

breathing is a joy that I cannot miss. Every day I practice breathing, and in my small meditation room is this sentence: "Breathe, you are alive!" Just breathing and smiling can make us very happy, and when we breathe consciously we recover ourselves completely and encounter life in the present moment. To me, this is the Kingdom of Heaven. The real miracle is not to walk on water, but to walk on the earth, to be alive in the present moment. If we live in mindfulness, it is possible to encounter God right in the present moment while we are washing the dishes, looking at a flower, looking in the eyes of a child.

When we are in touch with refreshing, peaceful, and healing elements within ourselves and around us, we learn how to cherish and protect these things and to make them grow. These are the elements of peace and happiness available to us anytime. If we do not look closely at these simple things, we may find them boring.

There are people who cannot enjoy simple pleasures, and that is why they seek drugs, alcohol, sexual misconduct, and many other things that destroy them, their bodies, their minds, and their families, and cause their children and grandchildren to suffer. If we educate ourselves and our children on how to enjoy peace in the present moment and to be happy with the refreshing and healing elements that are available, we will avoid these kinds of traps. Life can be found only in the present moment. The past is gone, the future is not yet here, and if we do not go back to ourselves in the present moment, we cannot be in touch with life.

## Who Speaks?

by MARSHA SINETAR



*"Only love heals, makes whole, takes us beyond ourselves. . . . Love gets us There, lets us know Who speaks."*

CHILDHOOD WAS LARGE MINDED. My family was intelligent, intensely creative, had a lively humor and good, firm moral tone. Ours was not a typically religious nest. Dogma, "religiosity" — any legitimized, organized specialness — was felt too restrictive a thought system to house the mind and style in which my parents lived.

In particular, when it came to me and God, my father consciously, philosophically restrained his charismatic influence. He expected me to use my mind to ask and answer for myself life's big questions. I tried to look and listen deeply — as substantively as a four or five year old could. My childhood's key and central question was, "Who speaks?"

My grandmother was an active spiritual instigator.

She stimulated what she called spiritual precociousness. She conspired with me. No doubt against my father's careful planning, she taught me as much as she knew about God from the viewpoint of the world's formalized religions. Mostly on the sly, we two renegades routinely slipped away to cross-cultural worship. My grandmother was a true ecumenical master; we made all the rounds. With her smallish, wrinkled hand clamped around my even-smaller, lineless one, she regularly escorted me to Buddhist and Hindu temples, to synagogues — especially on High Holy Days, which she loved — and to cathedrals, which I loved. God's living, active presence was there for me. The services, the liturgy, the prayers — even the architecture — shimmered. I felt that God lived in a nice house. I also knew He lived in me and in every devotee; I thought He absolutely undergirded all humanity with evidential Oneness. Those were bright, free-thinking days.

Such experiences, and others that I courted on my own, richly fed my inherent spiritual appetite. But years passed — dark, difficult ones — before I was satiated by the simple act of giving myself over to what I knew to be a radical interior summons. Today I have full confidence in this holy writ, with faith in its corresponding requisite of unconditional surrender. I regularly face what pop-psychology now terms “letting go.” This movement, this ruination of habit, mind, and comfort simultaneously disorients and unsettles me while it integrates my whole being and my life.

However, before being strengthened by the organizing

principle within that special disharmony, first I was significantly weakened by painful loss, the uprooting and dissolution of my small family, and economic hardship. Of course, given severe childhood losses, my first loyalties went to the world, to its securities and applause. No one could have accused me of any incapacity to “enjoy life” as convention defines that phrase.

Yet, as I came to — or rather transcended — my senses, St. Augustine's *Confessions* guided me to sanity. This autobiography of the prodigal son's return validated what I well knew but temporarily had rejected: Augustine's tumultuous youth, his description of his “great perverseness,” his stunning realization that without God he could find no rest, no true interior pace, reassured and led me. For this was my experience, my own life's motif. So somewhere around this time I bit the bullet and marched myself to St. Michael's Church and asked to be baptized a Christian. This adult choice, this first legitimate commitment, made all the difference; it ignited its own spirited harvest.

This, then, the truthful acknowledgment and hesitating obedience to my life's disruptive but authentic call, has become a benchmark of what I now trust. For me, relinquishment, “letting go,” has required — has built — my faith. Submission to the truth in faith comes by virtue of a grace. This regenerates, recreates, and feeds a life. Grace stirs us up. It makes us yearn for rearrangement, reach for reconfiguration and a truthful life. In faith we lose dishonesties, weaknesses, and subtle self-betrayals that we previously chose.

As we in faith (and I may add utter vulnerability) obey this impulse, this movement of our souls, we gain the courage to be, we somehow are made able to embrace the void. Ironically, just as we gain this courage to be, the void somehow erases personal being, makes us nothing, deletes us.

