

Insane for the Light – The Final Stage of Human Maturity and Christian Discipleship

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A Deeper and Final Generativity – Giving our deaths away

In his poem, *The Holy Longing*, Goethe suggests that there comes a time in your life when both your perspective on life and your motivation for doing things changes radically. In his words:

*Now you are no longer caught
in the obsession with darkness,
and a desire for higher love-making
sweeps you upward.*

*Distance does not make you falter,
now, arriving in magic, flying,
and finally, insane for the light,
you are a butterfly and you are gone.¹*

Christian spirituality, except for a few parts of scripture, the theology of martyrdom, and the writings of mystics, has not, until quite recently, reflected much on the question of what we are meant to do after our retirement years: What lies beyond generativity as we normally define this? How is the final season of our life meant to be one within which we integrate generativity with dying?

Perhaps these questions were largely ignored within theology and spirituality, as indeed they were too in the human sciences, because until very recently most people in fact died during their generative years, while they were still trying to give their lives away. There was no need to develop a spiritual vision for what lay beyond retirement. Today, as our life expectancy is ever-increasing and many people are staying healthy and active long after their retirement, these questions are taking on a new importance. What is the final stage of our lives meant to look like?

To summarize a lot of anthropology and spirituality in a few simple categories, it not oversimplistic to say that there are *three* major stages of Christian discipleship: *the struggle to get our lives together*, *the struggle to give our lives away*, and, ultimately, *the struggle to give our deaths away*. But this last concept is largely foreign to us. How does one give his or her death away?

Henri Nouwen once suggested that there comes a time in life when the real question is no longer: How can I live now so that my life still makes a contribution? Rather the question becomes: How can I live now so that when I die my death is an optimal blessing to my family, my friends, the church, and the world? ²

With those words he, in essence, defines what the final state of Christian discipleship asks of us, namely that we give our deaths away as we once gave our lives away. But how do we do that?

To answer that we turn to the passion and death of Jesus, a death we understand as redemptive, as pouring out life-giving blood and water onto an entire planet, and a death we understand precisely as Jesus' last and greatest gift to us.

The Passion of Jesus as the paradigm of how we are meant to give our deaths away

i) An important distinction

We speak of Jesus both as living for us and as dying for us. He gave us a double gift, his life and his death. Too often, however, we do not distinguish between the two, lumping them together into one act when, in fact they were two quite distinct things: Jesus gave his life for us in one way, through his activity, he gave his death for us in another way, through his passivity, his passion.

ii) Jesus' Passion as Passivity

It is easy to misunderstand what the Gospels present to us as the *passion of Jesus*. When we use the word *passion* in relationship to Jesus' suffering we spontaneously connect it to the idea of passion as pain, the pain of the crucifixion, the scourging, the whips, the nails in his hands, and the humiliation before the crowd. And indeed, the passion of Jesus does refer to this, but the word has a different focus here. The English word *passion* takes its root in the Latin, *passio*, meaning passivity, and that is its primary connotation here: What the passion narratives describe for us is Jesus' passivity. He gives his death to us through his passivity, just as he had previously given his life to us through his activity.

Indeed each of the Synoptic Gospels can be neatly divided into two distinct parts: We could take each Gospel and split off everything that is narrated until Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane and call this part of the Gospel: *The Activity of Jesus Christ*. Then we could take the section of the Gospels that we call "the passion" and call that section: *The Passivity of Jesus Christ*.³ This would in fact help clarify things: Jesus gave his life for us through his activity; he gave his death for us through his passivity. That is clear in the Gospels. Up until his arrest, the Gospels describe Jesus as active, as doing in things, in charge, preaching, teaching, performing miracles, consoling people. Then, after his arrest, the verbs become passive: he is led away, manhandled by the authorities, whipped, helped in carrying his cross, nailed to the cross. After his arrest, like a patient in palliative care, he no longer does anything; others do it for him and to him. He is passive, a patient.⁴ And, in the manner that he endured that passivity, he gave his death for us.

This then becomes the paradigm for how we are meant to give our own deaths away. But how might this to be understood?

