

Mysticism

And the Experience of Love

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Mysticism And The Experience Of Love

I would like to acknowledge in this Rufus Jones Memorial Lecture my indebtedness to him for so large a share in helping me to stake out the area of thought and the interpretation of experience which has been my formal concern for the past thirty years. In 1929, I was a special student with Rufus Jones at Haverford College. He gave to me confidence in the insight that the religion of the inner life could deal with the empirical experience of man

without retreating from the demands of such experience. To state what I mean categorically, the religion of the inner life at its best is life affirming rather than life denying and must forever be involved in the Master's instruction, "Be ye perfect, even as your heavenly father is perfect."

I have chosen the subject of "Mysticism and the Experience of Love" for reasons that are crucial and personal. The reasons are crucial because modern man is not only in a life and death struggle for biological and cultural survival, but he is also in a life and death struggle for the survival of the private life.

Our times may be characterized by a general loss of a sense of personal identity. We flee from the crowded cities to the quiet of the countryside but the countryside becomes jammed with the sounds, the noises, the sights, the pressures which were left behind in the city. Sometimes we escape again from the country into the city seeking the same kind of relief.

One of the dismal heritages from the past is a widespread disintegration of the mood of tenderness which makes us falter, hesitate, and become immobile in our efforts to understand each other and to treat with each other sympathetically. It is true that there is a kind of understanding abroad, but it is an understanding that invades, snoops, threatens, makes afraid or embarrasses. The craftsmen of the public taste, characterized by the term "the Madison Avenue boys," move in upon us, seeking to determine the kind of food we eat, the soap we use, the model of car we drive and the best way to brush our teeth.

We have made an idol of togetherness which takes the form of a muted mass hysteria. Togetherness in this sense is the watchword of our times. It seems that it is more and more a substitute for God. In the great collective huddle, we are desolate, lonely, and frightened. Our shoulders touch, but our hearts cry out for understanding without which there can be for the individual no life, and certainly no meaning. The Great Cause, even the cause of survival itself, is not enough. There must be found ever creative ways that can ventilate the private soul without floating it away, that can confirm and affirm the integrity of the person in the midst of the collective necessity of existence.

It is the insistence of mysticism as it shall be defined in this lecture that there is within reach of every man not only a defense against the Grand Invasion but also the energy for transforming it into community. It says that a man can seek deliberately to explore the inner region and resources of his own life. He can grow in the experiences of solitariness, companioned by the minds and spirits of those who as “pilgrims of the lonely road” have left logs of their journey. He can become at home within by locating in his own spirit the trysting place where he and God may meet. Here it is that life may become private, personal, without at the same time becoming self-centered; here the little purposes that cloy may be absorbed in the big purpose that structures and redefines; here the individual comes to himself, the wanderer comes home, and the private life is saved for deliberate involvement.

For me the choice is personal because all my life I have been seeking to validate, beyond all ambivalences and

frustrations, the integrity of the inner life. I have sensed the urgency to find a way to act and react responsibly out of my own center. I have sought a way of life that could come under the influence of, and be informed by, the fruits of the inner life. The cruel vicissitudes of the social situation in which I have been forced to live in American society have made it vital for me to seek resources, or a resource, to which I could have access as I sought means for sustaining the personal enterprise of my life beyond all of the ravages inflicted upon it by the brutalities of the social order. To live under siege, with the equilibrium and tranquility of peace; to prevent the springs of my being from being polluted by the bitter fruit of the climate of violence, to hold and rehold the moral initiative of my own action and to seek the experience of community, all of this to whatever extent it has been possible to achieve it, is to walk through a door that no man can shut.

