"Still Point: Loss, Longing, and Our Search for God"

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By
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Thank you all for coming. I’m honored and delighted to be here. The real challenge of course is to persuade you to stay. Whatever pleasure I take in your company, however heartfelt the vibrations---none of that will matter very much in the absence of your taking at least some modest pleasure in mine. So it’s a trade-off, I suppose. And I really do not know if I’m equal to your expectations. On the other hand, as Chesterton would say, “If a thing is worth doing at all, it is worth doing badly.”

So my hope is that we can make beautiful music together.

The theme I have chosen for this evening is called desperate desire, which I should like to deploy both as a defense for the existence of God, and as a way of throwing light on what seems to me to be the fundamental human predicament; whose resolution---I would argue---turns on the God whom we desire more deeply than any competing pleasure on the planet. Even when we no longer look to him for the joy of salvation, or, God forbid, when we flat out deny him, the search for God stands hidden amid the shadows of all that we are looking for. The wretched sinner banging on the door of the brothel is secretly in search of God. Indeed, it is this
“wild prayer of longing,” as the poet W.H. Auden once put it, “that all legislation is helpless against.” And that what the human heart hardly realizes at all is that the loneliness and pain it must endure is nothing other than a homesickness for God.

However, to sustain that claim I shall need some evidence, and to that end I have in mind the following examples (there are five), each of which providing a kind of window on transcendence, drawn from areas as disparate as Mythology, Psychiatry, Fiction, Film and, finally, Theology itself. Which can only finally be understood as a consuming fire (a devouring fire, to use the language of Hans Urs von Balthasar), between two nights, two abysses, the night of adoration, in which we see the face of the Child Jesus, radiant with the Glory of God on that first Christmas night, followed by the night of obedience in which we take up our cross and soldier on in the shadow of the Crucified Christ.

So, there you have it: five illustrations of my theme. Beginning with the first, which is taken from a psychiatric study, so the details are true although I have embellished them somewhat to sharpen the sense of desperation. Imagine, if you will, a very large room overflowing with strangers. All very stylish and successful. Not a nerd, nor a loser, in the lot. Now tell them to pair off with a partner, someone equally chic, to whom they are to ask, over and over, one single question: What do you want? What do you really want?

What could be simpler? A question so utterly innocent that the exercise could scarcely threaten a tit-mouse. Or a cocker spaniel. And yet, as the authors of the report reveal, within minutes the room is convulsed with emotion so raw that people cannot bear the pain and the weeping for all that they have lost. They cry out
to those who are gone, those never to be seen again—missing mothers and fathers, wives, children, friends. So many leaves fallen from the sky, carried off when they die. Who can bear it? Is it not to force a human being out into an extremity of loneliness and loss so great that one would think it impossible to have to go on living? Who would not prefer annihilation to an anguish so unendingly awful?

Yes, but suppose there were no other choice but to endure that which is unendurable? A loneliness so final that nothing in this world could mitigate or remove the sorrow and misery of it? Here we touch the plane of the supernatural, because if nature can provide no relief from a sadness so profound, so consuming, then what other recourse do we have? When your life is all at once shorn of hope and joy, of every prospect of happiness and peace, what then do you do? Is this not a curse greater even than that of Sisyphus, whose punishment of having to push the stone up the hill to the very top of the mountain, only to watch it fall haplessly down the other side, at least gave the poor fellow something to do. Which is why Camus pronounced him happy. He had a job. Even if it was only minimum wage. But this, this is a condition of sheer infernal isolation and forlornness, so totalizing as to plunge the soul into blackest despair. Like the cry of the drowning nun at the heart of Hopkins’ immortal poem, “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” who calling out repeatedly, “O Christ, come quickly,” only to realize that He is not coming at all. Or “Cries like dead letters sent / To dearest him that lives alas! away,” to quote one of the “terrible sonnets,” that sound the depth of grief and desolation felt in the wake of the Beloved having gone permanently away. It is as though the Prodigal Son
himself were fated never to find his father's love. But to be told, again and again, in a voice that neither time nor circumstance could ever soften, I do not know you.