Henri Nouwen, in trying to explain this, shares this story: He once went to a hospital to visit a man dying of cancer. The man was relatively young, in his sixties, and had been a very hardworking and generative person. He was the father of a family and provided well for them. He was the chief executive officer in a large company and he took good care of both the company and his employees. Moreover he was involved in many other organizations, including his church, and, because of his leadership abilities, was often the one in charge. But now, this

once-so-active and generative a man, the person who was used to being in control of things, was lying on a hospital bed, dying, unable to provide for himself even some of his most basic needs.

As Nouwen approached the bed, the man took his hand. It is significant to note what particular frustration he expressed: “Father, you have to help me! I’m dying, and I am trying to make peace with that, but there’s something else too: You know me, I’ve always been in charge – I took care of my family. I took care of the company. I took care of the church. I took care of things! Now I’m lying here, on this bed, with tubes in me, and I can’t even take care of myself. Nurses have to bring me a bedpan; I can’t even go to the bathroom! Dying is one thing, but this is another! I’m helpless! I can’t do anything anymore!” 5

Despite his exceptional pastoral skills, Nouwen was left rather helpless in the face of this man’s plea. The man was undergoing his passion, his passivity. He was now a *patient*. (Notice that this word too comes from the Latin, *passio*.) Just like Jesus, he had once been active, the one in charge; and now, like Jesus in the hours leading up to his death, he was reduced to being a patient, one who is ministered to by others. Nouwen, for his part, tried to help the man see the connection between what he was undergoing and what Jesus endured in his passion, especially how this time of helplessness, diminishment, passivity, and dying is meant to be a time where we are meant to give to those around a deeper gift, the gift of our death. Among other things, Nouwen read the passion narratives aloud to him. 6

In our passivity we can give to others a gift that we cannot give in our activity. This is part of the mystery of how we give and receive, but it is not entirely abstract thing. Allow me a personal example: I had a sister, Helen, who was an Ursuline nun, and a very happy one. She entered the convent at the age of eighteen and died of cancer, as nun, more than thirty years later. During most of those thirty years as a religious sister, she worked at a High School for girls run by her religious congregation. It was a residential school and the young women attending lived in convent residence during the school year. Helen was in charge of taking care of their needs outside of the classroom and these young women leaned on her for many things. She became a surrogate mother to them, tending to their many needs, and she loved every minute of it. She had the perfect temperament for the part. She was an extrovert and more of a natural doer than a natural contemplative. She loved activity, loved organizing things, had great common sense, and loved being with people. She also played that role in our family, after our parents died. She was a person who took charge. That was her temperament and she was much loved for it.

And then she was diagnosed with cancer and, after some initial surgery and treatment, it seemed she had beaten it. She went back to work, to her busy life, to the activities she so loved and within which she so thrived. But the cancer eventually came back and claimed her. Moreover, it played a mean trick on her. For the last nine months of her life, she, this so-active-a-woman, lay in bed, paralyzed from the waist down, unable to even prepare her own food, unable to go to the bathroom on her own, and unable to do all those generative things she had done for others for her entire adult life. For nine months before she died, the length of time it takes to gestate new human life, she lay in bed as a patient, in a frustrating passivity, unable to be in charge, even of her own basic needs.

But there was a great irony and stunning biblical parallel in this: During those last nine months, when she was unable to do things for others as she had always done, she, in some deep but real way, was able to give more to those around her than she was able to give during all those years of her busy activity. And, in that, her life and death in its own humble way paralleled the life and death of Jesus: For most of her life, like Jesus during his active life, she was the active one, busy, generative, doing things for others. In all that activity, she gave her life away. Then, in those months where she lay paralyzed in bed unable to do things for others, she was passive, undergoing her passion, and like Jesus in his passivity, giving her death away.