It is now in order to establish certain working definitions for the purpose of our discussion. There is a medley of confusion as to the meaning of mysticism. I am indebted to Mary Anita Ewer in her book, *A Survey of Mystical Symbolism*,¹ for this part of my discussion. It is her point of view, which commends itself to me, that the diversity within mysticism is caused by two things: first, the difference in emphasis in regard to the nature of the greater unity of life; and second, the difference in the type of personal response exhibited by the mystic himself:

a. There are those mystics, to be found in Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, who stand in a relationship of personal response to a God whom they conceive more or

less in personal terms, and their attitude of response is itself an intensely personal one.

b. The second group are those who express a relationship of personal response to an Infinite more or less intellectually conceived and the attitude of response defined is one of contemplation. In this classification would be the philosophies of the Logos and the Tao, Neo-Platonism in general, the doctrines of Spinoza, the Hebrew Cabala and certain of the more esoteric doctrinal teachings of Hinduism.

c. The third group may be called the mysticism of the Light Within. It is a kind of epistemology of intuition. Here is a relationship of personal response directed to a Divine Spark regarded as resident within the mystic himself. The response is one of obedience and confidence. One of the watershed personalities, to use a familiar phrase of Rufus Jones, in this group would be Meister Eckhart. They may be characterized as having a trustful attitude towards inner experience.

d. Finally, there is the mysticism of occult sciences, including a wide variety of endeavors to communicate with the dead, of magical attempts to gain occult power by means of certain words or letters or numbers.

Rufus Jones gives as a working definition of mysticism the following: “The word mysticism is used to express the type of religion which puts the emphasis on the immediate awareness of a relationship with God, on direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence.” This

working definition includes not only personal attitudes toward God, but a recognition of the primary experience of God within the inner core of the individual. *For our purposes then, mysticism is defined as the response of the individual to a personal encounter with God within his own spirit.* Such a response is total, affecting the inner quality of the life and its outward expression and manifestation. It is within the religious experience of the Society of Friends that the witness in the world is an outward expression of the inner experience. The concern of the Quaker, however involved it may be in the social order, is always grounded in the religious experience. To keep the relationship between the social concern and the experience of the inner light from becoming separate or separated from each other remains as a part of the constant struggle within the Society itself.

Because mysticism deals with the inner personal response to God, it may seem at first glance to be life denying as over against life affirming; life denying because the intent of the person is to retreat within, to disentangle his life from those things that make for fragmentation, divisiveness, and attachment. It cannot be denied that this element is very pronounced. The evidence is abundant in all the literature of mysticism. One of the great words in this literature is detachment, and by detachment is meant the relaxation of one's hold upon the testimony and the experience of the senses. It speaks intimately of self-denial, even of self-annihilation, or of utter and complete absorption in the experience of union with God.

Much of the emphasis upon spiritual exercises is focused upon what such exercises will enable the individual to achieve when he is able to rise above and transcend the fierce demands of the senses. These exercises are meant to “ready” the spirit for an awareness of the Presence of God dwelling in the core of the individual’s being.

It is for this reason that great emphasis is placed upon silence, on becoming still within. The insistence is not so much that something invade the life of man from without but rather that through quietness and inner solitariness, the individual becomes conscious of what is there all the time. “Be still and know that I am God,” is the way the Psalmist puts it.

When I was a theological student in Rochester, New York, very late one night I was returning to the Seminary by way of Main Street, the central artery of traffic for the city. The hour was so late that streetcars ran only infrequently and there was almost no traffic. As I walked along, I became aware of what seemed to be the sound of rushing water. I realized that I had been hearing this rumbling for quite some time, but had only suddenly become aware of it. The next day I was talking about this with one of my professors who told me that for a certain distance under Main Street there was a part of the old Erie Canal. This was the sound of water that I had heard. The sound itself was continuous, but when there was the normal traffic in the daytime, the sound could not be heard. It was only when the surface noises had stopped that the sound came through. This is analogous to the mystic’s witness of God within, whose Presence may not become manifest until the traffic of the

surface life is somehow stilled. This is what is meant by the experience of centering down.

What then is it that the mystic claims he experiences? For him his experience is a revelation of truth. In Charles Bennett's essay, *A Philosophical Study of Mysticism*,² he makes a rather illuminating analysis of the mystic's claim.

In the first place, he says, "It is quite clear . . . that the mystic is an initiate, one to whom has been granted a view of The Inside. To him the doors have been opened; from his eyes the veils have fallen; he has been a sharer in the counsels of The Most High. He knows the secret, then. But this secret is not the guarded treasure of an esoteric cult: it is 'one which the religious spirit tries not to keep but to give away.' . . . Whatever else is to be said about it, (the revelation) makes no claim to be any private truth."

