

Essays

for people who have already read other spiritual books

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Essays

Introduction

Unlike most of this author's writings on spiritual subjects, this collection of spiritual essays was written for people who have already read other spiritual books. They have read other spiritual books, liked what they have read, but then struggled to do something with what they liked, and to live the ideals that were so nobly presented.

Thus, the point of departure for all but one of these essays is some truth the spiritually minded have heard many times before and already profess to accept. From there we will describe a struggle that many will recognize, and from there we will find a way to get somewhere.

I think it will happen.

Why is Detachment Elusive?

“Worldly things will never make you happy.” Who hasn't heard that?

And who hasn't heard the stories, which always ring true... of the fool who works two jobs to buy the living room furniture he never uses, because he is too tired and because he has no friends? Of the even bigger fool who turns eighty and is still trying to buy another company? Of the sad little guy who pours all his hopes and then money into buying this car... and then somebody steals it... or nobody steals it and soon he finds out that it was just a car?

And these, of course, are only the extreme cases. Isn't it often written that the modern person is false and empty because he lives for worldly things, alienating himself from the source of his life, his future, and his hope...? Isn't this often described as sin—the worship of false gods, a massive and ugly devotion to self, stuff like that?

And the spiritual writers don't stop there. To them, we, too, people who "profess" faith in God, are guilty of idolatry. Don't we make a god of our projects, our books, the numbers concerning our communities? Don't we, like other worldly people, seek our value in our success, our work, and the fact that we are busy? Isn't this just another form of seeking our happiness in something of this world instead of finding it in God who alone is the source of life and the fulfillment of His creatures!

All of this strikes the spiritually minded as true. But then, so often, we go right back to our projects and our numbers.

Then we get down on ourselves because we should have... what?... do less?... care less?... focus more on God?... doing what exactly? This becomes a problem.

Perhaps the problem is that spiritual talk comes a little too easy, and sometimes ideas that sound good do not make good ideals. Too often they lack balance. They focus on one aspect of our human existence to the exclusion of others that operate in people whether or not they know it or like it.

The fact is: This is a created world where the Creator is first known in the things He has made. This is the reason that things are rightly considered good (as long as we do not confuse them with the Creator). But if they are good... good for what? Good to look at but never to collect? But if no one has a collection, where are we going to see the patterns and panorama of what creation can do? Good to enjoy for dinner, but who is going to prepare this dinner; and how are they going to buy the ingredients and maybe even wine? And if no one will sell me any more food because I do not pay my bills, then how do I feed my children?

And yes, it is true that the spiritually minded sometimes make a god of their projects and numbers, but is it not also true that all of us have heard the truth because somebody preached it, or wrote about it, and it somehow reached me or one of my ancestors—because some community was *that* big, because the book got *that* well known?

And if something is worth doing isn't worth doing well? And doesn't this take work? And isn't it inevitable that we will care about this work, and react to its ups and downs?

Clearly what is called for is balance. To enjoy things but not to let them be our God, as is exactly what we see when we think exclusively about our things, suffer over them, and find ourselves unwilling to share.

These, perhaps, are criteria of balance.

I am done writing this now. I was pretty careful with the words—and read them more than once—but, even this text is far from perfect, I am going to let you read it and enjoy my supper.

Living in the Sight of God—Not Others

“Live in the sight of God—not others!” God loves you and forgives you. His love is constant and intense. Look back to Him with love. Do not choose to ignore His immense love in favor of the imperfect love of others, who do not even see the soul they are called to love in you, and remain always preoccupied with themselves.

Live in the sight of God and you will be free from—what some writers accept from existentialism—the hell of other people.

Live in the sight of God and you will be free from allowing others to manipulate you and deform your spirit in their deformed image!

One reads this kind of stuff and one gets the idea that people should never care at all what other people think of them.

This turns out to be easier said than done. And when people find that they cannot help but think about what others might be thinking, they feel they are rejecting God in favor of others.

But things are not this simple.

We are not in a position to completely-not-care about what people may think—not without a lot of self-deception and a heavy dose of anger—because we were made to be a family. We are going to share heaven as a family where all of us are going to be richer for the holiness of each of us.

Each of us is a unique image of God, unique for the unique angle at which we will see God and from this sight to gain something of vast value to share with everyone else. Because this truth was written into our natures, we are already if vaguely aware of it now.

This is the underlying reason we perceive others as important, and therefore value their approval; and their approval is not to be despised. It is the power we have to support one another, and help each another to grow.

