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# Divine Understanding

Photo: Danielé Levis Pélusi

During Epiphany, we contemplate the Mystery of the Incarnation. In the Gospels, we read about the coming of the Wise Men, and we have our first look into Jesus’ beginnings on earth: his presentation at the temple, his baptism in the Jordan, and his first miracle at the Wedding at Cana.

So, why do an issue on Mysticism? Early Greek definitions of the word are “induct” and “initiate,” as well as “make someone aware of something.” And, according to *Strong’s Concordance*, the use of the Greek in the New Testament means “shutting the eyes and mouth to experience mystery,” figuratively “to be initiated into the ‘mystery revelation.’” I can think of no better topic to explore during a season that ponders mystery at its heart.

Christian mystics were interested in the idea of union with God: what did it mean to truly know the Creator of all things? Saint Julian of Norwich is famous for having 16 visions of Christ during a serious illness; she wrote about them at

great length in her book, *Revelations of Divine Love*, which is thought to be the first book written in English by a woman. Greek theologian Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite was influential in creating a Christianized Apophatic theology, which is the paradoxical idea that we must recognize that we have no knowledge of God in order to come to union with God. And, through his letters on the “Mixed Life,” Walter Hilton wrote about balancing one’s faith with one’s worldly duties.

Mysticism may seem too abstract for some, but I put together this issue in hopes of inspiring some spiritual thinking in Rupert’s Land. In this issue, Andrew Rampton explores the mystery of our liturgy and the Eucharist; Diane Lee-Olenic talks about how the Gospels can shed some light on God’s will; and Kirsten Pinto Gfroerer offers some helpful tips for those who are interested in reading spiritual work. On page 14, I’ve included a fitting image for the season, paired with some text from 2 Corinthians, which says, “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another...” Lastly, in *via media*, Mary Coswin reflects on the mysteries of Christ.

We’re in the depths of winter, when our thoughts turn inward as we wait for the coming of spring. We may not find all the answers we want when we look to the spiritual writers of the past, but the act of searching is what carries us to a better understanding of our faith.



Kyla Neufeld is the editor of *Rupert's Land News*.

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# Mysticism, Mystics, and Mystery

GEOFFREY WOODCROFT

Evelyn Underhill, in the book *Daily Readings with a Modern Mystic*, writes:

“Our deepest life consists in a willed correspondence with the world of Spirit, and this willed correspondence, which is prayer, is destined to fulfill itself along two main channels; in love towards God and in love towards humanity – two loves which at last and at their highest become one love.”

This season, we are beckoned into a conversation the angels never leave, where God is always present and we are *mystic silent*. This is a conversation whereby our every breath and every motion are integral parts of the orchestration of God.

Often, when I do not hear God’s symphony, it’s because I am overwhelmed by the negativity and violence in the world. In my distraction, I am not focused on fulfilling two loves to make them one. Rather, I am focused on fear, and fear consumes and destroys.

To will correspondence with God – to pray along the two main channels – is to trust that what has obstructed the two loves from becoming one, what has bred fear, is not an obstacle to God. This is to say that she who trusts God in the most uncertain of times shall birth peace and blessing far beyond her capacity. He who vulnerably reaches away from fear and violence gives birth to justice and comfort far beyond his capacity.

The wise ones travelled months through wilderness, danger, and the unknown, carrying

great wealth (probably enough to secure a return home). They followed the night star map, prophecy, and hope. They risked themselves not for *themselves*, but for the restoration of God’s peace, justice, and mercy: shalom. They brought the very gifts the Christ child required. Have we fully comprehended the gifts of the wise three, and the purpose for which the gifts were to be used?

We might think the story doesn’t tells us, but I believe it does. The wise three risked to throw Herod off the trail of the baby king; they risked when they warned Joseph and Mary to flee from Herod; and they risked when they left for home a more dangerous and longer route. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus escaped into Egypt, probably with enough gold, frankincense, and myrrh to keep them safe and free in a foreign land for two years. The wise three embraced the love of God and love of humanity so that God’s shalom could be birthed into life.

You and I know our neighbourhoods, and at a gut level we know what is needed for the shalom of our brothers and sisters. I hear God calling us away from what is presumably normal and comfortable, to challenge unjust structures, to secure the possibility of God’s shalom by loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and loving our neighbours as ourselves. I hear God calling us into the mystery by asking that we trust in our gift to make two loves one.