In the second place, it does not claim any novelty. "It 'dawns' on us or we 'wake up' to it." Continuing, Bennett says, "The mystic, every mystic, declares that he has discovered—God! Hardly a new insight this, it would seem, nor yet one to be proclaimed to all mankind as an unheard-of revelation. . . . In short, there is nothing original in mystic knowledge unless indeed originality consists not so much in the discovery of the new as in the rediscovery of the eternal."

In the third place, ". . . the mystic insight is not to be won without a certain preparation of the will, above all the moral will. . . . The truth is not to be won by violence . . . impartiality, dispassionateness, sincerity, some touch of

reverence, perhaps—in the honourable code of the modern investigator all these find their place. . . . And the meaning of this is that we must find a place in the theory of knowledge for the category of response.” The particular kind of response of which the mystic speaks is determined by the mystic’s object—God—who is primarily an object of love and the preparation essentially a moral preparation.

In the fourth place, “Whatever truth the mystics have come upon it is not any particular truth.” Always they are dealing with something that is total, with “the whole working essence, . . . the meaning of the whole.” This is somehow experienced at once. It is not experienced in fragmentations, in multiplicity, but in unity and wholeness. Continuing, Bennett says, “This is what [the mystics] are trying to declare by their constant use of such terms as wayless, pathless, abysmal, modeless, to describe the form of their knowledge and by referring to its content as a darkness, a wilderness.” An extreme expression of what is meant here is Eckhart’s famous reference to the Godhead as “the Nameless Nothing.”

The mystic cannot escape the necessity for giving some kind of “data content” to his experience. How he speaks of this content reflects the religious, cultural, and social heritage in which he finds meaning and in which he is rooted. For instance, if central to his experience is the recognition of God as being the Creator of life and existence, then God must, in a very definite manner, stand over against creation. God is the subject and all existences of whatever form are predicates. What then is the relation between God and his creatures? He cannot be wholly

transcendent because this would not satisfy the demands of the mystic's experience, which is a personal response to God. Here we are face to face with what is claimed to be a form of personal communion between two principals, man and God. This means that either the soul of man must be regarded as a very part of God or else some other means must be devised to make authentic communication in the mystic sense between man and God possible. The mystic claims that some connection does take place, man and God do communicate.

For me the importance of the mystic's claim does not rest on the degree to which he is able to establish empirical verification of his experience, if by empirical verification we mean a body of separate evidence—evidence that is of the nature of proof of the integrity of his experience. And here is the interesting dilemma and the fascinating paradox. The mind insists that all experiences fall into order in a system of meaning. What the mystic experiences within must somehow belong to that which is without. It is reasonable then for the individual to expect to validate his claim of truth by his experience of life in the world. What he experiences in the world must not seem radically different from the quality and the kind that takes place within. And yet at the same time the validity of his inner experience cannot finally rest upon any kind of manifestation. The integrity of the personal response does not rise or fall by the degree to which the response is checked by data from the outside. And yet the necessity for trying to find external validation and vindication can never be relaxed.

For me the key is the mystic's claim of having in his encounter touched that which is vital, total, and absolute. He experiences ultimate meaning, but he experiences it and he is a creature in time and space caught in all the involvements of finitude and limitation. May it not be then that what he discovers to be inherent and fontal in him is also inherent and fontal in Life. To the extent to which this is true for the mystic, to that extent will he look out upon the world seeing not merely manifestations, things, events, nature, but seeing also at a deeper level what he himself has seen in his encounter. The world now becomes pregnant with truth and literally God's creation. It is possible then that what the mystic sees and experiences in his response to God, he may discern and discover in his experience of Life.

Therefore, the mystical experience is only in a limited way life denying. It becomes in its most profound sense life affirming. It becomes quite conceivable then that if there are purposes in the mind of God, the Creator of Life, the living substance, and of existence itself, and if I may enter into communion with such a God, then as a result of that communion, I may be exposed to the vision of his purposes. To the degree to which I respond to that vision I participate formally, deliberately, and consciously in those purposes.