So much for the world of modern psychiatry, in which despite every proven therapeutic success, the soul remains unassuaged in its loneliness and pain. A predicament for which there appears to be no solution at all, leaving one with the everlasting refrain of the Castillian peasant: No hay remedio. There is no remedy. No exit. No way out.

My second example is taken from the world of classical mythology, in which the story of Orpheus and Eurydice is told. Not a true story, to be sure, although the telling of it by two great Roman poets, Virgil and Ovid, lends it a believability reminiscent of an episode, say, on the six o'clock news. We are told that the very earliest musicians were the gods. Apollo, for instance, who made music so melodious that when the other gods on Mt. Olympus listened, they could think of little else but the loveliness of the melody. They even managed to stop fighting, suspending their frequent plots and vendettas against one another, not to mention the human race, with whom relations were often predatory. But among the mortals none could play as well as Orpheus, whose gifts were sublime. Even the course of a river would change direction under the spell cast by the sound of his lyre. And when he fell in love with Eurydice, he won her heart by the beauty of his music. However, the marriage did not survive inasmuch as she died on the very afternoon of their wedding after having been stung by a viper. Leaving her husband Orpheus inconsolable. And because he could not bear to lose her, he was determined to go down into hell in search of his lost bride and bring her back to the land of the living.
Which he succeeded in doing, so beguiling were the sounds he emitted. Indeed, we are told that he “Drew iron tears down Pluto’s cheek, / And made Hell itself grant what Love did seek.” On one condition, however: he must never look back as together they climb their way into the upper world.

A provision which, alas, he fails to observe because on reaching daylight he turns tragically back to make certain his bride Eurydice is still with him. At that very instant she falls ineluctably back into hell, her last word to him a whispered “Farewell!” His desire having now grown desperate, he tries repeatedly to return to hell to find her again, but the gods refuse to admit him a second time. And so he spends the balance of his short life wandering in sorrow about the world, shunning the company of other men, until finally a band of robbers fall upon him and tear him to pieces. Not a happy ending. Not likely to become a pilot program for a new TV series. It is sometimes said that what Americans really want in their entertainment is a tragedy with a happy ending. There is no way to salvage even a scintilla of happiness or peace from the tale of poor Orpheus and Eurydice.

And so we come to my third example, which is taken from a screenplay written and directed by Ingmar Bergmann called The Seventh Seal. A haunting film set in the medieval world, it is a time marked by crusades and plagues, the burning of witches and the building of elaborate and magnificent cathedrals. The genius of the architecture of the Gothic was not only that here was a lance aimed at the heart of God, but that men possessed the willingness and the wit to pull it off. A happy combination, said the great Etienne Gilson, of piety and geometry.
And so we see the forlorn Knight wandering about this broken, ambivalent world in desperate search of God, determined to find some plausible shrine before which he might genuflect in humble submission to all that is true and good. We watch him as he falls to his knees in a little chapel where, hearing a sound from the confessional, he goes over and begins to unburden his heart of all that torments him. He thinks it’s the Priest, but he is mistaken: it is the figure of Death, laying yet another trap for him. Indeed, he pursues him relentlessly throughout the film, the two of them are often thrown together playing interminable games of chess game along wind-swept Scandinavian beaches. And when Death wins, checkmating the Knight at last, he must die.

So there he is talking to Death, telling him that it is not right that God should “hide himself in a mist of half-spoken promises and unseen miracles.”

I want knowledge (he tells him), not faith, not suppositions, but knowledge. I want God to stretch out his hand toward me, reveal himself and speak to me.

And when the Knight announces how each day he calls out to God in the dark but no one seems to be there, Death does not disabuse him, and so we see the coils of despair tighten themselves round his soul. “Perhaps no one is there,” Death tells him in his sly and lethal way. To which the Knight replies with admirable indignation: “Then life is an outrageous horror. No one can live in the face of death, knowing that all is nothingness.”

