

the journey to the divine. Early in the story, a man is told that something terrible is going to happen to him. So, he withdraws, hardly sees anybody, and lives a very, very protected existence. One day, while walking in a cemetery, he sees an old woman throwing herself on the grave of her husband, weeping and calling out. Suddenly, witnessing her grief and the love that lay under it, he realizes that the terrible thing he would experience was that *nothing* would ever happen to him. The woman showed him a love that is the glory of life. That glory would never be his because of his fear. It's a wonderful story, and everyone's story. To be open is to risk being shattered, but without that shattering there is no glory. As Rumi wrote:

The Burning Bush has come. It must put us to the test.

We wanted revelation and now we must burn.

You said "yes" at the beginning, why do you shrink now?

Become a salamander. Make a house of fire.

(This essay was adapted from an interview with Benjamin Shield, Ph.D.)

Leaning Toward the Light

by STEPHEN LEVINE



*"It may be said that God cannot be known
in the mind but only experienced in the heart."*

WHEN I WAS THIRTEEN I attended a summer camp run by a gentle bear of a man who was a Christian Scientist. My time with him was among my first introductions to the experience of the divine. His being displayed an ethic and a mercy I had not previously noticed in the world around me. One day I received a phone call from my parents, who were very angry because a neighbor told them he thought I had stolen something from him. My parents were outraged and insisted I make amends immediately.

Because I received the call in the camp office, the camp director overheard some of the conversation. He noticed the fear and the distress I was experiencing. After I hung up the phone he put his arms around me. I

put my head on his chest and sobbed. As I cried, he held me and said, "Everything will be all right. Just take a breath or two. Everything will be all right." And as he comforted me I looked toward the wall and saw a framed embroidery that read, "God is Love." I remember very clearly, at that moment, understanding something about God's nature I had never before comprehended. I realized that what this man offered me was God itself, was mercy, was nonjudgment and unconditional acceptance of me, simply as a human being in all the throes and flows a human experiences on the way to completion.

Many years later, in my course of an expanding commitment to self-discovery and service, Ramana Maharishi reminded me repeatedly that "God, Guru, and Self are one." As my practice deepened, feelings of separation from God diminished. And when that nauseating anxiety would momentarily manifest, it increasingly melted into God itself — a gradually deepening experience of the vastness of being shared with all there is and all that ever will be. In going beyond separation, beyond the self that strives even to know, there was a peace and a happiness I had seldom known.

Some years ago, while I was involved in an arduous Buddhist meditation practice, the door opened to the room in my mind in which I was sitting and in walked the luminescent figure of Jesus. I was dismayed. "You must have the wrong guy. I'm a Buddhist. Maybe you're looking for the fellow down the hall!" He smiled with the smile of the heart that knows no separation. His presence suffused the room with the infinite mercy of the

shared heart. He motioned to be still and to listen. My mind, full of rigid knowing, burst to expose the sacred heart beating in my chest. I was ecstatic for days.

In the direct experience of the shared heart I experienced The Deathless, that which precedes birth and extends beyond death. Asked afterward what that experience was all about, in exasperation I could say only that it was the experience of God, of our God nature, of our underlying reality, the ocean of being on which floats the tiny waves of thought and personality.

Since that time I have found myself often using the term "God." I am very comfortable with that term because I don't have the foggiest idea what it means. But I see no place where it is absent. Indeed, it may be said that God cannot be known in the mind but only experienced in the heart. You cannot know God; you can only be God. Thus you cannot know "the truth" but only enter directly the moment in which truth resides. Truth is an experience, a sip at the deep well of being, not a cluster of words or thoughts or even insights in the mind.

There is in all our strivings a profound homesickness for God. When we touch another we touch God. When we look at a flower, its radiance, its fragrance, its stillness is another moment's experience of something deeper within. When we hold a baby, when we hear extraordinary music, when we look into the eyes of a great saint, what draws us is that deep homesickness for our true nature, for the peace and healing that is our birthright. This homesickness for God directs us toward the healing

we took birth for, the coming into pure being that out of a poverty of language we describe as God. But God is not "God" any more than a flower is not "Flower." God is the direct experience of our true nature just as a flower is the direct experience of the miracle of germination and color and the indescribable beauty of simply being.

However, in a sense there is no such thing as "going home to God." We are already in the living room. All we need do is sit comfortably in the chair that awaits. Or, as my wife, Ondrea, put it, "The arms of the mother are always around you. All you need do is put your head on her shoulder."