In the kind of religion I have been describing, which is essentially the religion of the inner light, the individual has a sense of experiencing the love of God. *He senses that he is being dealt with at a center in himself that goes beyond all of his virtues and his vices.* And it is this which he seeks to experience with his fellows. There is something so

deeply satisfying about the quality of emotional security which settles deep within him that he gives to it a universal meaning. What he has experienced meets the deepest need of his life. It gives him a sense of being at home in existence, ultimately untouched by all the vicissitudes of life. Nevertheless, he is on the hunt for clues to this experience in the world which is God's creation. He discovers, for instance, that even the so-called lower animals tend to respond to this experience in the same way that he responds.

I read in a San Francisco daily paper several months ago a news item under the dateline of Denver, Colorado. It described how a certain high school girl had been given a unique summer job. She was hired by the General Hospital as a mice petter. Her sole occupation was to take the white mice out of their cages several times a day, pet them, croon over them, and gentle them. It had been discovered that mice treated in this way responded positively to various experiments with less tension than those who had not been thus dealt with. The petting touched something deep within them, giving to their total self a sense of well-being that put them at their ease. They tended to hold their own against any of the pressures of the environment. Many experiments of this kind have been taking place in widely different sections of our country and other countries in the world. Contemporary psychology has produced an abundance of literature dealing with the significance of understanding in mental health. So important is the need to be understood in the normal growth of children in emotional health that new light is being thrown on the relationship between the baby

and its mother or between the baby and the nurse. It is discovered that babies who are not given tender loving care tend to recede into themselves. The recession stunts the growth and sometimes causes them so to relax their hold on life that death results. Any person who has worked with children understands the significance of what is involved here. The need to be understood is a total need of the personality. It is therefore the need for love.

As the individual begins working at the experience of love with his fellows, certain important discoveries are made. In the first place, it is necessary to distinguish between love as interest in another person and love as intrinsic interest in another person. The distinction here is between love as an expression of interest in another person for ulterior reasons, and love as an expression of interest in another person for his own sake. In most of our relationships with each other, there are passing phases of interest manifested due to circumstances or the particulars of being thrown together for a limited time. We may have an interest in another person as an extension of our own preoccupation with ourselves. Enlightened self-interest is the sophisticated term used. The other person is caught up in our private process and is exploited for our own ends and needs. Usually this is done without sharing these private ends with the other person involved. The distinction between a dog and a cat in their attitudes toward human beings may serve to illustrate the idea here. This distinction is not original with me. A dog is outgoing, demonstrative, obvious in particularizing his affection. There is an element of spontaneity about him. Not so with the cat. When a cat rubs

against your leg, he is not caressing you, he is caressing himself against you. The interest which he has is not intrinsic.

As a footnote to this observation, it should be said that a person may give of himself with the full knowledge of what is happening. It may be for him an experience of being understood. To give of himself in this way may be a part of his own deep need to be understood.

The distinction here is between a warm feeling of genuine sentiment, but merely a feeling moving at the surface level of involvement, and the kind of caring that goes beyond all the divisiveness of the personality to the central core of the person. It does not tarry at the level of the temperamental or occasional mood; it goes beyond any whimsical relatedness.

To love means to have an intrinsic interest in another person. It is not of necessity contingent upon any kind of group or family closeness. True, such closeness may provide a normal setting for the achieving of intrinsic interest, but the fact that two men are brothers having the same parents provides no mandatory love relationship between them. In his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul writes, "My prayer to God is that your love may grow more and more rich in knowledge and in all manner of insight that you may have a sense of what is vital, that you may be transparent and of no harm to anyone, your life covered with that harvest of righteousness that Jesus Christ

produces to the praise and to the glory of God.” Men do not love in general, but they do love in particular. To love means dealing with persons in the concrete rather than in the abstract. In the presence of love, there are no types or stereotypes, no classes and no masses.

An intrinsic interest is therefore not possible apart from a sense of fact where other persons are concerned. This sense of fact means that the other person is dealt with as he is and in the light of the details of his life. It does not mean becoming so involved in the bill of particulars of other human beings that we cannot get through to them. But it does mean defining the other person in his context and establishing a perspective with regard to that context and where he is located in it. To state it conventionally and categorically, it means meeting a person where he is and dealing with him there as if he were where he should be. One day a woman was brought to Jesus because she had been taken in adultery and her accusers wanted Jesus to pass judgment upon her. It was his claim that he was not opposed to the law and it was the insistence of the law, said her accusers, that a person caught in adultery should be stoned to death. Did Jesus agree with the law and thus condone the stoning of the woman or did he not? His reply to the question seemed at once to be an evasion. He said, “Let the man among you who is without sin cast the first stone.” The implication being that after that any man may throw. Then he did a curious thing. He was such a gentleman that he did not look at the woman in the face and add his gaze to the stares of the hostile accusers. No, he looked on the ground. After a time, he lifted his face,

