

A Hunger For the Holy

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The bell rings at 5am, an early morning call to prayer. It is the beginning of our monastic day here in Vermont. It is time for Morning Vigil. At this hour, all is in darkness except for the one candle lighting our prayer space. I take my place on the cushion and join the others gathered for our hour of contemplative prayer. This time of Vigils is the night watch hour, a time to touch the mysterious Presence of God at the heart of the Universe. We discover, as the Gospel of John tells us, that "The Light shines in the darkness."

This morning I experience this literally. There is a large skylight above my head and in this predawn darkness I can see the shining stars of the Milky Way Galaxy. The words of the psalmist come to mind, "Praise God sun and moon, Praise God shining stars!" I reflect on the fact that I am made of that same star stuff. The numinous fire that burns in those stars has burned through 15 billion years of Universe unfolding and burns in me this morning. It burns in my hunger for the Holy. It burns in every leaf, animal, stone and bird. It is the Fire within the fire of all things. This is the same fire that ignited the burning bush, that jolted Moses and made him take off his shoes and exclaim, "This place is Holy Ground."

I try to absorb these words from the Old Testament; "This place is Holy Ground." I want to situate myself within the fullness of this understanding and push my contemplation beyond old limiting notions which subscribe God to some abstract heaven. The book of Wisdom declares: "The Spirit of God fills the whole world!" I want to know this world filled with the Spirit of God and situate myself in its larger context. Towards the end of his life Teilhard de Chardin wrote: "Less and less do I see any difference between research and adoration." For Teilhard as for many poets and mystics, prayer was a meditation on the Universe, informed by knowledge, open to Mystery.

I reflect upon how technology has given us the capacity to extend our senses, to be able to see and hear what has always been there but what we were unable to know with unaided senses. We have suddenly been given a glimpse of the footprints of God embedded in the cosmos as we come to understand how the Universe works.

We come out of 15 billion years of unfolding, we are vital dust, a further development of the original fireball. In this morning prayer I try to locate myself in our galactic neighborhood.

The galaxy in which I pray is 100,000 light years wide. A single light year is equal to 6 trillion miles. Our nearest neighbor, the Andromeda Galaxy is 2.3 million light years away. This takes some time to absorb. We are located in vastness, in the vast heart of God.

Although I sit still and firm during this time of meditation I reflect upon the fact that the

Earth is revolving at 900 miles an hour. It is orbiting the sun at 19 miles/second. We are moving as a solar system at 40,000 miles/hour around the center of our galaxy and our galaxy is expanding at 12 million miles/minute. This is the context in which I find myself as I sit down to pray. Things are anything but still. I imagine God dancing with wild abandon through the farthest reaches of the cosmos.

In today's Gospel of John the words, "Abide in me as I abide in you" take on new meaning. The place where the Divine abides is much vaster than we can imagine. Abide in me means "abide in my vastness" , "abide in my Universe."

There is a realization taking place within me, as my eyes reach out through the skylight, that the deeper in I go in prayer the farther out I go in the cosmos. Inner and outer are one.

This is what the mystics of our Christian Tradition understood as they went deeper into the inner experience of God. They experienced a harmonization of their lives with the greater rhythms of existence. They knew by faith what science knows empirically, that the Universe is charged with the presence and reality of the Divine.

These mystics allowed the fire of contemplation to transform them into a union of love with all of creation. They understood that Divine Radiance floods the Universe making all things holy. I know this too in a deep intuitive way. I think we all do.

The night sky begins to give way to the dawn as the Milky Way becomes a faint memory this morning. Before the bell rings to call this hour of prayer to a close I remember the words of Annie Dillard, " The world has two kinds of nuns, there are those inside and those outside of convents. Whichever kind she is, the nun's vocation is contemplation of the real."

The bell rings as the first glimmers of dawn appear in the morning sky. The hour of prayer is over. I blow out the prayer candle, extinguishing the flame. Yet I know full well that the Fire within the fire of all things still burns in every creature, galaxy and star and in every person who hungers for the Holy.

Suggested Reading:

Berry, Thomas. *The Great Work*. N.Y. Bell Tower. 1999.

Eiseley, Loren. *The Immense Journey*. New York. Vintage Books. 1957.

Oliver, Mary. *New and Selected Poems*. Boston. Beacon Press. 1992.

