

Thought for the Day: 7 - 13 September 2020

by Stephane McCarthy

Monday - Mysteries and my father

Ever since I can remember, I have been fascinated by some of the big subjects, questions and mysteries about existence. For example, and in no particular order: God, life, creation, being, angels, guardian angels, humanity, sexuality, the will, the intellect, the universe, the cosmos, eternity, infinity, light, darkness, time, Heaven, Hell, the Incarnation, redemption, salvation, damnation, love, evil, grace, sin, mercy, forgiveness, nothingness, truth, lies, free will, freedom, the beatific vision,



Lucifer, Satan, pride, malice, the fall, divinity, the Trinity, relationship, humanity, friendship, spirit, matter, beauty, happiness, suffering, faith, doubt, despair, why does God permit evil?, psychology, neurosis, the ego,

the true self, the false self, the little self, the separated self, the soul, the body, the heart, birth, death, resurrection, destiny, objectivity, subjectivity, Adam and Eve, the Virgin Mary, the Immaculate Conception, Mother of God, Jesus, St Joseph, St Peter, St Paul, St John, communion, the Blessed Sacrament, the real presence, immortality, mortality, visions, revelation, letting go, self-surrender, self-emptying, giving our selves away, contemplation, transformation, joy, ecstasy, Shakespeare, poetry, fiction, music, food, wine...

We can go on and on. We all have our own list of favourite questions, subjects, pursuits, ideas, pleasures and mysteries. That's what so interesting. We are all children, however old we are, when it comes to mysteries. That's one reason for the

excitement. As Richard Rohr says, the great thing about mysteries is not that we can't understand them, but that we can endlessly go on understanding them. You could spend several life-times on earth researching the above and still be scratching the surface. No doubt one of the reasons we need eternity. Surely this will be one of the joys of Heaven; God letting us see fully the answers to these mysteries, and countless others, through his eyes, just as we do now, here on earth, when we discuss these things with our own friends. Imagine that - being able to completely understand these things from God's point of view, as our friend.

The other great thing for now is we can go back to these mysteries and subjects at different stages of our lives and have new insights. Perhaps from something we hear from someone else, or read, sparks a new angle to look at them from. And the list keeps growing, anyway, as we get older. Also, these may be mysteries, but pondering them, reading and talking about them, doesn't mean you have to be clever; simply making a start, taking a small step and having a bit of an enquiring mind is all you need.

It's my father, Eddie's, fault that I love to think about these mysteries. An Irishman born in 1933, in what was then a village, Bantry in Co Cork, who loved literature and languages from a young age, following that long, rich Irish tradition. He became an English teacher but it was not only literature that he loved. He loved reading all the time on all the subjects, but particularly those involving theology, philosophy, literature and psychology. And even when he couldn't understand something, which was often, he just ploughed right on and moved on to the next thing and came back to it later, if he could. It didn't matter. That was his trick, I realise now, not to get bogged down by what you can't understand, simply go on; one way he was able to pack so much into his 55 years. It also helped him to keep the ever-present threat of depression at bay, which

was the flip side to his natural enthusiasm. He was endlessly fascinated by the latest discoveries he made reading and talking with others and, of course, wanted to discuss them.

Some of my earliest memories are being in bookshops for what seemed an eternity, feeling incredibly bored beside him, waiting, looking up as he was totally engrossed in a book. Libraries, second-hand bookshops; he couldn't pass any without going in and usually came out with another book. Better that than the other long Irish tradition of pubs, I suppose!

However, the upside for me from these earliest times was to catch some of that tremendous enthusiasm and energy he had about these things. Ever since, I have never really stopped thinking, reading about and discussing these mysteries and subjects. And, often, it involved walking. It is to these pleasures of walking, talking and friendship I will move onto tomorrow.

Tuesday - Walking and friendship

When I think of my father, Eddie, I think of our friendship before anything else. He may have died in 1988, but for me it could have been yesterday. Underpinning our relationship was love, of course, but all importantly sharing the same sense of humour, looking at things, at life from the same angle, friendship. It proved to be absolutely crucial in getting us through the toughest times.