looked the woman in the eyes and said, “Woman, where are your accusers? Does no man condemn you? Neither do I. Go into peace and don’t do it any more.” He met her where she was, admittedly an adulteress, but he dealt with her at that point of fact as if she were where, at her best, she saw herself as being. Thus he took her total fact into account and enlivened her at a point in herself that was beyond all her faults. A person’s fact includes more than his plight, predicament, or need at a particular moment in time. It is something total which must include awareness of the person’s potential. This, too, is a part of the person’s fact. This is why love always sees more than is in evidence at any moment of viewing.

The sense of fact with reference to an increasingly large area of the other person’s fact is most crucial. The area of the other person’s fact is an expanding thing if such a person lives into life and deepens the quality and breadth of his experience. This makes love between persons dynamic rather than static. It means further that the intrinsic interest must be informed. And constantly. There is no substitute for hard understanding of more and more and more of another’s fact. This serves as a corrective against doing violence to those for whom we have a sense of caring because of great gaps in our knowledge of their fact. This is generally the weakness in so much lateral good will in the world. It is uninformed, ignorant, sincere good will. It does not seek to feed its emotion with a healthy diet of facts, data, information from which insights opening the door to the other person’s meaning are derived. I think that this is

why it is impossible to have intrinsic interest in people with whom we are out of living or vicarious contact.

I remarked just above that men do not love in general. It is in order to explain this further. Often we are enjoined by the interpreters of the Christian faith that we must love humanity “for Christ’s sake.” The reasoning is that inasmuch as Christ died for humanity, then as his followers we should love humanity in the way that he loved humanity, to the extent of giving our lives if necessary. We manage to stop short of this. As a parenthetical statement which goes to the heart of the theological position about Jesus Christ giving his life in the crucifixion for humanity—it was a voluntary giving of self, devoid of all aspects of obligation or response to external demands. To speak of the love for humanity is meaningless. There is no such thing as humanity. What we call humanity has a name, was born, lives on a street, gets hungry, needs all the particular things we need. As an abstract, it has no reality whatsoever. Now this is not to say that love does not require us to develop a climate of acceptance which may surround any person who comes within our ken, but we should be clear what is at work here.

The corollary to the atmosphere of acceptance is the developing of an openness towards others. The purpose is always the same, to learn how to get through to them, to treat with them at the most central point in their personality. The fundamental purpose must never be lost sight of. By openness I mean an inner climate or sensitiveness to the awareness of others. It is the inability to have this inner climate of awareness that defines the

significance of the generalization that a person who has not experienced love finds it difficult to love. That is, one who has no sense of being an object of love is seriously handicapped in making someone else an object of his love.

There is much to be said for the Christian doctrine which insists that we are able to love others because He first loved us. A person who has grown up feeling always outside of the reach of other people's caring has a dual handicap which may be paradoxical in character. On the one hand, because he sees himself as being beyond the pale of love and affection, he is apt to pass a judgment upon himself which insists on his own unworthiness. Because he feels despised, at long last he begins to despise himself. On the other hand, there may be a kind of inner compensation for this lack. This inner compensation may very easily result in an exaggeration of self-love, a preoccupation with one's own needs, interests, concerns. In short, it may make such a person thoroughly self-centered. The result of the self-centeredness may be the building of a wall that shuts everybody out.

There are some people who have the quality of "built in awareness" of others as a special talent or special gift. It is not far off the mark to say that there are some individuals who by constitution are born lovers, who have what a friend of mine calls "the gift of intimacy." To be near them is to find yourself warmed by their fire. Their presence in the midst seems to activate in others a contagion of good feeling towards the world in general. But for most of us, it is a thing that has to be worked at, cultivated as a kind of inner development. We have all experienced this warmth in

some degree. You know what a difference it makes when you feel that another person is truly aware of you, of your presence, or even of your existence. I know a nurse, for instance, who can walk into a sick room, take a quick all-pervading look at the patient in bed, then walk over to the bed, touch a pillow here or make some shift in the covers there, do some little thing that adds enormously to the immediate comfort of the patient.