Our passivity and dying can potentially be our last and greatest gift to others. There is a deep truth in this which, unfortunately, we stand in danger of losing. Today, certainly within secular culture, we tend to identify value with utility, with action, with work. In a culture that is driven by health and pragmatism we find it almost impossible to see what value there is in people who, because of age, health, or handicap, cannot visibly and actively contribute something. So we ask ourselves: What is the value of someone living with Alzheimer's? What is the value of people continuing to live on in palliative care when there is no chance of recovery or improvement and they have already slipped away from us mentally? What is the value of the life of a person who so mentally or physically challenged that by normal standards he or she cannot contribute anything? The answer lies in the mystery of the passion, or, more widely framed, in the mystery of passivity. Simply put, sometimes in our helplessness and passivity we can give something which is deeper than what we can give through our strength and activity. A culture which is speaking more and more of euthanasia clearly is beginning to lose sight of this and will be significantly impoverished, humanly and spiritually, for that loss.

James Hillman, in a brilliant book on aging, *The Force of Character and Lasting Life*, highlights the poverty that besets a culture that no longer understands what it receives through the passivity of those whose contribution is of another kind. He asks the question: What is our value to others once our practical usefulness, and perhaps even our sanity, are gone? What do people bring to the table once they can no longer bring what society deems as useful? His answer: character. Not just their own. They help give character to the others: "Productivity is too narrow a measure of usefulness, disability to cramping a notion of helplessness. An old woman may be helpful simply as a figure valued for her character. Like a stone at the bottom of a riverbed, she may do nothing but stay still and hold her ground, but the river has to take her into account and alter its flow because of her. An older man by his sheer presence plays his part as a character in the drama of the family and neighborhood. He has to be considered, and patterns adjusted simply because he is there. His character brings particular qualities to every scene, adds intricacy and depth by representing the past and the dead. When all the elderly are removed to retirement communities, the river flows smoothly back home. No disruptive rocks. Less character too." 7

Another parallel between what occurred in Jesus' passion and what often occurs in our own diminishment and death is also worth highlighting. Jesus died by crucifixion. Crucifixion was a death designed by Romans as their version of the death penalty. But, in designing crucifixion, they had more than simple capital punishment in mind. They wanted, at the same time, to inflict the optimal amount of suffering possible for a person to endure. Hence, the death was to be slow and torturous. Beyond that, crucifixion was also meant to totally and publically humiliate the person being executed. Hence, among other things, the person was stripped naked and hung on a

cross with his genitals exposed. As well, often at the moment of death, or even before, his bowels would loosen in a further humiliation. Crucifixion was not a pretty sight! Neither is death through old age, cancer, dementia, AIDS, multiple sclerosis, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, and countless other diseases. Like death by crucifixion, terminal illnesses also inflict intense pain and, worse still, utterly humiliate the body. Terminal illnesses mimic the crucifixion. This should not surprise us since, our diminutions, powerless moments, humiliations, and illnesses are our passion, the passivity through which we are asked to give our deaths away.

And how are our deaths received? If we speak of giving our deaths away, then we must speak too of how they are received by others. How is a good death received? What is its effect on others?

Again, Jesus is the paradigm. The Gospel of John tells us that at the moment of Jesus' death "blood and water" flowed from his dead body. ⁸ This is a stunning image carrying several levels of meaning. First, the image is clearly one of birth, blood and water accompany the newborn out of the womb. Jesus' death is understood to be giving birth to something in the world. What is being born? The answer is in the symbolism, blood and water: What is blood? Blood is the life-principle inside us. We are alive when blood flows through us. What is water? Water quenches thirst and washes us clean. When we combine these concepts, we begin to get a sense of what the Gospel is trying to teach us here. It is telling us what the Jesus' disciples experienced inside of themselves in the face of his death. They felt an outpouring of blood and water, that is, a deeper and richer flow of life within themselves and a sense of being both nurtured and cleansed in a new way. They felt something flow out from Jesus' death that made them freer, less guilty, and more open to life than ever before. They felt washed, cleansed, and nourished.

This sounds abstract and quasi-magical, it is anything but that. We too have the same experience when someone we know and love dies in such a way so as to give his or her death to us. Again, an example can help explicate this: If someone asked me: What were the happiest occasions that you have been present to within the last ten years? The happiest occasions that I have been present to within the last decade were a number of specific funerals, funerals of persons, women and men, who, in the way they died, figuratively set off a flow of blood and water from their caskets.