I vividly remember while living at my French grandmother's house in Tours for a while, aged about 4, one frosty morning walking to the boulangerie to buy some fresh baguettes for breakfast. I'm holding Eddie's hand and feel this amazing happiness welling up in my heart just being with him walking along the pavement. He tells me to swing my arms to warm up and it works. We pass a park and there are lumberjacks

pruning the trees. And then, inside the boulangerie, and that fantastic, unique smell of freshly-baked French bread. Then walking back home, with the anticipation of eating it with my brother with my grandmother's hot chocolate.



I have always loved walking on my own, but there is something more special about going for a walk with a friend. There are the physical benefits, of course. They are gradual and accumulative compared to, say, sprinting, when the

endorphins kick in rapidly. Walking is relaxing and you can go at the pace that suits everyone. Look at any mother and her patience, walking ever so slowly to match the speed of her little toddler. Love in action! And then walking is so conducive to talking with others. The good thing is that you don't have to talk all the time. We all know that lovely feeling that springs from our hearts when with someone we love, just being together. It's that easy, that simple. No words at all need to be said. The rhythm of the walking brings in a relaxation all of its own, helping to unite you with the other.

The love of walking has remained with me ever since. It is so conducive to friendship, even when we walk alone. There is that beautiful phrase in the Bible telling us that, 'Enoch walked with God'. That phrase entrals me and I often think of it these days as I walk through the beautiful Panshanger Park, alone or with others. That phrase suggests God in his mercy and love stooping down to join us at our level and perspective. As equals!

Walking with Eddie always felt special. Through some very tough times, as well as good. With others or only the two of us. If it was simply the two of us, I had his full attention and could

ask any questions I liked on anything. Or he had stuff on his mind he wanted to bring up. We didn't always agree, but it was always a two-way exchange. He would sometimes infuriate me, but mostly he fired my imagination on the latest obsession he had discovered and was pursuing. He often had no answers to the questions. He'd smile and say he would need to do more reading and praying to try to find out, and would move on to the next thing.

Eddie died in 1988, but his influence on me has been strong ever since and when in a good mood I sometimes find myself smiling, or even bursting out laughing, because I catch myself thinking, reacting to someone or about something, or seeing something, and I feel his presence. We are looking at it together, and we are seeing it the same way, through the same eyes.

Wednesday - Friendship and death

Just last week (as I write), on 25 August, one of my oldest friends, who I've known since the age of 11 and went to school with, Ferdi, died from pancreatic cancer. He was 61 and had only been diagnosed 7 weeks before. Out of the blue. He and his wife lived in Bristol for the last 15 years and I hadn't kept in touch very much, but when we did catch up it was always the same as with all close friends; it was as if time had stood still, and we had spoken together every day since the last time.

Ferdi's death felt, for me, like losing a brother, and it made me re-live vividly, in that strange simultaneous mixture of intense joy/sadness that bereavement produces, some of the times we spent together, such as riding his motor bike, in our early 20s going on an inter-rail month-long trip through France and Northern Italy crossing Versailles, Tours then on to Turin where another friend lived, on to Florence and Venice and back. The

beautiful girls, the incredible people, amazing food and wine, the art, the sights, they all swept us away.

His death, and the lead up to it, made me so grateful for our friendship and it made me reflect on the importance friends, close and not so close, have had on me throughout my life.

When you are a child, at school, already friends play such an important part of your life. Children worry about the number of friends they have, they want to be liked, quite naturally. If you move a lot, as we did, the situation can become more worrying as you keep losing friends and having to make new ones.

As we become older, we begin to distinguish between different types of friends, those we have most in common with, those whom we feel are the most loyal and feel the most affection for. Those whom we may disagree with but, because of that special bond, it makes little difference. Anyway, it would be a dull world if everyone was the same. If we are lucky, we gain close friends and can share with them our most personal thoughts and greatest fears, weaknesses, embarrassments or doubts, knowing they don't judge us but only want to help if they can. We can also learn from them and see new things through their experiences without having to go through them ourselves.