But how may such a quality be developed? Of course, I must assume the fundamental intent or desire to love. Then what? There must be developed a sensitive and structured imagination.

Many years ago a brilliant young sociologist at Columbia College delivered a lecture to his class on the Philosophy of a Fool. He ended the first part of his address with these words, "On the seventh day, therefore, God could not rest. In the morning and the evening He busied Himself with terrible and beautiful concoctions and in the twilight of the seventh day He finished that which is of more import than the beasts of the earth and the fish of the sea and the lights of the firmament. And he called it Imagination because it was made in His own image; and those unto whom it is given shall see God."

We are accustomed to thinking of the imagination as a useful tool in the hands of the artist as he reproduces in varied forms that which he sees beyond the rim of fact that circles him round. There are times when the imagination is regarded as a delightful and often whimsical characteristic of what we are pleased to call "the childish mind." Our

judgment trembles on the edge of condescension, pity or even ridicule when imagination is confused with fancy in the reports that are given of the inner workings of the mind of the “simpleton” or “the fool.” We recognize and applaud the bold and audacious leap of the mind of the scientist when it soars far out beyond that which is known and established, to fix a beachhead on distant, unexplored shores.

But the place where the imagination shows its greatest powers as the *angelos*, the messenger, of God is in the miracle which it creates when one man, standing in his place, is able, while remaining there, to put himself in another man’s place. To send his imagination forth to establish a beachhead in another man’s spirit, and from that vantage point so to blend with the other’s landscape that what he sees and feels is authentic—this is the great adventure in human relations. But this is not enough. The imagination must report its findings accurately without regard to all prejudgments and private or collective fears. But this is not enough. There must be both a spontaneous and calculating response to such knowledge which will result in sharing of resources at their deepest level.

Very glibly are we apt to use such words as “sympathy,” “companion,” “sitting where they sit,” but to experience this is to be rocked to one’s foundations. The simple truth is, we resist making room for considerations that swerve us out of the path of preoccupation with ourselves, our needs, our problems. We make our imagination a thing of corruption when we give it range only over our own affairs. Here we experience the magnification of our own ills, the

distortion of our own problems and the enlargement of the areas of our misery. What we do not permit our imagination to do in the work of understanding others, turns in upon ourselves with disaster and sometimes terror.

To be to another human being what is needed at the time that the need is most urgent and most acutely felt, this is to participate in the precise act of redemption. The imagination acting under the most stringent orders can develop a technique all its own in locating and reporting to us its findings. We are not the other person, we are ourselves. All that they are experiencing we can never know—but we can make accurate soundings which when properly read, will enable us to be to them what we could never be without such awareness. The degree to which our imagination becomes the *angelos* of God, we ourselves may become His *instruments*.

If this analysis is sound, then it is clear that any structure of society, any arrangement under which human beings live that does not provide for maximum opportunities for free flowing and circulation among each other, works against individual and social health. Any attitudes, private or social, which prohibit people from coming into “across the board” contacts with each other work against the love ethic. Segregation, therefore, is bound to make for an increase in ill social health. It doesn’t matter how meaningful may be the tight circle of isolated security in which individuals or groups move. The existence of such circles preclude the possibility of the experience of love as a part of intentional living. The sense of the other person’s fact must be total.

In bringing this argument to a close, it is necessary to come back to the basic concept. The other person's fact includes the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly. It may be a fact, for instance, that here is a person who is mean, greedy, even vicious and ungracious. Here is a person who by his action declares himself on every hand to all and sundry or to you in particular that he has no active membership in the human family. This is a fact and it is his fact. It must be taken into account. To ignore it is to be utterly sentimental and false. Always there is the insistence at the very center of the Christian faith, for instance, that even the enemy must be loved. The injunction is, "But I say unto you, love your enemies that you may be children of your Father who sends His rain on the just and the unjust." It is clear and needs no underscoring that what seems to be the natural thing is to hate one's enemy. The insistence here is that the individual is enjoined to move from the natural impulse to the level of deliberate intent. One has to bring to the center of his focus a desire to love even one's enemy.

