments on a circle that can be entered at any point. Whether one enters it through glimpses of mystery, through the writing of poetry or the practice of prayer, through the study of theology or through working in a soup kitchen is not important. The important thing is to

enter the circle, for that is where one will relate to God, to one's deepest self and to others, and where one's 'spirituality' will come to life. To enter the circle at any one point is to experience them all.

Experience is the ground out of which everything else comes. Expression is the symbolic form that provides a grasp of the otherwise inexplicable and innermost experience. Explanation is the conceptual statement of truth about experience. There is a relationship among these three moments, a continual give and take. These moments mutually penetrate one another, just as in the perichoresis the three persons of the Trinity mutually dwell in one another. Entering into the creative process is in fact a participation in the sacred and divine, even if one is not explicitly talking in terms of the Trinity. Together, these three moments enable the fourth, that is, a communication or an action that is consistent with one's inner life of God, however hidden. From one's self-understanding and from relating dynamically to the mystery, to the intuitive grasp of one's interior life and to the incarnate word, one communicates one's self in integrity and honesty. One's actions are then rooted in the mystery and freedom that are God.

According to this method, the first moment – that of human experience – is both the starting and ending points. The expression, explanation and action each heightens one's consciousness of the mystery that lies within. This mystery is the 'indestructible something' that lies at the core of the human being – even at the core of the self so often described as fractured, alienated, lost, divided. When a human being touches that 'something' there is, at the core of one's self, an interior fire which is exteriorly expressed in terms marked by unity and truth. It is this Self – even if seen only in glimpses – that gives rise to the free act. These four moments, then, can provide a framework for a person of the twentieth century to enter more and more deeply into his or her human experience, to understand one's Self through intuition and intellect, and to act in the world with an adult freedom that is anchored in one's first-hand experience of God.

NOTES

¹ Catherine of Siena, *The dialogue*, translation and introduction by Suzanne Noffke OP (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p 25.

² Johann Tauler, *Spiritual conferences* (Rockford IL: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1978), p 76.

³ *Ibid.*, p 45.

⁴ Karl Rahner, *The practice of faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), p 18.

⁵ John S. Dunne, *The reasons of the heart* (London: Macmillan, 1978), p 55.

⁶ Max Jacob, *Conseils à une jeune poète, suivi de Conseils à un étudiant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p 75.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp 10–11 (emphasis in the original).

⁸ A dictionary of Christian spirituality (London: SCM, 1983), v, cited in Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright and Edward Yarnold SJ (eds), *The study of spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), xxvi.

⁹ Kenneth J. Gergen, *The saturated self* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), pp 1–2.

¹⁰ Raïssa Maritain, *We have been friends together* (New York: Longmans, 1942), pp 90–91.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Teilhard de Chardin, *The divine milieu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp 76–77 (emphasis in the original).

¹³ Dunne, *Reasons of the heart*, p 57.

¹⁴ St John of the Cross, *The spiritual canticle*, in *The collected works of St John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh OCD and Otilio Rodriguez OCD (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1979), p 408.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p 526.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 410–411.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p 416.

¹⁸ St John of the Cross, *The living flame of love* in *The collected works of St John of the Cross* (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1979), p 578.

¹⁹ St John of the Cross, *The spiritual canticle*, p 408.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p 409.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p 408.

²² *Ibid.*, p 411.