Seeing life, events, understanding, from the same perspective, through the same eyes as others, or as Cynthia Bourgeault says, 'the same operating system', that is special. Sharing the same sense of humour, having the same thoughts and reactions, having the same temptations, and having the joy of the person's presence. We are seeing ourselves in them without realising it. It's so easy to take it all for granted; until something major happens, like serious sickness or even death.



Thankfully, it seems to me that in spite of even death these friendships survive and flourish, just as they can do when we are physically separated from others here on earth. In my case, I catch myself thinking or looking at

something or, for example, this week even simply enjoying a cup of 'Turkish coffee' made by my Cypriot barber, Andreas (who knew Eddie), and as I sip and look at a beaming Andreas I'm flooded with happy memories of both Eddie and Ferdi, who also both loved making and drinking coffee, but most of all Turkish coffee. They are with us.

Apparently just a trivial example, but, for me, proof yet again: Love is stronger than death.

Thursday - A brief interruption in eternity

When I first came across Henri Nouwen (1932-96), his writing made an immediate impact on me, but when I discovered you could hear and see recordings of him (and others like him) on YouTube, the impact was even greater.



There is one recording which I haven't been able to find since, but must still exist, when he is giving a talk to a hall full of people. In front, nearest to him, are some people with

disabilities. Henri begins by asking the audience how long an average lifetime is? 50, 60, 80 years? Not long either way, all are agreed. Henri says, we think it matters and we want a long

life. But he says it really doesn't matter whether it is 25 years or 90 years from God's point of view. He then asks one boy on crutches to come forward and he puts his arms around him and asks him: 'Do you realise that because God lives in eternity he has always known you, even before you were born here on earth? And do you realise what that means? It means that he always loved you, from all eternity, in fact there has never been a moment (if you can speak of moments when in eternity) when he has not loved you. Imagine that! This brief life here in space and time is simply an interruption in eternity for each of us. God is giving it to you to say thank you Lord, I love you Lord. And, afterwards, when your life here on earth is finished, you will simply resume your life with God in eternity.'

Friday - Spark of the Divine

The great German mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) writes: 'In the soul there is something like a spark of divine nature, a divine light, a ray, an imprinted picture of the divine nature.' The theologian Mathew Fox says, 'But we have to make contact with this divine spark by emptying ourselves or letting go. And then we will know the unity that already exists.'

This is both extremely profound and simple. My take on it is that this means God, when he creates our soul, he, as it were, leaves his divine stamp on each of our souls, his personal seal. Does this mean there is a little bit of God himself in us from the beginning? Yes, I think so. Not only are we all made in the image of God, he goes further - as always! - he implants some of his own divine DNA into us. The implications are staggering.



Mathew Fox goes on to say, 'Meister Eckhart was frequently criticised by his contemporaries (and still is by some people today) because his language was far too unitive. We like our distinctions! We don't want

to hear we have the same souls as our enemies, not our personal ones and certainly not our cultural ones! ... But mystics don't hate anyone. They simply can't... Mysticism begins when we start to make room for a completely new experience of God as immanent, present here with and within all of us. God isn't only transcendent "out there," and separate from me. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) wrote that God is "more intimate to me than I am to myself." St Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510) said, "My me is God: nor do I know my selfhood except in God." Like all mystics, they overcame the gap, and we can, too. When God is no longer out there or over there, we have begun the mystical journey. It's not simply that we have a new relationship with God. It's as if we have a whole new God! That's what Eckhart meant when he said, "Let us pray to God that we may be free of God". That's not sacrilege; that's a beautifully humble prayer because we know our present notion of God is never all God is. Our present experience is never enough, but is gratefully where we begin, and these mystics teach us that we grow with each experience of God'.

That human friendship I have been talking about, seeing ourselves in those we love, and they in us; it turns out God has had that same intimate relationship with each of us from the very beginning. Except, being God, it's on a deeper level altogether, which is beyond our imaginings. It means each of us is walking around with a spark of divinity implanted into the

depths of our being from the beginning. What another great mystery to add to the list!

