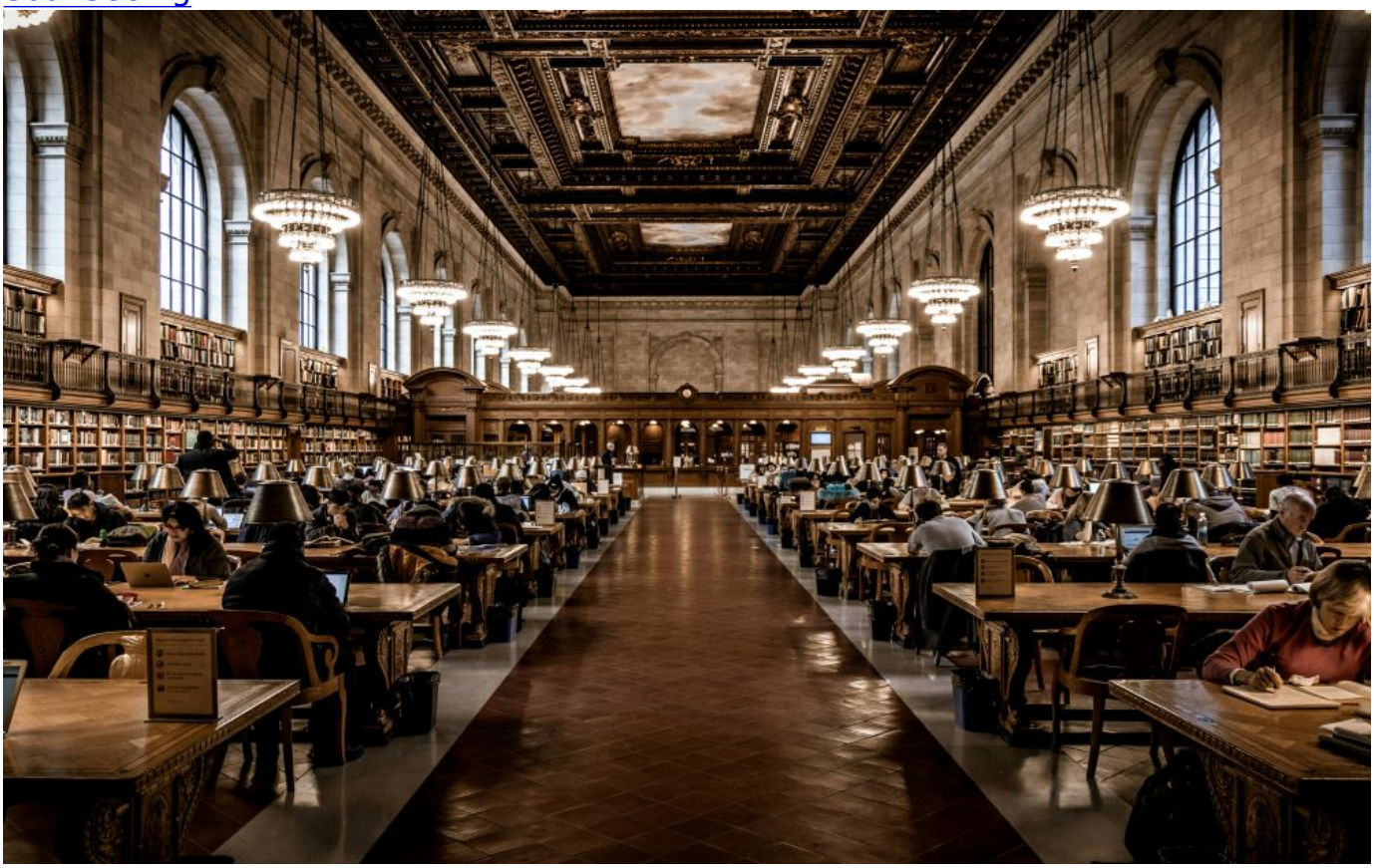
Spirituality
Soul Seeing



(Unsplash/Patrick Robert Doyle)

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Have you ever been tormented by faith? Gripped by a restless need for answers? For 10 years, I pursued theology with passion. I needed to know, truly know, that the word "God" meant something.

In the end, my quest went up in flames. Perhaps as it was always destined to.