Geoffrey Woodcroft,  
Bishop of Rupert’s Land



## The Source of Life: Mystical Experiences in the Liturgy

ANDREW RAMPTON

Photo: [Jametlene Reskp](#)

"One often gets the impression today that the liturgy is perceived more as a problem to be solved than as a source of life." This is the opening line of the 2014 English translation of Goffredo Boselli's *The Spiritual Meaning of the Liturgy*. Whether one thinks of the liturgy as problematic or not, it is true that the Church intends its liturgical celebrations to be life-giving, especially when we appeal to the mystical tradition for a description of the experience of the liturgy.

The liturgy offers us a liminal space, which Jean Corbon compares to the moments of dawn just before sunrise in his book, *The Wellspring of Worship*: "The time of the luminous cloud but not yet of day." We have moved from our day-to-day and into a special space and time, set aside for this purpose, where there waits a particular encounter with the mystery of God. An encounter which contains the possibility – and the expectation! – of revelation. Revelation by God of God's self, and revelation of our own selves.

We should expect the liturgy, particularly when we participate in sacramental celebrations, to be a source of life. When we gather to offer prayer, praise, and worship to God, we do so not out of habit or a compulsion toward rote repetition – indeed, empty rituals repeated over and over are the grip of death – but because we expect to meet there the mystery that is the source of all life: God. We do not hope for this encounter; we expect it because God has promised "where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). The encounter is one that seems to be a paradox: deep, familiar, knowing intimacy with one who is more than we can fully comprehend, but also one who uses each such seemingly impossible encounter to offer still more revelation of self.

Our participation in the liturgy is participation in God's work, for only mystery can reveal mystery – only God can reveal God. When Jesus appears to the disciples after the resurrection and shares a meal with them, he opens their



minds to the scriptures where they can then plainly see him, when they could not before (Luke 24:45–48). The mystery reveals itself to those who participate in it. In that revelation, we encounter what Boselli referred to as “a source of life”: a wellspring of living water.

This wellspring of life flows forth like a river, into whose current we are called to step and travel. When we participate in this mystery, this divine work, God rejoices in our inhabitation of creation and delights in our own rejoicing (Proverbs 8:31). When the liturgy and our lives connect, we find ourselves in the centre of the mystery, and we realize part of the mystery revealed. As the disciples saw Jesus in the scriptures, so we realize that the wellspring not only flows from God but may also flow from us. Through our participation in this work of God, we realize that we, too, may be sources of life.

Consider our participation in the eucharistic celebration at the moment when the gifts are presented. We bring bread and wine to the altar as both the fruit of creation and the work of human hands. We are the fruit of nature, history, and culture, but each one of us also represents an outpouring of love within the Trinity, a love which draws us back to its source. And so, we present bread and wine that they may become the body and blood of the Lord, and in so doing

the entire life of humanity is transformed. In the bread and wine, our lives are transformed through God’s work, in which we participate as an act of communion and sharing.

The transformative power of encountering mystery in the liturgy is why Jesus calls us to plunge deeply into the river that flows from this wellspring of life (Luke 9:24). When we submerge ourselves in this work of God, its abundance overflows us with holiness and manifests as God’s glory. When we drink from the flowing river and take in that mystery, it reveals to us that we need not gather fruit for ourselves to eat, remembering the pain, rejection, barrenness, and death of our actions in Eden. We are instead transformed into the very trees of life ourselves.

The Anglican tradition includes many liturgical styles and patterns. Liturgy is always contextual, and the rites and language which open up the possibility of encounter with the mystery of God differ from community to community. What does not change is the expectation of that divine encounter: the desire to participate in the liturgical work of God and dip into that flowing river, the wellspring of life, to know God’s self-revelation. In so doing, we are transformed into a more perfect likeness of the one in whose image we were all made.



Photo: James Coleman



Andrew Rampton is the incumbent of St. Bartholomew’s Anglican in Winnipeg and the chaplain of St. John’s College. In August, he completed an MA in theology at Huron University College, specializing in liturgy.



A stained-glass depiction of Saint Julian at Norwich Cathedral.