This at once makes of love something more than a balance of rewards and punishments, of merits and demerits. The person's total fact has to be taken into account. Precisely what does this involve? First, it involves a recognition that goes beyond the logic of the deed that a person does. It does not mean saying that the deed is something other than it is—it means calling the deed by its true name. This having been done, then one has to go on to understand that this deed, however despicable, does not cover all that the person is. Love means to place the particular deed in a perspective, a perspective of the other person's life. His

behavior is seen as a part of his personal history and his experience. Love warns that the judgment of the deed is circumscribed or limited by your lack of a total knowledge of the person. As your knowledge increases, the deed finds its place of sequence in the total movement of the individual's life. All of this may seem to be some kind of fiction, but let us examine the meaning more closely. Our understanding is always partial understanding because it is limited both by our lack of knowledge and by the inadequacies within ourselves through which we look at the other person.

*If I knew you and you knew me,
And each of us could clearly see
By that inner light divine
The meaning of your heart and mine;
I'm sure that we would differ less
And clasp our hands in friendliness,
If you knew me, and I knew you.*

In the last analysis, therefore, every judgment of the other person is importantly a self-judgment. There remains the real question: If I could see this man in his own context and get behind the thing that he is doing to the real center of his life, then I would be able to deal with him there in a manner that is total, wholesome and redemptive rather than to deal with him at the point of his deed which is always partial. In so doing, I establish psychological distance not only between him and his deed but between me and his deed. I must help him to come to an understanding of his deed both

in terms of what it is doing to him as well as what it is doing to me, or to others.

This may be impossible because I may not be able to get close enough to him to give a personal face to face communication. Thus we come to our second consideration, what I must do if I would love him, if I would deal with him at a point beyond all his faults and virtues. I must find a way to bring home to him the meaning of his deed, the meaning that transcends the intent of the deed itself. This may be done by binding him with limitations and penalties, by laws and conventions that will cause him to raise crucial questions about his deed and its meaning. Once these questions are raised in his mind, there is a chance now that he may measure his deed by his true intent as a human being. At such a moment, he is apt to stand in self-judgment.

Meanwhile what is happening to my love? It must keep on loving. I must not ever give him up, no more than I am willing to give myself up. The responsibility of love is to love. Where love persists, it awakens the mind and the imagination to a wide variety of insights and techniques that will run interference for the clear flowing affection.

It is for this reason that there can be no love apart from suffering. Love demands that we expose ourselves at our most vulnerable point by keeping the heart open. Why? Because this is our own deepest need. When I love, even though I may in the act identify with the other person in his predicament, what I can never enter into are the experiences which resulted in his deed. I do not want other

men to deal with me on the basis of what I may do under some particular circumstance, but rather I wish to be dealt with in an inclusive, total, integrated manner. This is what it means to be understood. This is to have the experience of freedom, to be one's self, and to be rid of the awful burden of pretensions.

It is our faith that this is the way God deals with us. He has not dealt with us after our sins nor rewarded us according to our iniquity. Therefore, to love is the profoundest act of religion, of religious faith, of religious devotion. It is only in a secondary sense an act of ethics or morality.

There is a steady anxiety that surrounds man's experience of love. Sometimes the radiance of love is so soft and gentle that the individual sees himself with all harsh lines wiped away and all limitations blended with his strength in so happy a combination that strength seems to be everywhere and weakness is nowhere to be found. This is a part of the magic, the spell of love. Sometimes the radiance of love kindles old fires that have long since grown cold from the neglect of despair, or new fires are kindled by a hope born full blown without beginning and without ending. Sometimes the radiance of love blesses a life with a vision of its possibilities never dreamed of and never sought, which vision stimulates to new endeavor and summons all latent powers to energize the life at its innermost core.

But there are other ways by which love works its perfect work. It may stab the spirit by calling forth a bitter, scathing self-judgment. The heights to which it calls may

seem so high that all incentive is lost and the individual is stricken with an utter hopelessness and despair. It may throw in relief old and forgotten weaknesses which one had accepted, but now they stir in their place to offer themselves as testimony of one's unworthiness and to challenge the love with their embarrassing authenticity. It is at such times that one expects the love to be dimmed under the mistaken notion that love is at long last based upon merit and worth.