To cite one example: A couple of years ago, I went to visit a man who was already in palliative care, dying of cancer. He was a young man, still in his fifties, but he was dying well because he was dying in the same way as he had lived his life, without bitterness and without enemies. He spoke to me of the intense loneliness of dying: "I have a wonderful wife and kids and they are holding my hand every minute, but I'm 'a stone's throw away from everyone', like Jesus in the Garden. I'm loved, but I'm alone in this. Nobody can be truly with you as you're dying!" Then he shared this: "I've had a good life and I've no regrets. I don't think I have an enemy, at least I don't know of one. And, I want to do this right. I want to die with a dignity that makes my wife and kids proud of me. I want to do this right for them and for everyone else."

He died some days later and his family and everyone else who knew him were deeply saddened. But, inside that sadness, there was also something else, an outflow of blood and water. After his funeral, as we walked out of church to a small reception, there was not one person who knew this

man well, including his grieving wife and children, who, at a level deeper than the sadness of the moment, did not feel freer, less guilty, and more open to life than ever before. He wanted to do his death right, and he did, and that reinforced everything good he had done in his life so that what he wanted to give to us came to us, the goodness of his life and the love he showed in his death. Blood and water flowed from his casket, to all of us and not least to his family.

Less happily, the opposite can also be true: Not every death is a gift to those who knew that person. All of us have also been to funerals where, because of the manner in which the person lived or died, we did not feel blood and water flowing from the casket but rather felt as if the very oxygen was being drawn out of the room. Instead of feeling freer, less guilty, and more open to life, we felt guilty about the very act of breathing and guilt about enjoying anything in life.

How we live and how we die leaves behind a spirit, a blessing or a curse, after we are gone. Our caskets will either emit a flow of life-giving and guilt-freeing blood and water or they will suck some of the oxygen from the room and hearts of those who knew us.

The final human and Christian challenge of our lives is the struggle to give our deaths away.

Giving our deaths away - A fantasy journey into the “Dark Night of the Spirit”

Still the question remains: How concretely can we give our deaths away? How might we live so that our death is a gift to our families, our church, and world? The paradigm, as we saw, is Jesus’ death, but the language within which this is expressed is so entangled with other things that it difficult to extrapolate exactly what made his death so special a gift. For this reason, it can be helpful to turn to another rich well within the Christian tradition, that of the mystics, to help explain how someone can give his or her death away.

In the mystical tradition of John of the Cross, radical discipleship, that time in our lives where we give our deaths away, is understood to be the journey that one makes through something John calls “dark night of the spirit”.⁹ What is the “dark night of the spirit”? The concept is complex and, since it is not a common-sense idea, difficult to explain. But, in essence, the “dark night of the spirit” in the tradition of John of the Cross works this way:

i) The function of the “dark night of the spirit”

Once someone has attained a true maturity within his or her discipleship, one that has been tested over time, that person stands before an invitation to enter the final, and most radical, phase of discipleship, the “dark night of the spirit”. The purpose of the journey through this dark night is not so much to deepen one’s maturity, as was the case earlier in life with the “dark night of the senses”. The purpose now is rather to purify one’s natural attachments so as to connect oneself to the world, to others, and to God more radically through faith alone, rather than through understanding, through hope alone, rather than through security, and through charity alone, rather than through possessiveness. One does that, John submits, by doing a radical act which totally cuts one’s attachments and securities on the basis of raw faith alone, that is, on the basis of the written promise and word of God. Such an act, John says, in effect, mimics what we will

have to do at the moment of our deaths. It, metaphorically, puts us into palliative care. It is also how we imitate the way Jesus gave his death to the world.

ii) A fantasy trip through the “dark night of the spirit”

Perhaps this can be best explained with an example. Here is what a journey through the “dark night of the spirit” might look like in its ideal-type: Imagine John and Martha as a married couple approaching their seventy-fifth birthdays. They enjoy good physical health, have a solid marriage, are very involved in their church and their community, are proud of their grown children, all of whom seem to be doing well, and take particular delight in their grandchildren. They are also financially secure enough to enjoy a comfortable retirement.