## Reading the Great Spiritual Writers of the Past

KIRSTEN PINTO GFROERER



*All shall be well, and all shall  
be well, and all manner of  
things shall be well.*

–Julian of Norwich, “Long Text 27,”  
*Reflections of Divine Love*

Many of us come to know spiritual writers and mystics through a quote that resonates, challenges, comforts or inspires. We are so taken in by the quote that we want more of the same. But when we go looking, we do not always find exactly what we were searching for. Often, we encounter something complicated, demanding, strange, sometimes beautiful, and sometimes troubling. Is it worthwhile to read the difficult texts of spiritual writers who write such inspiring words? I think it is.

The truth we meet in the quotes that strike our souls is meaningful because it is grounded in the infinite, complex truth of God. This means that, beneath these quotes, there is wisdom that informs and shapes the quality and resonance of this thought. Without this undergirding, the quote’s few words lose their true power. To search for the structures of deep truth is part of the search for God. The truth of God always stands the same, but the way we understand

truth on the surface changes over time. Just so, every era has gifts to offer. There is always truth that people of one era know, which has not been understood before or is forgotten by the ages that follow. These texts that have lasted show themselves to be able to reach into the deep structures of truth that resonate across the ages. Thus, these truths offer new insights and possibilities into our own limited worldviews. Writings from another time can also chasten and awaken us to see something afresh, or to recognize a long overdue need to repent and turn to God. Just think of what we have learned in the last few years from our Indigenous brothers and sisters about the dangers of believing that we have the only way of seeing the world, and not listening to wisdom of the elders.

So, how do we go deeper? I have some ideas on the following page.

### 1. Do not be afraid.

Follow the quote that pulls you, or let someone you trust lead you to a good fit, and just begin. If you don't know where to start, don't worry; you have already started by going to church. Scripture is of God *and* it is a strange and ancient text. You are already grappling with a hard book. Going beyond the lectionary and reading the strange stuff alongside the Gospels will help you grow acclimatized to the complexity of Truth. Reading with wonder expands thinking. Reading scripture will help spiritual texts because most ancient spiritual writers are steeped in scripture.

### 2. Look for love.

A fundamental teaching of our faith is that we are called to love the Lord our God and to love our neighbour as ourselves. Thus, spiritual reading should help us do this. Saint Augustine teaches that, if we read scripture in a way that does not build up love for God and neighbour, we are not understanding it, but when we do find love in a text, even where others don't find love, it is good. I think this principle of Saint Augustine can be applied to all texts that are intended for our spiritual growth. Love is not always evident on the surface of a work, but this is when we are called to look again. Julian of Norwich, who penned the epigraph, says that her work is useless unless it makes the reader love Jesus more. When we read, we should always ask, "how does what is being said here increase my love for God and my neighbour?" In so doing, we follow God's desire for us.

### 3. Read humbly.

When we come to ideas and imagery with which we are uncomfortable in spiritual writing, we might feel tempted to stop reading, glaze over the text, or criticize the writer. In order to really receive from spiritual teachers of another time, it is important to throw away, at least for a moment, any doctrine of progress that says we moderns know better. Assume that the writer is more intelligent than you are – after all, the book has stood the test of time. Give up the

assumption that every culturally uncomfortable thing is wrong. Instead, when you are uncomfortable, ask yourself why you are uncomfortable and what assumptions are you bringing to the text. If there is fear in your assumption or discomfort, what are you afraid of? What would it look like if what this text teaches was true in your life? How do the uncomfortable parts work with the parts of the text that resonate with you as truth? How does the puzzle work together, and why does it work this way?

### 4. Let the text read you.

When we ask questions of ourselves, we let the text lead. This does not mean we have to agree with all the details of what the text teaches. But if we have suspended judgment long enough to be vulnerable, and if we let the text ask us questions about ourselves and about truth, then the text becomes more than a piece of new information to accumulate: it becomes a friend and a teacher through whom we can grow and learn about ourselves and about truth. Truth is always larger than what we can grasp on our own, so letting a spiritual writer stretch our truth is integral to the life of faith. If Truth is infinite, our truths can always use some expanding and they will not expand if we always come to a text as the one in control.

Spiritual writings are meant to change our lives. Even if you are not ready to be changed, they are good to read anyway. If you are prepared to be changed, then read slowly and prayerfully, searching for God. You may not agree with or understand everything you read, but, in the end, the God of truth and love is always willing to be found. All we have to do is look.



