

The 'inked' waitress, Meister Eckhart, and the urge to display the glory within

Rich Heffern | Jan. 27, 2011 Eco Catholic

The waitress arrived with order pad in hand. She was heavily 'inked,' as they say. A lavish feast of illustration covered both arms from under her wrists to disappear beneath her shirt sleeves — stylized dragons interwoven with many-petaled exotic flowers, intricate jewels and symbols. When she turned to deliver our order, an ornate rose could be seen on her lower back.

In 1991, a 5,000-year-old 'inked' man made headlines in newspapers around the world when his frozen body was discovered on a thawing glacier in the Alps. That's how old body adornment is.

Anyone who has ever lived with a teenager knows this: There is no power on earth stronger than the human urge to display, to show the world who we are, what we want to become.

I watched my teenage stepson show me and everyone else who he was, with a distinctive haircut etched with razor-hewn zigzags, a Superman emblem tattoo on his upper arm, his bedroom papered with poster blowups of the Michaels — Jackson and Jordan — and of M. C. Hammer and Malcolm X. For a while the house shook with the heavy percussion and in-your-face sounds of hiphop.

We must tell others who we are, no matter what. It's a basic human need, to turn ourselves inside out.

Just killing time? No, in the ruckus of our lives we glimpse hints of the Holy, signs of the Mystery, and we must tell others the story. In the midst of our everyday babble and business, we stumble upon glory and we must somehow show off our connection with it, flaunt its residence within us.

Divine Mystery plants an image in our heart that begs to be expressed and lived out. This image gives rise to yearnings, wild longings, and perhaps a burning to do the work that fulfills the image. We either yield to it or bury it.

Our days are full of chores, appointments, things to do, but also a beckoning wish to decorate our office, confess our fondest wish, pen a good letter, paste up a collage, make an artful decision, fall in love or mount an insurrection against some injustice. This force urging us to create, display, to tell our story, to act creatively is no doubt the passion of divine revelation itself. There seems to be something of the graffiti artist in God.

'Divinity is seeking to be revealed everywhere,' said Meister Eckhart. 'Every creature is doing its best to express God.'

Is that all there is to it? Just finding our light and letting it shine. Isn't there too much of that sort of thing around these days? Isn't it self-indulgent? Our biographies, though, don't belong to us. Our religious quest is done ultimately for the good of the community. In the end we can't help but be members of the global tribe. We must creatively give birth to ourselves for the benefit of the whole Earth.

It may well be a key antidote to the addiction and consumerism that take such a toll on the planet's resources,

this creative activity of weaving the discordant elements of one's life into harmony and significance, of discovering the fascinating sumptuousness of our own inner life, then connecting our gifts, talents and energies up to good work that needs to be done in our world.

"It is no longer possible to believe," writes E. F. Schumacher, "that any political or economic reform, or scientific advance, or technological progress could solve the life-and-death problems of our current society. They lie too deep, in the heart and soul of every one of us. It is there that the main work of reform must be done." We need to explore our inner being, our hearts and souls, and search for the causes of our violence, greed or apathy, uprooting them. This is what the spiritual life is about.

The Catholic spiritual tradition has always offered resources for this spiritual quest, aids such as spiritual reading, meditation, prayer, solitude, silence, the art of letting go, the sacraments of reconciliation and healing, all the various spiritual devotions and disciplines.

In recent years, for example, the disciplines and joys of journaling have been rediscovered and reinvented. Old prayer forms like *lectio divina*, a way to bring one's life to scripture for guidance and insight, have been revived. Active imagination, an ancient prayer form, has been dusted off and refurbished. Spiritual direction, once available only to those in religious life, is becoming more and more accessible to everyone who needs it.

We spend our lives searching for the balance between interior and exterior, between contemplation and action, working amid the inner contradictions that make up the human soul. Prayer and meditation are key prerequisites for moving forward in the inner life, for the avoidance of floundering and confusion. "Without this one hour a day for God," wrote Fr. Henri Nouwen, "my life loses its coherency and I start experiencing my days as a series of random accidents and incidents." Spiritual guides have always recommended regular prayer times as the single most important practice in spiritual living.

Here is where we can bring the current events and opportunities in our days, the overarching themes of our lives, the challenges and dilemmas of our times together with the peace and illumination of God's intimate spirit within us.

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