Still, it is often our experience that the need for people's approval is hell, and other people's approval does not always help us grow.

The secret, then, in living well with others is to base yourself on the love that you receive from God, and allow it to be confirmed by those whom God might send into your life for this purpose. Where someone does not confirm the love that you receive from God, check quickly to see whether they might have something to teach you and, if not, ignore them. (They'll see better in heaven.)

Seeing God in All Things

“See God in all things.” How is this not right? God is the Creator of all things. He can be known in the things He has made. Life, then, is a grand and constant dialog: God reveals Himself in every direction, and newly around every corner, and we are supposed to see and respond with praise and thanks and grateful lives.... And then the whole thing breaks down when we see litter, or a broken down fence, or we are insulted or ignored by the people around us who more than anything else are made in His image.

The problem is simple: We forget the purpose of life. We forget that we are here because God is giving us the opportunity to be involved in our own creation, and for this reason creation is necessarily imperfect, i.e., not yet finished.

Looking at creation, we mistakenly expect perfection.

Creation itself has ways of tricking us into doing this. It shows us things that seem perfect, like a well-formed flower, or a sunset on a clear,

cool night, and we are fooled into thinking that this is how it should always be.

Of course, even the flower or the sunset are imperfect in their way, which is exactly what we would see if we were expected to ponder either endlessly.

Things and people are imperfect. They are perfectly imperfect—they are exactly as God needs them to be, so far, for their great purpose—and if we are willing to keep this in mind we can see them for what they are and be inspired by what we see.

Yes, this is also true when we look at people, and even at ourselves. If we pay attention to what is *there*—much more than a rock, and in every case a soul whose struggle to survive, to be happy, and even to love, is enormously beautiful in the eyes of its Maker—we *will* see God and we will be impressed.

Abandonment to God's Will

“We are the flawed creations of ourselves when our will is what we seek. We are frustrated and live in pain. We are freed and beautiful when what we seek is His will not ours. We shine with His light when our will is His will and nothing more or less.”

Sounds good. But what does it mean? I mean, how, really, are we to identify God's will at every moment, in every case where something is to be looked at in one way or another, in every case where a decision must be made?

And what is God's will when accepting some hardship is letting a person get away with a sin, or the only way to accomplish something that *I* believe ought to be done requires a plan created by *me*?

And how can anyone ignore his own will?

These sort of questions, and problems, come about because people fail to notice that there are two kinds of God's “will.”

The first and easiest to analyze is essentially our answer to the question, What would Jesus do? Often there is a clear answer, and even if what Jesus would do would not be easy, it is still what I know I should at least try to do, and so I am hardly ignoring my best self if this is what I choose to do.

Even when the answer is not at first obvious, at least I know it is there to be found, maybe with the help of someone I trust.

The other source of God's will in our lives has to do with the things that God sends into our lives according to His plan. This means that when things have happened that cannot be changed—or something is happening that we cannot control—are we called to embrace these circumstances and to deal peacefully with the mess we were left. Doing this is one of the ways that God is giving us to grow.

Of course, we do this growing by making decisions; and our actions also have a part to play in the unfolding of God's plan. Thus, we are called to do what *we* believe will bring about the best. This might mean that we will work hard to fix something going wrong, or to stop someone doing wrong.

It also means that we recognize that what God "sends" is not just something that just happened, but the state of the world around us—a situation we are called to deal with and improve. Once again, our job is to do the best we can as we can see it.

I guess we are back to the idea that we should do what Jesus would do!

Why Does Conversion Lead to Confession?

"Confrontation equals cure." This adage, from modern psychology, does not always prove true. But it provides the form for a similar adage, one which spirituality has almost always experienced to be true: "Conversion equals confession." Why is this?

On one level, it's easy to understand. If a person's conversion involves his discovery of the evil of his ways, and now he knows he needs to make a change, and he wants to make amends to God, his conversion may well lead to confession.

But there are many other cases of a person who did not think his ways were so evil—and maybe they were not—and yet when finally he comes to faith in God he also desires to confess, and he makes a good confession! Why is this?

Again, on one level, it's easy to understand. If a person feels that he has received so much from God, he wants to do what is right. Confession, for various reasons, is right.

But often there is more to it. Often, faith's first fruit is precisely the main thing that was lacking from a person's happiness—his acceptance of himself. For all the many reasons that people put themselves down—judging themselves against an imagined standard of perfection, comparing themselves to others, letting themselves be defined by their treatment by other human beings—they are unhappy being who they are.