Kirsten Pinto Gfroerer is a counsellor and writer currently learning from the medieval theologian and mystic, Julian of Norwich. She is part of St. Margaret's Anglican, where she served for a long time as a pastor. To learn more about her work visit [the Anchorhold](#).



# The Gospels and God's Will

DIANE LEE-OLENIC



Nathanael under the fig tree.

This past year was very challenging personally, as I moved from Toronto with my husband and settled into our new home in Winnipeg. Our road trip took us five days, driving in the treacherous weather around the mountains, passing through a long stretch near the border. One might ask why we made such a big move, leaving the family and friends. Certainly it was a test for both of us to follow God's will and understand His purpose in our life together.

I do not have a clear answer. Digging deep into the course of my life, however, I have no doubt that our hard times can lead us towards God closely. Rolling back 17 years, I emigrated from South Korea with one suitcase, having no idea where God was leading me. Charmed by *The Little House on the Prairie*, and following my heart to the prairies, I landed in Winnipeg by myself. It was my innocent mistake, believing that all prairies were like the ones on TV, yet God had a mysterious plan for this feeble human creature to venture into a deeper faith. My adventure continued, flying from Winnipeg

to Toronto, finding my soulmate in Toronto, and finishing my further studies in education and divinity there. I lived there for 12 years until I returned to my Canadian hometown, Winnipeg.

To a Christian, the question is not why we migrate, but how we discern God's will as we move and enter into a new chapter of life. There are events that have led all of us up to this point, but it is difficult to explain why those events happened in those specific moments in the past, and it is obscure what will unfold tomorrow as we are conditioned by time and space, finite in one sense and infinite in another. Thus Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...." Blaise Pascal, however, reminds us that "the heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of." Therefore, we might need to engage the heart and the mind to apprehend the mystic past and construct a revelatory future. The one thing I can say is that, in our lives, there is no part that is meaningless, whether remembered or unremembered. Surrounded by the unintelligible

joys and sorrows in this inescapable world, we must trust that God's invisible hands shape us for His purpose, as the Potter reworks the pot from the clay.

Nevertheless, in our post-Christendom era, blown by narcissism, our human willpower is more frequently discussed than Jeremiah's vision of the Potter. Now, let's listen to the author of Hebrews: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son..." (1:1–2). Christ has made God known to restore our relationship with Him, and we can discern God's will through the Scriptures, the Logos, the incarnate of God, which is God's revelation to humanity. Hence, John 1 starts: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

God's mercy and love are unveiled everywhere in the Bible. Even when God is revealed as the Judge, we must not oversimplify such a prophetic message as the punishment. Rather, it is a reminder of the divine justice by the One who desires to have a covenant relationship with God's people. Looking into the Gospels, particularly, we gain a new perspective of our present history through the resurrected Christ. During his earthly ministry, Jesus talked about many parables to illustrate God's will. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32), the father portrays an unconditional love and a complete restoration of sonship. Like this forgiving father, God wills to forgive and receive us who often travel far away from God, and we, just as the prodigal son, are saved by the grace

of the Lord, not by our human works. Using the language of love, Jesus also tells us to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, and minds and to love our neighbours as ourselves. If we pour out on God our whole power of love, possessing nothing at all for ourselves, except wanting to belong to God, and if we care for those in need, we will experience God.

Knowing God's will is a spiritual discipline that aims towards a mystical union with God, which requires us to follow Christ, who commands us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. This commandment is not easy to follow, and it involves a hard decision. Our faith requires not merely knowing God's will, but *doing* God's will. Saint Augustine viewed that our contemplative life should yield action. In the Parable of Two Sons (Matthew 21:28–32), it is obvious who did his father's will: the one who said no, but changed his mind and went to work in the vineyard as his father told him to. Aligning his will with his Father's will, Jesus exemplified himself as the atoning sacrifice for all human sins to show God's divine love for humankind.

God wills our salvation to restore the broken human relationship with the Creator. Behind moments when we cannot sense the divine presence is God, who searches for the lost sheep. And, God knows each of us by name, just as Jesus knew Nathanael when this disciple was still under the fig tree (John 1:47–48). Even during the period of our wandering, like the Israelites in exile, we must obey the Lord and remember that God has a salvific plan for us. Thus, we pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!"