Ah, but Death is not impressed by this sudden outburst of eloquent protest, and points out that while “Most people never reflect about either death or the futility of
life,” he will have them in the end anyway. Here the exchange breaks off, leaving both the Knight and the moviegoer with the appalling prospect of a world not only without God but bereft as well of hope or joy or peace or light or remedy for our pain.

Which brings me to example number four, which is more bleak and desperate than all the others. And that is the story of the young Elie Wiesel, which he tells in his book Night, a bitter and unforgettable memoir forged out the fires of the Nazi Holocaust, where at Auschwitz he was forced to witness the death of his mother and sister, followed by the slow degradation and death of his own father. “Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever,” he writes. “Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God himself. Never.”

And while there are countless nights spent in sorrow and injustice and bitter disillusion, there is none like the death of the “sad-eyed angel,” whose story lies at the heart of Night. A quintessential innocent, a child hardly a day older than Wiesel himself, he has been singled out by the Gestapo and for reasons horrifyingly capricious sentenced to die by hanging. The entire camp, meanwhile, has been conscripted to witness this unspeakable iniquity. From the memory of this event, this trauma, Wiesel will never allow himself to escape. This will leave him permanently, metaphysically bereft.

On the morning set for the child’s death, it becomes at once evident to everyone that he will not die quickly, for the child is far too light for mere rope to do its work
well. And while the child dangles horribly in front of the whole camp, Wiesel hears a man call out. “Where is God? Where is God now?” Thirty minutes later, the grisly business at last over, the prisoners silently file by the corpse. Again, Wiesel hears the cry, “Where is God?” Only now he hears himself answer in a whispered aside, “Here he is, here is God.”

There are depths here which only Christ can plumb, and with my final example I should like to explore some of those.

In September of 1995, my mother died, the result of a sudden and quite unexpected heart attack that plunged our family into grief and incomprehension. It was, I suppose, the shock of losing her so quickly that took us entirely by surprise. By an odd coincidence, I had been sent, earlier that day, an advance copy of my first book, The Suffering of Love: Christ’s Descent into the Hell of Human Hopelessness, which she had looked forward to with pleasure. Based on a dissertation I’d done in Rome at the Angelicum in 1988, it attempted to answer the question that has bedeviled many souls, particularly during the last century when the cry of God’s People (seemingly) went unheard in the Death Camps of the Third Reich. Where was God? Where is he to be found amid so many nameless horrors that mark the long dark journey of human history?

And the answer of course is that God is always on the side of those who suffer. He was there in the Death Camps, and most emphatically there at the end of the noose fastened round the neck of the little boy.

Indeed, here is the Mysterious Hour towards which everything in the life of the Incarnate God has been moving, from the first moment of his being in the world
until, finally, it reaches its most sublime climax in the mysterious descent Christ makes into the shame and the horror of Holy Saturday. The strangled cry from the Cross—"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"—surely the strongest piece of evidence we have, testifying to a solidarity sufficient to encompass the entire universe. Because here in the image of the disfigured Christ, so graphically depicted by the artist Grunewald, we see an entire body covered with boils, mute testimony to the torments of countless plague victims whom no more intimate identification with God's Suffering Servant could possibly exist. Faced with so sacrely terrifying an image, a God slowly tortured to death, who would not wish for consolation from One who had come among us to suffer and to die? Here is unmistakable evidence of the sheer radicality of divine love, so heartbreakingly shown in the pierced and crucified Christ, who loved us "to the end." What further proof do we require of God to assuage the innocent, the oppressed? "He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness...becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2: 7-8). It is, writes Pope St. John Paul II, "the strongest argument. If the agony on the Cross had not happened, the truth that God is love would have been unfounded." Or, to quote those wonderful words spoken by Jesus himself to the Lady Julian of Norwich: "As I have made good the greatest damages," he tells her, "so I intend that you understand from this that I will make good all that is defective." What kind of a God could get away with saying something like that, a promise so extravagantly over-the-top? "That all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well. When the tongues of flame are enfolded and the fire and the rose
are one.” Who can believe such a thing? And at what frightful cost to Christ we can scarcely imagine.