One day they approach their parish priest and ask for his guidance and this is the story they share: “Father, we have been long-standing and faithful parishioners here and you know us well. We’re retired, we’re comfortable, we’re still enjoying good health, and we’re really enjoying our grandchildren. In fact, John has just built a huge deck off of our living room so that we have more space for our family when they drop round. There are so many options still open to us, so many things we would like to still do in our lives. But ... but ... we have been praying together, and praying a lot over the story of Abraham and Sarah and how when they were old, done with their child-bearing years, God called them to set out for an unknown place and how it took them ten years to get there and then, when they arrived there, with them now well over eighty years old, Sarah got pregnant in some new way, and how that, this grey-haired and impossible pregnancy, became their real gift to the world. ... Well, we have been praying over this for a long time and we feel called in this way, like Abraham and Sarah. We feel that God is calling us into the big, big unknown as he did them. We have mulled over this for a long time and this is our plan: What we want to do is to sell our house and, after buying two one-way airline tickets, give the rest of money to the food bank (because Jesus said to sell everything and give the money to the poor). The one-way tickets we would buy would be for Pakistan. We feel that God is calling us to spend the rest of our lives as missionaries to Islam in Pakistan. We picked Pakistan because there is so much tension today between Christians and Muslims and there is a need for more understanding between us. Our plan is to go there with no money and to live simply with the poor there, and die there. We presented this plan to our children and they were beyond belief, stunned and horrified. They think we are insane and demanded that, among other things we talk to you. So what do you think of this idea?”

The priest, unless he was John of the Cross, would most certainly side with their children: “You are crazy! This is dangerous fundamentalism! This is the ultimate in naiveté!” But, being a trained pastoral minister, he would attempt to dissuade them and bring them to their senses through logic. His first objection would be this: “You shouldn’t do this. You are needed here! Your children, your grandchildren, the church, the community, we need you! There is still so much that you can do. You’re still young, still healthy. You may not do this!” But John and Martha are ready for this objection, having already thought this through: “We appreciate you saying that, and it’s nice to be wanted. But, radically, we are not needed. What we have to give we have already given through the last fifty years. We done the work, we provided for our kids, and we love them deeply. But, in going to Pakistan and ending our lives in this way, we want to give our kids and grandkids something else, something deeper, something that can only be given in spirit. We have already given them what we can humanly. Now we want to do something

further for them! They will miss us and we will miss them terribly, but that's the price for this. Besides, yes, we're healthy, but we're no longer young, either or both of us could be struck down by cancer or a stroke or something else and we would be gone in any case. In twenty years, we'll both most likely be gone so we may as well do this of our own volition, when we can make it mean something deep."

Dissatisfied but undaunted, the priest would move on to his second argument: "And how do you intend to live in Pakistan, once you have given all your money away? How will you eat? Where will you live? What will you do if you get sick and need a hospital?" But, again, John and Martha are ready for those questions: "That's the real point of this. If we took along credit cards and had return tickets tucked away in case of an emergency that would defeat the real purpose of this. We need to do this on blind trust. We won't starve, we'll live somehow, we'll beg, we'll live off peoples' kindness. We know this sounds utterly naïve, but God will provide for us somehow! Don't think that we haven't thought of this and don't think that we aren't scared. We're very scared; we don't even know what we are going to do immediately after we get off the plane. But that's the point of this!"

With that response staring at him, the priest plays his last card: "Besides the whole thing is wrong from the top down. You know nothing about Pakistan, nothing about the Islamic religion. Moreover, the last thing we need in the church and the world today is a couple of naïve, misguided missionaries, thinking they can save the world! You will do more harm than good!" John and Martha have also already thought about this: "You're right. We are naïve and maybe we are misguided. We don't know anything about Pakistan and Islam, other than some rather superficial things we've picked up by reading a couple of books. But, again, that is point. We are going there as sheep. We're not going there to preach or to convert anyone. We just want to live among the people there and try to understand and love them. Maybe we will get killed, but we hope not. We're not going there to try to save the world; it's more ourselves and our kids and grandkids that we are trying to save!"

