

A feather on God's breath: Recovering our hearts

Rich Heffern | Jan. 7, 2011 Eco Catholic

A memory: I was 21, in Vietnam-era military police school, with 40 others in the hill country of central Texas. We were all exhausted, dirty and dispirited on a long march back from the pistol range. Suddenly one of our squad leaders started loudly singing, "Monday, Monday," a then-current hit from the folk-rock group The Mamas and the Papas.

To a man, we all took up the lyrics. Our drudgery shape-shifted into a make-it-up-as-you-go bugaloo down the gravel road. In a moment, fatigue-clad automatons were transformed into a spunky, badly harmonizing, ragtag assembly of uniquely peppy spirits with a whole new lease on life that day.

Another memory: While living on the West Coast, I was driving home in my battered little convertible across the Golden Gate Bridge. The siren blast of a freighter outward bound for Capetown or Singapore duetted with the foghorns on the bridge's towers. Past the glittery bay-reflected lights of Sausalito, I saw ahead the pastel tiers of fog-stalked San Francisco looking ever so bedazzling like the Emerald City of Oz. Off to the right, the titanic, heaving mystery of the Pacific Ocean brooded in distant, cloud-shrouded darkness.

My mind and heart were swept off their feet and knocked out by how mysteriously, ravishingly beautiful our world can be. The only drugs involved were the salty night air and music pulsing from the radio -- the sensual sawdust charm of Bob Dylan's voice singing with the organ and his own harmonica.

Here's poet and Christian mystic Thomas Traherne writing in the 17th century:

Joy, pleasure, beauty
kindness, glory, love
Sleep, day, life, light
Peace, melody, my sight.
My ears and heart did fill
and freely move.
All that I saw did me delight
The Universe was then a world of treasure
To me a universal world of pleasure.

Theologian Dorothy Soelle points out that the language of religion is the language of mysticism. But because religion has been experienced in authoritarian and patriarchal forms, frequently colluding with the market economy and with consumerism, perhaps this potential has never been realized for most of us.

Soelle writes: "The language of religion, by which I do not mean the stolen language in which a male God commands and radiates imperial power, the language of religion is the language of mysticism. I am entirely and wholly in God. I cannot fall out of God at all. I am indestructible. 'Who can separate us from the love of Christ? we can ask with the mystic Paul. 'Neither death nor life, neither height or depth, neither what is, nor what is to come' (Romans 8:35, 38)"

As an antidote to the addiction of consumerism and materialism, the mystical way is being reclaimed in Christianity. A hunger for mysticism everywhere is evidenced by increased attention to Tarot cards, crystals, Wicca, wind chimes, sweat lodges, Centering prayer, *lectio divina*, gurus, meditation, yoga, Tibetan religious paintings, the mindfulness disciplines of Buddhism, the ancient Catholic devotions to the eucharist ... the list goes on.

British theologian Mary C. Grey warns us that "privatized mysticism is easy for the competitive individualism characteristic of contemporary culture," but what is really being sought at a societal level is "the recovery of heart, the deepest source of human desire, as an alternative to what is offered by the consumerism banquet of the global market."

What we seek to recover, according to Grey, is "a community experience both of God's energy -- the Spirit's greenness, or *viriditas* as Hildegard of Bingen calls it -- and the mystery of intertwined joy and suffering, delight and darkness, the participation in both."

The memories I listed above are examples from my own life of the Spirit's greenness. Each of us can make up his or her own memorable list from life experiences. Traherne was doing it 400 years ago. Hildegard of Bingen wrote this description of herself toward the end of the 12th century:

"Listen: There was once a king sitting on his throne. Around him stood great and wonderfully beautiful columns ornamented with ivory, bearing the banners of the king with great honor. Then it pleased the king to raise a small feather from the ground, and he commanded it to fly. The feather flew, not because of anything in itself but because the air bore it along. Thus am I, a feather on the breath of God."

Hildegard wrote explicitly about the natural world as God's creation, charged through and through with God's beauty and energy, entrusted to our care, to be used by us for our benefit but not to be mangled or destroyed.

How will the salvation of this world be accomplished? Perhaps partly at least by our own wholeheartedly savoring its joys and embracing its sorrows. How can we ensure that our children's children will have a viable future? By reconnecting to the mystical dimension of religion, by recovering our very hearts, in a deep immersion in the glory, beauty, sadness, pathos and mystery of the world around us.

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