Diane Lee-Olenic is a St. John's College alumnus with an M.Ed. from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and an M.Div. from Wycliffe College. Currently, she is doing her diocesan placement at St. Peter's Anglican Church in Winnipeg.



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# Parish News Round Up

## In Love and Gratitude: A Note from Bishop Don

It has been over six weeks since I officially retired from being Bishop of Rupert’s Land. Nancy and I are transitioning into our new mode of family and professional life. I’ve been able to put some distance between my previous work routine and my present daily routine. Through the many conversations I’ve had that usually begin with “So how’s retirement going?”, I have had the opportunity to reflect more deeply on the last 18 ½ years of episcopal ministry. The overarching feeling I carry very strongly is one of having been blessed – blessed by God and blessed by all of you who have patiently ministered alongside of us. You have encouraged us to share our gifts, and you have tolerated our shortcomings with patience and good humour.

We especially want to thank you for the very creative and wonderful retirement party that you gave us – and for the very generous “retirement purse” you provided. Thank you to everyone who was able to contribute to that gift. Thank you for cooperating with

a new method of transitioning in episcopal ministry (electing a co-adjutor bishop) and for welcoming Bishop Geoffrey so warmly in his new ministry.

We look forward to continuing to serve God and this Church in the Diocese of Rupert’s Land. Nancy and I will likely visit a few parishes in Winnipeg before discerning where we may be called to serve in a more permanent way. I am looking forward to resuming work on a book based on my PhD thesis and hopefully to doing a little teaching of theology as the opportunity arises.

We wish you all a most blessed New Year.  
- (Bishop) Donald & Nancy Phillips



Bishop Don and others dance the "YMCA" at his Farewell on November 12, 2018.

## Canadian Foodgrains Bank

Canadian Foodgrains Bank published a reflection, looking back on the work they’ve done over 2018, and reporting that the number of people experiencing hunger has increased for the first time in a decade. However, they’ve also been seeing success in other programs, like Scaling-Up Conservation Agriculture in



East Africa, which helps farmers in drought-prone areas. You can read the whole article at the [Canadian Foodgrains Bank website](#).



This page of the Parish News Round Up is sponsored by Richard Rosin. For more information, see his ad on page 16.



## Primate’s World Relief and Development Fund

PWRDF Youth Council member Jessica Steele attended the 24th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP24), in Katowice, Poland, as a representative of KAIROS Canada. Her mission was to urge the Canadian government to increase its greenhouse gas emissions reductions targets, and join other women climate activists in adding their voice on the gendered impacts of climate change.

“It is time that Canada steps up to this challenge by agreeing to more ambitious climate targets,” said Steele. “We need to commit in word and in action to facilitate a transition away from fossil fuels and support communities both in Canada and abroad who are most affected by the climate crisis.”

You can read [PWRDF’s coverage of the convention here](#).

You can read [Steele’s report of COP24 here](#).



PWRDF Youth Council Representative Jessica Steele, representing KAIROS at COP24 in Poland.

### Upcoming Issues

In **February’s** issue on **Living with Less**, we’ll explore poverty and the privilege behind being able to choose to live minimally.

In **March**, we’ll look for the lonely people sitting in our pews in this issue on **Being Alone**.

In **April**, we’ll find out all the ways Rupert’s Land is encouraging parishes to step outside the box in this issue on **Creative Disruptions**.

## Donate to Rupert’s Land News

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# Stories for the Seasons: A Review of *Pilgrim Year*

KYLA NEUFELD



*Pilgrim Year* is a new collection of books written by Steve Bell and published by Novalis. *Pilgrim Year* is comprised of seven books – one for each season of the Church calendar – which offer reflections and encouragement for their particular seasons. Some reflections are about the season in general, and others are about specific feast or saint’s days. Each reflection, however, is paired with a song from Steve Bell’s vast body of work with the intention of enhancing and complementing the reading experience.



These also aren’t meant to be day-to-day devotionals. Rather, they can be read one at a time, all at once, or out of order.

But, even though the nature of these reflections is flexible and subject to the discretion of the reader, they are all connected by the central theme of story: the stories of the Church and our Christian faith.