Now imagine what would happen if neither their family nor the priest could talk them out of their plan and they indeed went to Pakistan, stayed there, and died there. What would be the reaction of their family ten years after their deaths: "Our parents were crazy!" More likely the reaction would be: "We had extraordinary parents! They did this incredible faith thing when they retired! What an incredible witness they gave us! What an incredible memory we have of them!" And, if they could phrase this in more religious terms, they might phrase it like this: "What a freeing and life-giving spirit they left us! They gave us their deaths as a gift!"

iii) What happens when we do not risk this kind of raw faith?

This fantasy might seem pretty fanciful and far-fetched. Who would ever do something like this? John of the Cross would, I suspect, answer the question this way: You may as well risk this kind of radical journey because if I you do not do this of our own volition it will be done to you. Sometime, and it will happen to us all, we will walk into a doctor's office and be given a death sentence. Or death will catch us even more unexpectedly in a heart attack, stroke, or accident. At that moment, metaphorically, we will have been handed our one-way ticket to the greatest of all unknowns and, from this journey, there will no coming back. Palliative care awaits us all and palliative care is a one-way ticket. We can enter it on our own, on purpose, or we can wait to be

eventually taken there against our will. Either way, we will now stand before the same choice that Jesus had to make in the Garden of Gethsemane: How am I going to give my death over? In freedom or in clinging? In graciousness or in bitterness? In anger or in forgiveness? The particular spirit that our death leaves behind, our final gift to the ones left behind, will be determined on how and what we choose in our dying.

iv) Our struggle to do this

For most of us, no doubt, entry into the “dark night of the spirit” will be by conscription rather than through a pre-mediated, voluntary choice of something that mimics what happens to us in our death. And that is okay too. In fact, Jesus’ entry into his passion was also by conscription. He did not choose the cross, he only accepted it. It was his attitude in accepting what was imposed upon him that made his death redemptive. The same can be true for us. We need not choose the “dark night of the spirit” but how we accept it is important.

Still John of the Cross would, ideally, invite us to do some kind of voluntary palliative journey late in life, like that of John and Martha to “Pakistan”. Obviously “Pakistan” here is a metaphor. We need not leave home or country to do this. Perhaps one’s giving up of one’s house and car and moving into an assisted-living center more than suffices. The key is only that whatever it is we choose, it must displace us from our normal securities in as a radical a way as going to Pakistan would do for John and Martha or as something as debilitating as a serious stroke or terminal cancer would do. It needs to be a journey into palliative care, not just a trimming down, no matter how radical, of our lifestyle.

In our culture entering into the “dark night of the spirit” deliberately will be hard to do for a number of reasons: First, culturally and even in our spiritualities, we have little vision of what life might mean beyond generativity. Next, connected to the first reason, we lack competent spiritual directors for this stage the spiritual life. Not many spiritual mentors have a vision of what ideally should happen in our post-generative years and not everyone gets to have a John of the Cross as his or her spiritual director. Finally, in trying to discern what we might do in our final years so as to give our deaths away more deliberately, we are left too much alone, without a community vision and without real mentors and this is the consequence.

Many seniors feel an inchoate nagging inside of them, gently trying to push them beyond the golf course and the bridge table to something deeper, but are unable to respond to that voice because they have no idea of where to go with it. So they simply keep doing what they are doing and hanging on to generativity as long as they can.

Culturally and spiritually we have little to help them. What we are lacking inside of secular culture and in our churches is any kind of meaningful ritualization or institutionalization of a concept that the Hindus call “forest-dwelling”. Simply put, we have no universities or seminaries to prepare us for the last stage of our lives. Hindu anthropology does. It proposes an intermediate stage between generativity and giving your death away (by living as a “holy beggar”). They call this intermediate state “forest-dwelling”, a metaphor for leaving behind one’s home, going into the deep forest, and apprenticing yourself to some elders who can then teach you what the next step in your life should be. In their vision, we need to be initiated into the final stage of our lives in an analogous manner to the way we were initiated into the generative state of our lives. And

this is precisely where, in our Christian cultures, we have a massive lacuna. We go through years of schooling and training to prepare us for our careers and our generative activities, but we have no schools, universities, seminaries, and novitiates to prepare us for the final stage of our lives, post-retirement. We are alone, mostly without preparation, without a vision, without mentors, and without communal support. Small wonder we dodge the inchoate nagging inside of us that would want us to do something of greater depth during our final years.

