

The Inner Treasure or Our Journey to God



1. Where Your Treasure Is

There is a treasure within each of us – and can be found by looking at our inner life. It lies hidden in our inner moods and feelings. Even if we see ourselves as unspiritual, irreligious, or estranged from God and church because of guilt or discouragement, characteristics like compassion, a sense of wonder, humility, and ministry to others of peace, hope and joy are evidence of the natural love within. Spirituality has often been interpreted so narrowly that we don't recognize it when we meet it in ourselves or others.

We all have a unique, complex inner life of thoughts, memories, feelings and desires which are the result of heredity and experience. Even though often stored in the subconscious mind, they affect our perception of the world around us and influence our behaviour. Indeed, the inner life is the source of our direction and energy for our life's journey. Yet we have divinized reason and tended to ignore emotions – which if not acknowledged and befriended will eventually destroy us. Many bodily illnesses are an expression of inner disharmony, such as ongoing resentment, bitterness and frustration.

In religious language the inner life is called the soul (or heart), and the art of knowing it, healing it and harmonizing its forces is known as spirituality. Unfortunately, religion has often failed to nurture awareness of the inner life or to teach its adherents how to befriend it. This has resulted in much confusion and disillusionment – even feelings that religion actually masks the face of God.

2. Clearing the Approaches

There are many obstacles to finding and accepting ourselves as the place where God is working. These hindrances include wrong concepts and teaching about God. Before God is seen in and through our human development, he remains remote – unimportant or even terrifying.

According to von Hügel, humans in their development go through three basic stages – infancy/childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Religion needs to understand and nurture the predominant needs and activities of each stage and thus include three elements: institutional element catering to the needs of infancy; critical element corresponding to adolescence; and mystical element meeting the needs of adulthood. *All three elements must exist in balance.*

The institutional element provides for the childhood needs – which never totally disappear even in adulthood – to trust, and to be taught, protected, and given love and attention. In leading people to God, the church needs to speak not only to people's minds through the Word of God, but also to their senses through signs and symbols including music, gestures, and movement. Teaching needs to be both factual and moral.

The critical element ministers to the adolescent stage which also continues into adulthood. Adolescence is characterized by asking questions and trying to discover meaning and unity in what we have learned and experienced – seeing “the One in the many”. This questioning also includes criticism, systematization, and formulating theories about our world and existence. To respond to this, the church must allow individual thought and questioning – intellectual vigour – as well as showing coherence between its teaching and life experience. God in certain aspects is immanent – His emanations are present in all things – and there should therefore be no question which falls outside the scope of religious inquiry.

Adulthood is characterised by a growing awareness of inner consciousness which brings us closer to ourselves at the heart/soul level and therefore to God. Each person has a unique inner world, complex, multi-layered, mysterious, in some ways scary, yet attractive. While incomprehensible, it influences us far more than external circumstances. Religion needs to encourage and guide people in this exploration which is the most important stage of our journey towards God. A mystical element is needed in the church to guide the adults who are invited to meet God through the hidden and often frightening recesses of their minds and memories – God whose ways and thoughts are not ours, the God of surprises, who is now encountered rather than thought about, who communicates himself through mysterious inner experiences rather than through articulate phrases of set prayers, who is being experienced from within through the soul rather than presented from without, is loved and lived, rather than theorized about, is action and power rather than any external constraint and discipline as in the institutionalised stage or intellectual reasoning as in the critical.

If the church lacks any one of the three dimensions – institutionalised, critical and mystical – true spiritual development will be out of balance. If the institutionalised aspect is overemphasized, people will remain spiritually infantile, mistakenly understanding loyalty and humility as unquestioning obedience to church authorities. Suppression of the critical element by discouraging questions will produce believers who have not integrated God into their day-to-day life, and religion will remain a private and unimportant dimension. On the other hand, overemphasis of the critical element will produce unemotional rationalists devoted to a theological, moral, or philosophical system rather than religious people devoted to God. Neglecting the mystical will produce individuals who cannot get to know themselves and hence God – the source of our freedom. At this stage, adults need instruction and guidance in prayer, more than doctrine or moral values. Overemphasis of the mystical, on the other hand, leads to rejection of formal prayer, worship, and doctrinal and moral teaching, in the worst case resulting in extremism and fanaticism.

3. Inner Chaos and False Images of God

Our inner life experience, the site of the hidden treasure, is also complex and dangerous and hence we are tempted to ignore it. There are often confusing, but powerful drives and desires within us of which we may not be conscious, but which nonetheless guide our behaviour.

The gospel story of Jesus healing the Gerasene demoniac (Luke 8:27-35) has lessons for all of us. It figuratively portrays our ambivalence – both attraction and repulsion – to Christ, the seeming deadness of life, the agony of unforgiveness, and the conflicting nature of our inner drives. Within, we are indeed like the demoniac – a terrifying mix of evil, none of which we are incapable of manifesting. On the other hand, there is no heroism, selflessness or love which is beyond our capabilities. Being afraid to look at the evil possibilities, we also fail to see our true greatness – our true selves.

We refuse to acknowledge our inner chaos because we are afraid of rejection – especially rejection by significant others which would make our life meaningless. We all need other people to give our life meaning because we are relational creatures. Our relationships with other humans and all of creation are within the unity of God in whom all creation lives and moves and has its being.

In a desperate effort to gain acceptance and recognition, we tend to feign what we think others will like about us – pretending to be what we are not till we become a tangled web of deceit. Being terrified of criticism and self-questioning, we do violence to our deepest selves. In the worst case, we figuratively live among the tombs in quiet desperation. The answer to this conflict is to turn to God.

There are many, often contradictory, concepts of God – the God of the philosophers is impersonal and remote, while the God of the prophets and the Father of Jesus Christ is mysterious, but also full of feelings – compassion and love, as well as wrath and fury. In turning to God, we must first acknowledge that he is mystery – incomprehensible with our limited minds. Without acknowledging this essential truth, we will tend to create false gods in our image. In a sense, “God” is a beckoning word, calling us out of and beyond ourselves, always creating anew and surprising us. God is at work throughout the creation and in the heart of every human – across denominations and religions, even in professed atheists.

Being made in God’s image, we also share in his mystery. Also, we each have a unique journey in learning to know and understand God. Scriptures and the church give us guidelines, but ultimately we have to find our own way and be responsible for our journey to God. While the destination is mystery, we can trust that God will lead us if we turn to him in prayer.

Wrong concepts of God that have been mediated to us through parents, teachers, and clergy can be hindrance to approaching God in prayer. In childhood we may have acquired the ambiguous notion that God is loving, but will sentence us to hell if we misbehave. While intellectually we later get to understand that this concept is false, it often remains in our emotions, making us disinclined to approach God in prayer. It is only when God reveals himself to us and we actually experience God and perceive his true nature, not intellectually, but as felt knowledge, can we be liberated from the constraints of our upbringing and environment.

As we become aware of the distorted images of God in our minds and correct them, we make progress on our journey toward God. Along the way we may discover other distortions of which we were previously unaware – which may be painful, but also liberating. For example, using the imagination to visualize ourselves in a gospel story can reveal subconscious images unbeknown at the conscious level, but nonetheless affecting our behaviour and actions. Once a new misconception is realized, it can be corrected and progress can be made on our journey.

(Based on *God of Surprises* by Gerard W. Hughes, Chapters 1-3)

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