“Together, these recurring seasons, with their remembrances, fasts and feasts, retell and reharrow the living story of God and God’s good creation – a story that has been entrusted to the Church; a story that often runs as a counter-narrative to stories broadly told in the wider culture. We must not be naive about such things, for stories really do matter,” says the introduction to the collection on Epiphany. “They fashion a rich bed of receptive imagination from which all manner of possibilities are either

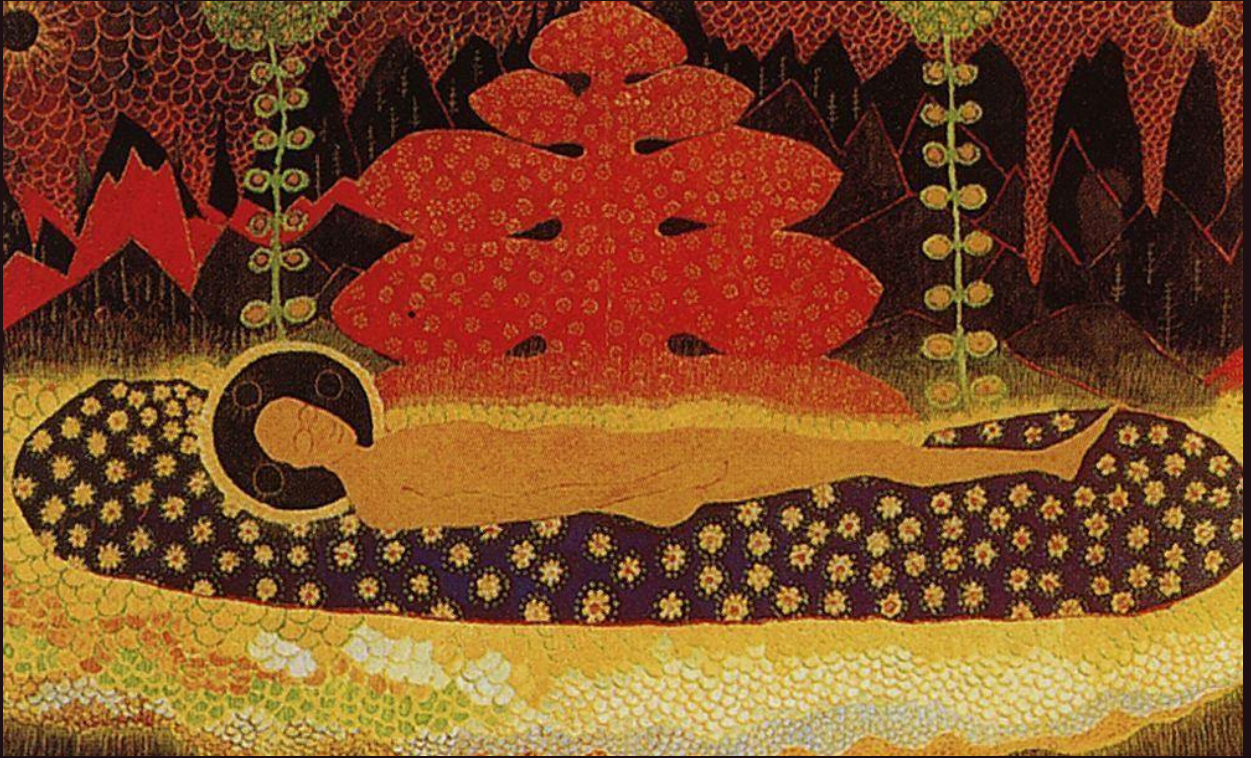
opened up or closed down. Indeed, if one wants to know the cause of the inspiring and/or bewildering behaviours of any given individual or culture, one need only investigate the foundational stories they tell....

“The Church tells and retells her sacred stories year after year, much as a mother to her children who ask for the same stories night after night. And like any good child’s tale, they continue to reward well into adulthood. Each time we rehearse and reharrow these stories, we unearth something new precisely because there is so much more to receive, but also because our capacity to receive has deepened.”

What I appreciate about these reflections, and what I suspect other readers will as well, is the new approach to these stories I’ve heard time and time again. But I’m also grateful for the reminder that these stories are a part of me as member of the Church; I may have heard them hundreds of times, but they will never get old.

These books can be purchased individually or together as a box set at [the Pilgrim Year website](#). Readers can find all of the accompanying songs there as well.