A final Image – John Paul II

Perhaps one final image can be helpful in explaining what it means to give one's death away: Whether a fan of Pope John Paul II or not, everyone has to admit that his death spoke to the world as few other deaths ever have. The outpouring of love and affection at this death has few equals in history. Why did so many millions and millions of people sense some special spirit at his death and react with so much love and affection? Indeed, his long papacy had its share of controversies and he had his share of detractors. Why such an outpouring of love at his passing?

John Paul II spent the last years of his life, in effect, living out his death publicly before the whole world, a broken and dying man, and in doing that, John Paul II, the broken, was able to give to the world something that John Paul II, the handsome athlete, could not give.

The mystery of giving and receiving spirit

How we give our deaths to each other is deeply entwined inside the mystery of how we give and receive spirit and that mystery is itself entwined inside the mystery of how we are present and absent to each other.

For example, when Jesus is saying farewell to his disciples he tries to explain to them some of the deep paradoxes inside the mystery of presence and absence. He tells them that it is better for them that he goes away because, unless he does, he will be unable to send them his spirit. He assures them too that the heaviness and grief they will feel at his leaving is really the pain of giving birth and that this heartache will eventually turn warm and nurturing and bring them a joy that no one can ever take from them.

That is the language of Ascension and Pentecost, not just as it pertains to Jesus leaving this earth and sending his spirit, but it is also as it pertains to the mystery of giving and receiving spirit in all our goodbyes, including the goodbye inside our own death. Among other things, it points to that perplexing experience we have where we can only fully understand and appreciate others after they go away, just as others can only fully understand us and let themselves be fully blessed by us after we go away. Like Jesus, we can only really send our spirits after we go away.

We experience this everywhere in life: A grown child has to leave home before her parents can fully understand and appreciate her for who she really is. There comes a day in a young person's life when she stands before her parents and, in whatever way she articulates it, says the words: "It is better for you that I go away! Unless I go you will never really know who I am. You will have some heartache now, but that pain will eventually become warm because I will come back to you in a deeper way." Parents say the same thing to their children when they are dying.

We only really grasp the essence of another after he or she has gone away. When someone leaves

us physically, we are given the chance to receive his or her presence in a deeper way. And the pain and heartache we feel in the farewell are birth-pangs, the stretching that comes with giving new birth. When someone we love has to leave us (to go on a trip, to begin a new life, or to depart from us through death) initially that will feel painful, sometimes excruciatingly so. But when that leaving is necessitated by duty or by life itself then, no matter how hard it is, even if it is death itself that takes away our loved one, eventually he or she will come back to us in a deeper way, in a presence that is warm, nurturing, and immune to the fragility of normal relationships. Many of us, I suspect, have experienced this in the death of someone whom we loved deeply. For me, this happened at the death of my parents. My mother and father died three months apart, when I was twenty-three years old. They were young, too young to die in my view, but death took them anyway, against my will and against theirs. Initially, their death was experienced as very painful, as bitter. My siblings and I wanted their presence in the same way as we had always had it, physical, tangible, bodily, real. Eventually the pain of their leaving left us and we sensed that our parents were still with us, with all that was best in them, our mom and dad still, except that now their presence was deeper and less fragile than it had been when they were physically with us. They were with us now, real and nurturing, in a way that nobody and nothing can ever take away.