And yet, that decade pursuing theological understanding remains the defining adventure of my life. I'm still discerning what it all means, this odyssey of seeking, finding, losing and, ultimately, regaining.

I was 5 years old when my older brother received first Communion. I remember poking around the sanctuary afterwards, my dad beside me.

"Dad," I asked, "Where is God?"

He hesitated, taken aback: "Well, son, God is everywhere."

"Oh. There?" I pointed to a window.

"Yes, son." My Dad had chosen his strategy.

"There?" I pointed upward at the crucifix.

"Yes, son. There too."

How could this be? Dad wouldn't lie. Yet I noticed his split-second hesitation and understood that my question had somehow transgressed the bounds of answerability.

In time, I'd set off in search of answers to the unanswerable.

I discovered the religious humanities in my high school career. Fr. Dan Scheidt's Great Catholic Thinkers course exposed me to Catholic philosophy, literature and theology. I encountered Thomas Merton and G.K. Chesterton, the creative imagination of Walker Percy and Flannery O’Connor, the sophistication of Pascal's Pensees and Augustine's Confessions.

What stuck out to me about the religious humanities was the conviction that all truths anywhere were expressions of a transcendent truth everywhere, and that Christianity was a humanistic and integrating force that honored the use of reason. Theology, as it turned out, was faith seeking understanding: 20 centuries worth of human beings contemplating and opening themselves to a revealed mystery.

The decade that followed was a whirlwind of theological study. As I graduated from Notre Dame's undergraduate theology program into its master's program, and from there to the doctoral program in systematic theology (with two nourishing years of

teaching between) I broadened my intellectual horizons in ways I could have hardly imagined. I read the New Testament in koine Greek, admired the bold and innovative syntheses of the ancient church fathers, and immersed myself in Catholic social doctrine and liberation theology.

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That time was an intellectual cammino, a pilgrim's adventure marked by extremes: paper-writing binges fueled by energy drinks, books piled 15-high in my 6' x 6' study cubicle, thick bundles of flash cards in Greek, Latin and German. There were hundreds, maybe even thousands, of pages to be read each week, in addition to hundreds of pages of writing due each semester.

This was mostly a joyful time. However, as my knowledge deepened, so too did my anxiety. I felt diminishing returns in my search for answers. The broad questions I had pursued grew ever more "micro" as academia pushed me toward specialization. Meanwhile, the scarcity of job opportunities became painfully clear. In my daily thoughts and behavior, I began "performing" scholarship rather than pursuing truth, second-guessing myself constantly like an imposter who didn't belong. My passion was slipping, replaced by fear, careerism and pride.

It came to a head one mid-May afternoon in Notre Dame’s Hesburgh Library. I submitted a paper I knew was strong. But rather than gratification, all I felt was dread. When I was young, my dad had told me that God was everywhere. But on that afternoon, I knew God was not in that paper. The words I'd written felt hollow. My faith — and my life — were burnt out.

I handed in the paper, disconsolate and depressed. I knew I couldn't go on like this.

In the following months, I withdrew from the program and retreated from academia to recuperate. I made an eight-day Ignatian retreat in Colorado. With my spiritual director, I imagined walking with Jesus on the water—only to sink into the waves and cry out, accusing him bitterly of leading me there. It was there I discovered that Jesus' tenderness could bear even my anger.

Later, I lived briefly in a place whose geography was as confused and unsettled as the landscape of my mind: the border between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. There I encountered many Palestinian Christians who frequently invited me to their side of

the separation fence for tea, dinner and even pickup basketball. It was in Bethlehem that something shifted: the simple reality of being welcomed and loved, of receiving genuine hospitality, slowly untangled the confusion and conflict I'd been carrying.

Most importantly, I found new practices. Today, I regularly visit the Catholic Worker community in Chicago, in which the works of mercy are practiced daily. Much of my theological knowledge has fallen by the wayside, but the Gospels have sustained me — particularly the beatitudes.

If my story testifies to anything, it is to the great Augustinian confession: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you." But also, it is summed up in another Augustinian maxim: "If you comprehend it, it is not God." God defies the hubris of any final attempt to be comprehended in any human concept.

The intellectual life is a noble thing: a tradition passed down, from believer to believer, to contemplate the revealed mystery. Yet while faith can seek — and indeed find — understanding, understanding is incomplete without faith. We walk not in the fullness of light, but in luminous darkness.

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