I am not one to tell anyone specifically “how” to proceed or to say exactly what happens — what phrases or experiences or bright celestial sounds or pain to expect. My foolish notion is that those who direct us too exactly based on what has happened to them rob us of surprise and wonder, restrict us by their frames. In our desperation, we often guiltily collude. No matter. This, too, passes. For the Lord “comes as a thief in the night.”

Each spiritual tradition gives different keys for our unique passage. Zen, Yoga, the Sufis, shamanism, classical Judeo-Christian chants, prayers, and rituals unearth us in their own ways. Sufi literature, for instance, provides novel ingress. Whirling dances bring aspirants to so joyful and self-forgetful a state that, ecstatically, they tear off clothes, cry out, become the void. But Sri Ramana Maharshi taught that simple being is enough.

All prayer seems to be our cry for access, our attempt in word or deed to touch God's hem. Whether we are feeling or cool and cerebral, whether we prefer to concentrate on form or practice negating all form or work toward self-surrender must matter less than that we choose strongly for a way that permits love, brings us to a worldless, wordless core within that *is* peace, *is* radiance, *is* that mystical union about which saints embody in their

lives. A reader once sent me these tender lines from Deuteronomy: “The eternal God is a dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.” What could be clearer? What do we wait for? St. Therese of Lisieux instructed us further: “[Happiness] is not what attracts me. . . . It's Love! To love, to be loved, and to return to the earth to make love loved.”

Only love heals, makes whole, takes us beyond ourselves. Love — not necessarily mushy sentiment or docile passivity — is both right motive and right result. Love gets us There, lets us know Who speaks.

At one extreme, many people completely shy away from freedom. Instead, angrily I think, they cling to rules, intellectualize, honor convention more than God's spontaneous open love. Less extreme, most of us also postpone our true good, sensing that we must live in wilderness, in unfamiliar territory — Reality. But whether by emotionless, incremental entry or by cataclysmic, high feeling, surely we can simply learn to *be* as God simply is. For haven't we been especially invited — by birth and by His creation — specifically addressed?

Sometimes addressed personally, we stumble “in,” without desire, device, or premeditation. While fishing, doing the laundry, fixing a car motor, in prayer or meditation, we, too, through unmerited favor, can be reborn.

How can anyone not be touched or moved — forever changed — by God's grand, timeless creations? In nature, surrounded by pure, immortal, elemental beauty, we rejoin that which is eternal, that which always is. By praying, reading scriptures, doing concentrated, devoted work

or selfless service, or simply living life, we can recover life. This is healing rebirth. Formal theologies, myths, poetry, music, art, dance, and our own instinctive, primal intuition spark it. God's "everlasting arms" are closer to us than we are to ourselves, yet more and yet beyond.

John Muir, an uncommon saint in his own right, wrote that he wanted to spend all his time in an idle manner, "literally gaping with all the mouths of soul and body, demanding nothing, fearing nothing, but . . . hoping and enjoying tremendously." This transcendental daydreaming, Muir felt, was the only valid business of life. This is my favored way.

I have a special call and disposition for silence. But I know that to some, quiet is pointless. After all, what can you do without talking? Well, plenty. More important is what happens to you in silence. It is a perfect replica of inmost poverty. Periods of silence regenerate, simplify, and organize my life. Silence has strengthened my good will, brought peace of mind, produced for me a new life — *nova creatura*.

Not for an instant do I prescribe this as a method for others or for what is popularly called "self-discovery." Silence is severe, a discipline with special rules and dangers. If we practice to avoid, to mire in self-centeredness, we are done in. When we practice correctly, the fruits of silence are the fruits of the spirit: joy, peace, faithfulness, self-control, love. Approval-seeking weaknesses, the world's noise and its hopeless reality fade. Perhaps this is why a Jewish proverb teaches that silence heals all ailments.

Silence teaches love, makes us able to receive love and to extend it, yet in our own authentic, proper way. This means we will love differently than the world expects — we will surprise and often disappoint.

No one writes more eloquently of silence than Thomas Merton. He has been a distant, if also absent, teacher. He says for me what I am too dull to say alone: "Let me seek then, the gift of silence . . . where everything I touch is turned into prayer; where the sky is my prayer, the birds are my prayer, the wind in the trees is my prayer, for God is all in all."

In truth, my life is very ordinary and specific — not problem-free, abstract, or theoretical. I love the wood-carrying, bird-feeding, floor-washing, bed-making, cooking, showering, coffee-klatching times. Friends and neighbors to whom I turn for talk, advice, and help — practical, useful acts and useless ones as well — these make up my life.

Too much talk of mystic things, like voids and transcendences, makes me nervous, misses the point — probably even makes God edgy. Down-to-earth, physical, relational, and quite creaturely realities (and not all beautiful, either) also shape and bless us. Surely these, too, point to God, permit dialogue and insight. Surely these lend life its worth and flavor. These, to me, seem holy, purposeful reminders that Who speaks is God, in whom we dwell, whose living presence addresses us to "make love loved."