Our presence to each other physically, in touch, sight, and speech is no doubt the deepest wonder of in all of life, sometimes the only thing we can appreciate as real. But wonderful as that is, it is always limited and fragile. It depends upon being physically connected in some way and it is fragile in that separation (physical or emotional) can easily take someone away from us. With everyone we love and who loves us (parents, spouse, children, friends, acquaintances, colleagues), we are always just one trip, one misunderstanding, one accident, or one heart attack away from losing their physical presence. This was the exact heartache and fear that the disciples felt as Jesus was saying goodbye to them and that is the heartache and fear we all feel in our relationships. We can easily lose each other. But there is a presence that cannot be taken away, that does not suffer from this fragility, that is, the spirit that comes back to us whenever, because of the inner dictates of love and life, our loved ones have to leave us or we have to leave our loved ones. A spirit returns and it is deep and permanent and leaves a warm, joyous, and real presence that nobody can ever take from us.

Recently I was at a funeral of a woman who was much loved by family, friends, and community, deservedly so. She had a large family and a large heart. She took care of her own and she helped take care of others. She was one of those women who fed the neighborhood and tried to feed the world. Her life and her love had had a wide embrace. By any standard she was a great person. Just before her body was taken out of the church, four of her children each gave a short eulogy. Her eldest son gave a brief sketch of the major chronological events in her life; her eldest daughter then shared about her generosity and her propensity to feed every person and dog in the neighborhood; another of her sons shared about some of the wonderful rituals she had developed within their family around birthdays and other celebrations; and finally, her youngest daughter gave a final eulogy. Her sharing was brief and poignant. She simply stated what we all already knew, this woman, her mother, was an exceptional person. Then, addressing herself more directly to her siblings and her nephews and nieces, the woman's grandchildren, she said: "Our mother, your grandmother, was a great woman. But we don't really know that yet, but someday we will. Someday we will know this because she will come to us, she will come back to each of

us, in her own way, respecting who we are, respecting what our lives are, and we will *get* her - get who she really was, get what she gave us in her life and in how she died, get how blessed we are to have had her, and get that we have this exceptional, wonderful person as our mom and our grandmother! In receiving her spirit we will drink more fully from her depth.”

In receiving Jesus’ spirit, his disciples drank more fully from his depth. That is true too for us as his disciples. We too can only fully drink in Jesus in all his depth through his spirit. And that is also true for how we receive the spirit of our loved ones after they die and how others will receive our spirit after our own death. Some form of Ascension and Pentecost will occur after every death. I sometimes tell parents who are distressed that their own children are not able to appreciate the faith and virtue they see in them that someday those children will appreciate it, but that will probably occur after they, the parents, have died and left their spirits.

If we die well, without bitterness and without regret, the spirit we leave behind will be one that is nurturing, warm, and cleansing, biblical blood and water.

Endnotes ...

1. Goethe, *The Holy Longing*.
2. Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, N.Y., Crossroad, c1992, pp. 94-95. Also see: Nouwen, *With Burning Hearts, A Meditation on the Eucharist*, c1994, N.Y., Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2003.
3. This is true for the Synoptic Gospels, namely, for Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Things are very different in John’s Gospel. Throughout his entire Gospel, John emphasizes the divinity of Jesus, to the point of leaving almost no humanity in him. This carries through to John’s narrative of the Passion where he has Jesus in full control, showing no human weaknesses whatsoever. John’s passion narrative puts emphasis on the trial of Jesus and John writes it up in such a way that everyone else is on trial, including us the reader, except Jesus.
4. For an excellent, detailed, and scholarly analysis of this see: W.H. Vanstone, *The Structure of Waiting*, Morehouse Publishing, 2006.
5. Henri Nouwen, *Spirituality of Waiting: Being Alert to God’s Presence in our Lives*, Audio Cassette, Notre Dame, Ave Maria Press, 2006. The dialogue here is a not a verbatim but a “rendering” of the substance of the conversation.
6. Nouwen also read, aloud to him, W.H. Vanstone’s book, *The Structure of Waiting*.
7. James Hillman, *The Force of Character and Lasting Life*, N.Y., Random House, c1999, p. 16.
8. John 19, 34.
9. John’s theology of the “dark night of the spirit” is contained in these books (and to be read in that order): *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Books II and III, and *The Dark Night of the Soul*, Book II.