Well, all this is what I tried to say in the book that came out the day of my mother’s death. And I drew comfort from the fact that having gone home to God she now knows the thesis from a much higher vantage point and so she need hardly have read the book.

But isn’t that a bit like whistling in the dark, a sort of cheap grace? Because I really do not know any of this to be true. How could I? The distance between the living and the dead remains an infinite and absolute sea of being, across which no adequate engineering skills exist for constructing bridges. And even if it were possible to go there, like the mythic Orpheus in search of Eurydice among the shades of the Underworld, what guarantee do I have that she is there? That anyone is there?

Here is fear enough to harrow the heart of any man. It greatly unsettled even so robust an apologist as C.S.Lewis. Would he, at the last (he wondered) learn that the God to whom he’d resolutely given over his life, did not want him; and so, with blithe indifference, would leave his soul prey to an ultimate “horror of nonentity, of annihilation”? Or the poet Hopkins, author of those “terrible sonnets,” who, observing the lowest point of his soul’s descent, registers such heartrending absence of God (“I wake and feel the fall of dark,” he tells us, “not day”), that the reader’s own heart almost breaks on this seeming wheel of divine indifference.

With witness I speak this. But where I say

Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament
Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
To dearest him who lives alas! away.

What an awful image that is. And yet, still greater horrors may await us. What if God himself were not to be found on the other side? What if the letters come back unread because there is no one to read them. That there is no there there. Von Balthasar reminds us that God is so intensely alive he can afford to be dead. But suppose that were not so. What then? Because it is only on the assumption of his existence---and, to be sure, his goodness---that any of us will in fact find those whom we have loved and lost. And isn't this precisely the rub? That while I may hope with all my heart to join hands with those dearest departed, to look upon the face of my dead mother, in the end it is only hope that sustains my longing to see her again. Not knowledge. Not the hard verifiable data of science that ensure the sum of two plus two will always equal four, a datum on which even the most hardened skeptic would stake his life. But hope---"the thing with feathers," suggests the poet Emily Dickinson---what gossamer thing is this? A thing with feathers, I am suggesting, is perhaps no more dependable than the waxwings on which poor Icarus launched himself into space.

This is what the grammarians call the subjunctive, which is only a mood, not any sort of verb tense indicating when or what will happen. It carries only the hope and the desire that, please God, it just might. Someone, in an inspired phrase, has called it "the mood of mystery. Of luck. Of faith interwoven with doubt. It's a held breath, a hand reaching out, carefully touching wood. It's humility, deference, the opposite of hubris. And it's going to take a long time to master." It will have to, of course, if,
as experience teaches, the cry of hope is always uttered by someone on whom the happy outcome of his hope does not finally depend.

Here we touch the heart of the matter, what Gabriel Marcel has called the ontological mystery. “To hope against all hope that a person I love will recover from a disease which is said to be incurable is to say: It is impossible that I should be alone in willing this cure; it is impossible that reality in its inward depth should be hostile or so much as indifferent to what I assert is itself a good.” And it is quite beside the point, says Marcel, to adduce evidence to the contrary, citing this or that case where clearly the patient dies; in the teeth of the assertion itself, all objection falls haplessly away. “I assert that reality is on my side in willing it to be so. I do not wish: I assert. Such is the prophetic tone of true hope.”

Thou shalt not die! Isn’t this what love of the other most deeply, insistently demands? “All joy wills eternity,” exclaims Nietzsche, “wills deep, deep eternity.” An astonishing admission from so godless a source. The atheist philosopher confessing with abject terror: “God is dead! God will stay dead! And we have killed him!” No wonder the poor man went mad.

But, again, on what possible basis besides hope, the voice and the language of prayer, do we profess to know anything at all about these matters? In The Jeweler’s Shop, a play of luminous, unforgettable beauty written by Karol Wojtyla, a young priest tries to console the widow of his friend killed while resisting the Nazi takeover of their country. What does he say? What can anyone possibly say to allay a widow’s grief? And so he tells her that her dead husband even now is more alive than ever he might have been in the flesh. She accepts this, not because she knows it
to be true, but rather because she believes, she hopes that it may be so. What else is
man but sheer desperate desire, crying out for a savior who alone can rescue and
restore those whom we have loved and lost? Man, says Plato, is a child of poverty.
Which is precisely why the true protagonist of human history, as Luigi Guissani
reminds us, is the beggar, whose arms are outstretched in a gesture of profound and
simple entreaty, asking God to cover our nakedness, to fill the emptiness of our lives.