Finally, faith comes along and now they see themselves differently. Now they understand that God is God and God's plan for everything is also God's plan for them, and God being God it is certain that He has put all He has into His plan for their lives and no less than He has put into the making of anyone else. Finally, they no longer feel that they must compare themselves to others, be other than who they are, or be other than who they *were*, in other words, to change their life's story and undo what cannot be undone.

For such a person, confession, then, is an act of self-acceptance. It is an act of accepting God's love and plan for his life, and it is a grand declaration: "I no longer need be what I am not. I no longer need hide the who I am. I as me am loved."

How to Be Disinterested

When spiritual writers talk about “disinterest” they are talking about an ideal. The ideal is to love God and serve others whether or not anybody knows it, even if to do so calls for great sacrifices that you must bear in silence.

On the face of it, this looks difficult.

But God gives us a way, and this is it: Don’t kid yourself. Don’t tell yourself that you should *just do it* because it is right.

It *is* right; and it is great; and it is great because it is difficult. Indeed, to sacrifice yourself in any sense, where no one will know it, is about as close to imitating God’s utter unselfishness as human beings can ever come.

Let’s start by thinking about that.

Then, let’s also notice that to do something that holds out no real chance for earthly reward—not even a “thank you”—is for this very reason an opportunity to show yourself that you have faith.

Let’s say you come upon a mess you did not make. To clean it up will take work you do not want to do. But people are coming to use this room. They are not people who know you; and they are not going to blame you, or anyone you care about, for the mess that they will find. But they will feel unwanted if they find it like this. If you do something about it things will look as they should look and no one will know that work has been done.

No one will naturally view such a situation with joy. But a faithful person will say to him- or herself, “these are people; they should not be made to feel unwelcome, or unworthy, or even something worse.” Interiorly, even deeper calculations might be made. “To hurt people hurts the world. It slows the growth of God’s kingdom. And, hey, these are brothers and sisters I will love in heaven. Somehow they’ll know about it then.”

The same sort of things might pass through the mind of a person when it’s time to put cash (no receipt) into a basket (no handshake).

It also works when someone *who doesn't know it* needs to be forgiven.

It even works well into Lent when you alone (here on earth) know how hard your project has become.

The question is clear: Do you believe that we are here to get ready for life with God—or not? Do you believe that every act or faith or love counts—or not? Do you believe there is a God who sees you—or not?

Happily, once you answer these questions, and confirm your answers once or twice, a new point of view will be forming in you. You will get used to looking at things through the eyes of faith, and more conscious of the eyes of God. It will become, not just easier, but more and more natural, to do what you can when you can; and you will hardly notice that nobody noticed.

You will grow into the ideal that seemed so lofty when we started. But then that is the idea of ideals, isn't it?

Confronting the Real, if Secret, Source of Doubt

This is one the spiritual writers *don't* talk about.

They talk about faith for sure. They talk about some of the reasons that people's faith is weak. (This mostly makes people feel bad.) They talk about the many signs of God's greatness and love. (This mostly makes people feel better.) They speak of faith as a choice (but not enough about the reasons that a person might make this choice). And they do not talk enough about the reasons that a thinking person might have doubts. And they never talk about the big one:

We are here. We say we were made for heaven but we are not in heaven. The most important thing that we believe appears to be contradicted by the most obvious thing we know.

Then there is this: Most of the most wonderful things we say about heaven far exceed our ability to imagine concretely.

These are issues faith must face.

The second isn't too bad.

The things we say about heaven—that we will all be together, and know and love each other, and share with one another what each one sees in God—do indeed follow the things we know with the certainty of faith. After all, we cannot conceive of God as limited in any way, and nor can we conceive of life with God as being any less than the best thing that we can put into words—and better. (And surely it is better that all God's children will know one another....)

We might also notice that science already asks us to move from what we know to what we cannot imagine. For example, what we do know directly tells us that there are 6,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 molecules of water in the average glass. Though we cannot concretely imagine what we are saying in this case, still we can believe it.

With regard to the first issue, this is one case where confrontation does equal cure! Once we acknowledge the question, *Why are we here?* we notice that the answer is in plain sight.

Why are we here—before we go to heaven? We can derive our answer. Let's start with this: Life is hard and God is good so life here must be for some important purpose. What do we do here? (We grow.) What does this accomplish? (It makes us, in part, people we have had something to do with making.) What would be the one and only thing that God could not just give us? (To be our own person—someone that we, in part, have made.) Is this really so important that we must have it even at the expense of suffering and death? (Yes. God is good, and He would never ask us to grow through anything for any less the best possible reason.)

