

My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 87

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Vision, Part I

"Where there is no vision, the people perish..." --Proverbs 29:18



A correlative to these words from Proverbs are those written by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in his delightful book, "The Little Prince," "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." As I have reflected on my original motivation to serve God and others--whether in the monastery, the Catholic Worker, or the Unification Movement, as a monk, missionary, teacher, or lawyer--the truth of these aphorisms has become ever more apparent to me.

Before entering Holy Cross Abbey in the summer of 1972, I had been pushed and pulled by the current of the times. I felt passion for particular causes associated with the peace movement, but these emotions proved to be unrooted and ephemeral. They were political positions which I had adopted and not ideals for which I sacrificed. I lacked ownership. In consequence, I was spiritually restless and dissatisfied. If I had continued in this manner, I am convinced I would have perished for lack of a vision and my life would have vanished in a flash with no enduring connection to the world of the heart. My first step towards making an actual commitment that, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's formulation, was the "Cost of Discipleship," occurred when I burned my draft card on the steps of the Pentagon in protest of the Vietnam War. Though in retrospect, I view my actions as ill considered, these were my first halting steps toward authenticity or "ownership."

As I have written elsewhere, my participation in the demonstrations and subsequent arrest and short imprisonment, threw me into a crisis as I struggled

to find my way forward. Essentially lost, I wrestled with a sense of deep anxiety and desperately prayed to find a sense of purpose. My prayer brought me to Holy Cross Abbey in Berryville, Virginia. Still, although physically settled, I lacked a substantive vision or even a vague direction to guide my future steps. Gradually, as I prayed and sought the counsel of the older monks, I came to realize that God had been guiding my steps, and that, as in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), I had been embraced by the Father and welcomed home. In the initial days of that return, as I confessed my sins and

committed myself to a life of prayer, study, and work within the Cistercian Trappist tradition, I fell in love with the rhythms of the monastic hours and found a well established pathway into the world of heart. Although a vision for my life still eluded me, the beauty of a centuries old spiritual tradition is that a young soul can be guided through consistent and faithful practice to a deeper understanding and ultimately, a realization of purpose. Of course, the danger that arises is the tradition can become an end in itself, an idol more pernicious than Mammon.

For me, the path to vision came through opening the world of heart via the discipline of prayer. While there are many formal times for communal prayer in the monastic schedule, when we would gather for Mass or chant the psalms, my critical development occurred when I discovered prayer of the heart through the spiritual discipline of Zen meditation. In retrospect, I can see how Zen became the external form of my prayer, while contemplative union grew as the internal content. However, in medias res, those distinctions are not so apparent. What I experienced every day was the discipline of sitting and watching my breath, as I chanted my chosen mantra, the name of Jesus. Most days, in the beginning, I persevered without much observable change. However, during these initial efforts, my spiritual director encouraged and reassured me that from God's perspective, I was showing up and becoming reliable.

Every afternoon, I sat in meditation for 1.5 to 2 hours. Each practice session required me to deny myself. Initially, each time I sat, it felt futile or worse: some days it felt like death. Gradually, outside of my meditation practice, the discipline began to bear fruit--it was as though God was telling me, "it's not on your terms but Mine." In these flashes, God or Jesus would open my mind to understanding or touch my heart. I would suddenly see the world differently. Through those seemingly unconnected moments, my dread of sitting began to fall away. Slowly transformed, I entered the chapel with a sense of longing to experience the God who had earlier aroused me to awareness. Imperceptibly but nonetheless substantially, my afternoon meditation deepened and became a prayer of the heart filled with longing for God.

And then, after an experience of intense physical suffering (of which I write in an earlier chapter) I entered into a heart to heart union with Jesus, in traditional Catholic terms, a mystical relationship. I find that terminology stultifyingly formal now, entirely too theological and cerebral. What occurred is that Jesus introduced himself to me and simultaneously while revealing himself, made me aware of my deepest heart, "the ground of my being." Even now, as I sit and write, I can turn my attention inward and connect with Jesus--or others--in the world of heart. Moreover, I know quite well from life experience, nothing can touch, comfort, sustain, or fulfill me on this deepest level unless it is of God, from God, or God.

To be continued....