And why must this be seen as a mere stolen base? Because in what what this
mood of indomitable desire and hope portends---here, now---in this time of bleak
unfathomable sadness and loss, is nothing less than a final victory over death and
despair. And why is that? Why is it legitimate in making the case for God, to draw
precisely upon those resources of hope that in fact circumvent the need actually to
know whether in fact one has proven that he does or does not exist? And that his
existence, moreover, is good?

God is not a problem we solve from the outside; rather, he is a mystery we endure
from within. It is a question that leaves none of us untouched. That splendid Jesuit
John Courtney Murray, in a series of lectures given at Yale many years ago (which he
later parlayed into an elegant little book called *The Problem of God*) has brilliantly
parsed this question. Taking his text from Dostoyevsky that if God were not to exist,
everything would then be permitted, he amends it as follows: “If God is not, no is
permitted to say or even to think that he is, for this would be a monstrous
deception...a pernicious illusion whose result would necessarily be the destruction
of man.”
On the other hand, he continues, “if God exists, again one thing is not permitted. It is not permitted that any man should be ignorant of him, for this ignorance, too, would be the destruction of man. On both counts, therefore, no man may say that the problem of God is not his problem.”

It is a question that, as Pascal would say, takes every man by the throat.

So what is the case for God but that, in the very mode of hope, the mood of the subjunctive, we need him to exist in order that all the longings of the human heart may reach their supreme, optimal fulfillment. “The human being,” declares Luigi Giussani, “is properly that level of nature in which nature asks itself: ‘Why do I exist?’ Man is that miniscule particle which demands a meaning, a reason—the reason.” Who am I but a being beset by questions I may not ignore, yet cannot answer. And if there were an answer to the question that is my life—an existence briefly, heartbreakingly spent between womb and tomb—only a God would be in a position to tell me. Only God can save me now, to paraphrase a famous line from Heidegger. Certainly science, for all its pretensions to exact measurable knowledge, has not cornered the market on meaning. And technological man, for all his vaunted progress in subduing those forces determined on his destruction, has yet to succeed in disarming the last enemy, which is death. If the lessons of 9 / 11 has taught us anything, that surely is it. Or the bomb that blew up the Boston Marathon a year or so ago...

And because, therefore, I am more than the sum of my parts, more than mere matter in motion, it follows that the refusal to turn to him because some atheist twit has persuaded me of his irrelevance, amounts to an assault upon the most elemental
dimension of my being, namely, the thirst for a total answer to the human
predicament. My need for a truth finally transcendent to proof (i.e., God) may only
be suppressed, I am saying, at the price of my freedom, my very self. Only the God
hypothesis will finally satisfy because it alone is adequate to that hunger and thirst
constitutive of my very being—for perfect and unending happiness, truth, justice,
beauty, goodness.

"You would not be looking for me," the God of Pascal tells us, "if you had not
already found me." For that state of definitive deliverance from sin, suffering, and
death, without which life would be unendurable, no more than a "tale told my an
idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," there has simply got to be a God.
The God. The God whose very name----I Am Who Am----bespeaks being, is-ing.

No one can subsist on a diet of nothing. And who besides God, in the gift of his
Son, in the kenotic gesture of his love ("Costing not less than everything," writes T.S.
Eliot), has offered to walk with me through the dark valley, through the hellishness
of sin and suffering and loss, in order to accompany me in my final loneliness?

"Where no voice can reach us any longer," Pope Benedict reminds us, "there he is.
Hell is thereby overcome, or, to be more accurate, death, which was previously hell,
is hell no longer. Neither is the same any longer because there is life in the midst of
death, because love dwells in it."

And so death, thou shalt die!

Thank you very much.