So, what is the importance of being our own person. (Well, let us start with this: We are hoping to share God's life. What is the most divine thing about God's life? The most divine thing about God's life is the fact that God "just" is; He comes from nothing else; He is the source of His own existence. Now, God cannot give us this; but He can give us a role in making us us; and this is what we are doing here. And this is the reason that to be "our own person" is felt as something so important!)

Contemplation

“Contemplation.” The words used to describe it are not really descriptions. They say it’s the soul seeing where it came from, a person losing himself in God; it’s a place where time stands still and space no longer matters....

But these are not descriptions of specific experiences. And when we are contemplating, what, exactly, are we supposed to be looking at?

Actually, there are two places to look—at things, and at experience itself.

It is sometimes good to look at things—the sky, a tree, an object of art, a shoe.... If you give yourself time to focus, and calmly take things in, you will soon be impressed by the miracle of existence.

What does *this* mean?

It means that in our daily life we deal with things superficially, as if each were an object we have to work around. We look at the sky so we know what to wear. A tree is something not to walk into. An object of art identifies this office as mine. A shoe is something to put on, and keep tied.

When, instead, we really look at what things *are*, we are invariably impressed with what they are. Even more than that, we are newly amazed that they exist at all! This is what we mean by the “miracle of existence.” It is a thing’s way of saying “I was made,” and pointing to its Creator, and inspiring us to be conscious of Him present as we are looking at His work. Then, as we try to grasp Who and What is present to us, and standing behind everything in the universe such as we conceive it... well, that surely is an experience of the greatness of God.

Much the same thing happens when we look at experience itself. This is what we might do if we give ourselves time to focus and *don’t* look at other things, but rather pay attention to the existence of our own spirit. Here is something we see not at a distance but from within for what it is. The miracle of existence is even more clear. What is more, our experience of God paying attention to us almost always leads us to experience what so

often comes from attention, which is love. It is as sure as can be but barely believable. How great are You that You should love me.

Losing Yourself?

“In true contemplation,” it is sometimes said, “you lose yourself in God.”

Explaining this further, some writers insist that the point of contemplation is not peace for you, or feeling yourself loved, but rather to lose all consciousness of self in favor of the joy of beholding.

Is this true? It would seem a fair question since to lose oneself in this sense would seem to raise the question, Why exist at all?

In attempting to tackle this issue, let us begin by noticing an ancient bias in spiritual writing: It is the presumption that experiences more “spiritual” (involving quiet and contemplation) more nearly if not exclusively represent the life we are going to have when finally we see God.

But there is a larger truth that is always forgotten. This is a time-bound world where all our experiences occur in time and are as wonderful for what they are because of time. In other words, the joy of Christmas would not happen fifteen times a year. The beauty of a sunset would not last a week.

The beauty of a sunset, or of the face of your beloved, does result in the joy of beholding. But this experience is what it is only because it takes place at certain times within the context of a whole life, where sometimes it is light and sometimes it is dark, where sometimes we are talking, and sometimes helping others, and sometimes other things.

These many other experiences make possible certain moments when no words need to be spoken and I do indeed forget myself in the joy of beholding this or that. And then my life moves on to something else.

Life with God is NOT like just one kind of experience of life on earth. It will involve the infinite variety of activity that must exist in God, as well as a vast variety in our relationships as members of His family.

Though it is impossible for us to be precise if we are speaking of “times” in heaven, we can still use this word in order to talk about different “elements” or “aspects” of life with God. It is with this in mind that I say that at times we will lose ourselves beholding God. At other times we will feel deeply loved by God for who He made us... or feel the love of others... or discover new things “in” God... or have adventure. And sometimes we’ll have fun.

How We Experience People Who Are Already with God

In this little essay, this author is going to explore a high sounding sentence of his own—the idea that “we can experience those we love who have died *where they are.*” How do we do that?

We do it in a way which is just like the way we experience God in prayer.

Isn’t prayer “thinking knowing God is listening”? Doesn’t this give us an experience of God in the present; and doesn’t this experience inspire us to keep on talking?

It is much the same when someone we love dies. We know the person is with God. We know the person now sees things from God’s point of view. They, too, know what we are thinking; and they know when we are thinking about them.

Well, if we are thinking about someone knowing that this other person is listening to our thoughts right now, how do we do *not* experience him or her where they are?

This is how we experience people who are already with God. It is a function of faith, and of sureness about the basic and beautiful!