Saturday - True Self/Separate Self. The Glory of God in Us

Richard Rohr writes: "Following his conversion, Thomas Merton wrote: 'At the centre of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is, so to speak, [God's] name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our [birthright]. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.... I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.'"



Richard goes on to say: 'People spend their entire lives living up to the mental self-images of who they think they are, instead of living in the primal "I" that is already good in God's eyes. But all I can "pay back" to God or others or myself is *who I really am*. This is what Merton

is describing above. It's a place of utter simplicity. Perhaps we don't want to go back there because it is too simple and almost

too natural. It feels utterly unadorned. There's nothing to congratulate myself for. I can't prove any worth, much less superiority. There I am, naked and poor. After years of posturing and projecting, it will at first feel like nothing.

But when we are nothing, we are in a fine position to receive everything from God. As Merton says above, our point of nothingness is "the pure glory of God in us". If we look at the great religious traditions, we see they all use similar words to point in the same direction. The Franciscan word is "poverty". The Carmelite word is *nada* or "nothingness". The Buddhists speak of "emptiness". Jesus speaks of being "poor in spirit" in his very first beatitude (Matthew 5. 3).

A Zen master would call the True Self, "the face we had before we were born". Paul would call it who we are "in Christ, hidden in God" (Colossians 3. 3). It is who we are before we've done anything right or anything wrong, before we even have a conscious *thought* about who we are. Thinking creates the separate self, the ego self, the insecure self. The God-given contemplative mind, on the other hand, recognises the God Self, the Christ Self, the True Self of abundance and deep inner security.'

Sunday – True self/separate self – Trusting a deeper aliveness

Again today Richard Rohr, quoting Cynthia Bourgeault, on the practice of Centering prayer, a type of silent prayer, a meditation that usually takes about 20 minutes, during which you consent to God's presence and action within by ever so gently letting your thoughts go. Richard says:

I believe a regular practice of Centering Prayer is one of the most effective tools we have for discovering our True Selves. Sitting in silence, we become adept at compassionately observing our separate self at work, as it tries to maintain control of the inner narrative. Ultimately, however, with our genuine intention and attention, our True Self is revealed, present to the Presence of God. CAC faculty member Cynthia Bourgeault describes how this happens:

‘When we enter [into] meditation [or contemplative prayer], it is like a “mini-death,” at least from the perspective of the ego... We let go of our self-talk, our interior dialogue, our fears, wants, needs, preferences, daydreams, and fantasies... We simply entrust ourselves to a deeper aliveness, gently pulling the plug on that tendency of the mind to want to check in with itself all the time. In this sense, meditation is a mini-rehearsal for the hour of our own death, in which the same thing will happen. There comes a moment when the ego is no longer able to hold us together, and our identity is cast to the mercy of Being itself. This is the existential experience of “losing one’s life.”

Just as in meditation [and contemplative prayer], we participate in the death of Christ, we also participate in his resurrection... For twenty minutes we [ie, our ego or separate self] have not been holding ourselves in life, and yet life remains. Something has held us and carried us. And this same something, we gradually come to trust, will hold and carry us at the hour of our death. To know this—really *know* this—is the beginning of resurrection life...



Virtually all the great spiritual traditions of the world share the conviction that humanity is the victim of a tragic case of mistaken identity. There is a “self” and a Self, and our fatal mistake lies in confusing the two. The egoic self . . . is

in virtually every spiritual tradition immediately dispatched to the realm of the illusory or, at best, transitory. It is the imposter who claims to be the whole. This imposter can become a good servant, but it is a dangerous master.

Awakening—which in Jesus’ teaching really boils down to the capacity to perceive and act in accordance with the higher laws of the Kingdom of Heaven—is a matter of piercing through the charade of the smaller self to develop a stable connection with the greater Self . . . becoming intimate with our spiritual identity, the sense of selfhood carried in our spiritual awareness. . . .

Through meditation [like Centering Prayer] it gradually becomes ingrained in us that “losing one’s life,” regardless of the action that may ultimately be required of us in the outer world, entails first and foremost a passage from our ordinary awareness to our spiritual one, because only at this deeper level of non-fear based, wholistic perception will we be able to understand what is actually required of us.’