Behold the miracle! Love has no awareness of merit or demerit—it has no scale by which its portion may be weighed or measured. It does not seek to balance giving and receiving. Love loves; that is its nature. But this does not mean that love is blind, naive or pretentious. It does mean that love holds its object securely in its grasp calling all that it sees by its true name but surrounding all with a wisdom born both of its passion and its understanding. Here is no traffic in sentimentality, no catering to weakness or to strength. Instead there is robust vitality that quickens the roots of personality creating an unfolding of the self that redefines, reshapes and makes all things new. Thus the experience is so fundamental in quality that the individual knows that what is happening to him can outlast all things without itself being dissipated or lost.

Whence comes this power which seems to be the point of referral for all experience and the essence of all meaning? No created thing, no single unit of life can be the source of such fullness and completeness. For in the experience itself a man is caught and held by something so much more than he can ever think or be that there is but one word by which

its meaning can be encompassed—God. Hence the Psalmist says that as long as the Love of God shines on us undimmed, not only may no darkness obscure but also may we find our way to other hearts at a point in them beyond all weakness and all strength, beyond all that is good and beyond all that is evil. There is no thing outside ourselves, no circumstance, no condition, no vicissitude, that can ultimately separate us from the love of God and from the love of each other. And we pour out our gratitude to God that this is so!

Notes

1. Macmillan Co., p. 16ff.
2. Yale University Press, p. 72ff.

About the Author

Howard Thurman, Dean of Marsh Chapel and Professor of Spiritual Resources and Disciplines at Boston University, gave the 1961 Rufus Jones Lecture sponsored by the Religious Education Committee of the Friends General Conference at Baltimore Friends School, and revised that address slightly for its publication as a Pendle Hill pamphlet. A widely traveled lecturer, teacher and author, he is perhaps best known as co-founder of Fellowship Church in San Francisco and as the author of *Deep River*, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, *Deep is the Hunger*, *Meditations of the Heart*, *The Creative Encounter*, *The Growing Edge*, and *Footprints of a Dream*.

Pendle Hill

Located on 23 acres in Wallingford, Pennsylvania, Pendle Hill is a Quaker study, retreat, and conference center offering programs open to everyone. Pendle Hill's vision is to create peace with justice in the world by transforming lives. Since Pendle Hill opened in 1930, thousands of people have come from across the United States and throughout the world for Spirit-led learning, retreat, and community.

At the heart of Pendle Hill is a residential study program which encourages a step back from daily life for reflection and discernment in preparation for deeper engagement in the community and wider world. Because spiritual experience is essential to Quakerism, Pendle Hill's education is experiential, or experimental, at its core. Adult students of all ages come for a term or a year of education designed to strengthen the whole person – body, mind, and spirit. The Resident Program captures the earliest vision for Pendle Hill while responding to the call of the world in which we exist today. Program themes include:

- Quaker faith and practice
- Dismantling oppression
- Spiritual deepening
- Leadership skill development
- Ecological literacy
- Personal discernment
- Arts and crafts

Gandhian constructive program
Building capacity for nonviolent social change.

Programs are offered in a variety of formats – including term-long courses, weekend workshops, and evening presentations. Those unable to come for a term or a year are encouraged to take part in a workshop or retreat. Information on all Pendle Hill programs is available at www.pendlehill.org. Pendle Hill's mission of spiritual education is also furthered through conference services – hosting events for a variety of religious and educational nonprofit organizations, including many Quaker groups.

The Pendle Hill pamphlets have been an integral part of Pendle Hill's educational vision since 1934. Like early Christian and Quaker tracts, the pamphlets articulate perspectives which grow out of the personal experience, insights, and/or special knowledge of the authors, concerning spiritual life, faith, and witness.

A typical pamphlet has characteristics which make it a good vehicle for experimental thought. It is the right length to be read at a single sitting (about 9000 words). It is concerned with a topic of contemporary importance. Like words spoken in a Quaker meeting for worship, it embodies a concern, a sense of obligation to express caring or to act in response to a harmful situation.

To receive each Pendle Hill pamphlet as it is published, order an annual subscription. Please contact:

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