"Veil" by Ukrainian painter Kazimir Malevich, 1908.

"Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit."

– 2 Corinthians 3:12–18



# Everyday Mysteries

MARY COSWIN

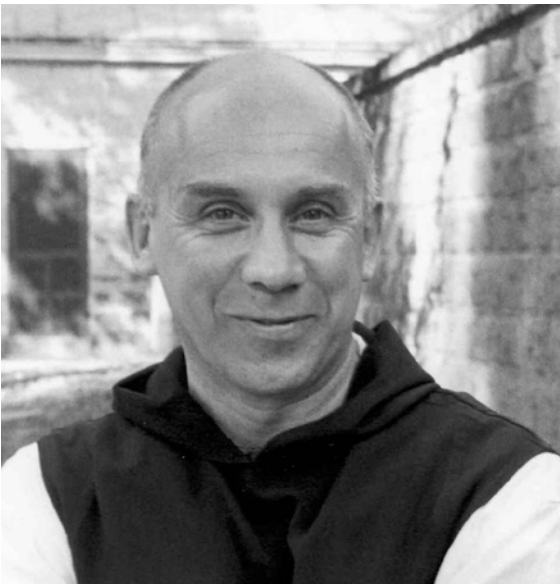
Photo: Evelyn Mostrom

Someone has said, “Life is a not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived.” I sense that most of us find ourselves experiencing “problems” in our lives rather than “mystery.” We are able to confront, attack, resolve, or decry problems, and in this way, feel we are in control. But mysteries, except those in TV series like *Murdoch Mysteries*, find us wrapped in unknowns, in holy darkness.

To understand Mystery we would do well to watch a child of three years exploring the world. Taking a child on a walk on a summer day in a

park can take a very long time; every bug and leaf is a fascinating mystery, one to be gazed at, admired, enjoyed. No rush, no problem, just wonder. If only I could approach life as a child does, as a mystery to be contemplated.

As Christians, we often speak of Christ’s mysteries – his life, death, and resurrection – and of God as Holy Mystery. We understand our lives to be a share in the mysteries of Christ. Yes, even our messy, mundane lives are where Holy Mystery abides. Our ups and downs, our very selves, are the dwelling place of God: “The



Thomas Merton



Etty Hillesum

Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

My spirituality of scripture teacher at university used to say that "If God is, God is in this time and place." Jesus said it this way: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

The mystics of every age knew this profound truth and experienced it in personal ways. Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jewish woman who died at age 26 in the Holocaust, said in her diary, *An Interrupted Life*: "That is how I feel, always and without cease, as if I were lying in your arms, O God, so protected and sheltered and so steeped in eternity." Even a concentration camp is not outside God's reach. Etty added, "...life is one long stroll with God."

What could possibly convince a person deprived of freedom, witnessing human suffering, up close and personal on a daily basis, that God is protecting, sheltering, and strolling along with her? Here we find ourselves in the realm of mysticism, the realm of mystery.

Mysticism is the lived belief in the existence of realities beyond our intellectual understanding and sense perception, which are central to being and accessible by personal experience. It is the conviction that there is more to this life than "meets the eye." Mysticism, at least

Christian mysticism (and there are mystics of all religious traditions), is the awareness of, and relationship with, the Divine through Christ, which expresses itself in love for self and others in the concrete realities of one's circumstances.

Etty Hillesum found God in Westerbork and in the suffering prisoners around her, like Thomas Merton who said in *The Seven Storey Mountain*: "At the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world..."

These two examples show so well, I believe, the power and beauty of mystery welcomed. No problem is solved, but meaning is abundant.


During the days of Advent, as I write, Christians anticipate again the celebration of Word made flesh, the Incarnation, the greatest Mystery of all. With eyes of faith, we recognize God with us in the guise of a tiny, helpless (Divine) Child.

To be sure, mystical experience and consciousness is a gift. We cannot earn it or manufacture it. We can, however, dispose ourselves to receive it. The silence of nature in this season models for us the receptive silence and stillness required to notice the still, small voice; the bleakness of winter encourages hope in unseen life waiting for its time. Appreciating the goodness and beauty of daily life's small miracles cultivates the mystic soil, and the simple black and white landscape invites us to notice inner and outer movements.

Mystics-in-the making, rejoice.




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