Sometimes when I read a poem by Rumi or Kabir tears rise for the absolute joy of our journey toward ourselves. Because our true nature had no edge on it, no limit or limitation, it is impossible to describe its direct experience, because all description is based on duality: if it's short it's not tall, if it's white it's not black, if it's high it's not low. But in that experience of limitless being there is no reference point, no duality, no one separate from God to describe the experience. It is an emerging, a dissolving, a dying into our true nature.

It is for the love of God that we love. It is for the mercy of God that we go beyond judgment. It is into the sacred heart of our own divinity that we sojourn as through Dante's classic inferno to recapture and reexperience the ground of being on which we walk our tremulous way through a confusing life of the mind. God is not to be found in the mind, and the mind is all that separates us from God. Indeed, if you make a list of all that

you hold precious, of all that you fear losing, of all that you think you are, of all that gains you praise and guards you from blame, you would have a list of your separations from God. You would have a list of all that the mind protects, defends, attempts to maintain in a false solidity, in all it keeps to maintain its separate reality.

Our experiences have all been within the stream of flow and change; every thought, every moment of tasting, of touching, of thinking, of hearing, of smelling has had a beginning, a middle, and an end. Only one experience in all our lives has been constant: the experience of simply being. Since the moment we become aware that we are aware, whether in the womb, at birth, or at the breast, there has underlain all the phenomena of thought and feeling simply the hum of being. My experience of being and your experience of being are exactly the same — the boundaryless, wordless whoosh of suchness. But when I am being this and you are being that, heaven and hell are set infinitely apart, holy wars arise, and starvation ensues. When you and I are no longer "you and I" but just the oneness that permeates all, that one constant of simply being that all experience, that underlying ocean of being on which our tiny selves float is easily described as God.

And I see, after more than twenty years of Buddhist meditation practice, that we watch our minds to see who we aren't. For God is found beyond the mind, when conditioned responses part and one goes beyond the seeming to the real. It is our willingness to be healed, to be at one with something deeper than personality or separate

aggrandizement that does the work that is to be done. To die out of separation into the unity, the oneness, the suchness of being takes us past the mind to the heart of the matter. In that experience there is a sense of "reality" hardly paralleled by any previous experience.

One of our teachers said that the practice of discovering the divine was the practice of remembering — to remember to be mindful of the contents of the mind so as to see beyond; to remember to be present in those moments when the mind is so full that the heart is least available; to remember, as Thomas Merton said, that "true love and prayer are learned in the moments when prayer has become impossible and the heart has turned to stone."

There are many ways to aid remembering. I find that nothing helps me "remember God" as much as daily meditation practice. For some time each day, or a few times a day, Ondrea and I sit, watching the breath and noticing the movement of mind as it comes and goes but does not distract from the sacred spaciousness that is our birth-right.

One morning I awoke on my side and thought, I must get up now and meditate. But very quickly I wondered what would happen if someday I couldn't get up and meditate. What happens if I come to a point in my life where lying on my side, half-embryonic, is the only position available to me. Would I then no longer be able to experience God? So I began to meditate upon awakening without changing posture, sometimes for twenty

minutes, sometimes for three hours before I had to get up. I lay there watching my mind's idiosyncratic desire to alleviate the discomfort that may have arisen from maintaining one posture and its desire to let go of the fears, the old holdings, the absence of delight at being in a situation over which it may have no control.

In Zen there is a wonderful statement: "Spring comes and the grass grows all by itself." That statement shows us the wisdom of letting go of all the attempts to maintain control and hide from our pain (which thus turns it to suffering). To let go of control is to enter into creation in the act of becoming. We discover who we have always been when we stop attempting to become better than who we really are. The very desire to be better than who we are is to have forgotten God. We need not be one iota different to directly experience the absolute vastness of our true being. In going beyond the mind, beyond that which blocks the heart, we discover who we have always been and always will be.

Now I do not notice the ecstatic commune I once experienced so regularly. Rather, I experience a constant hum of quietness and confidence in my true nature. What was once at the center of my life — my love of God and of deepening self-awareness — has now permeated to the edges, has become more integrated, more "common." In many ways the most consistent experience now is that sense of spacious ease that is my true nature, and so much less the rapid roller-coaster ups and downs of feeling at one with God and then feeling so distant from

God. Now there is just a sense that when I am present God is present. When I am wholeheartedly in the moment nothing is separate from God.

Even in the hellish states of mind that we all experience at times and may feel locked into for extended periods, there is indeed God. Beneath the vicissitudes of thought and feeling and image and remembrance is a spaciousness, a mercy, a delight in being that goes beyond comprehension.

It seems that God becomes more solid the more we need that experience; but when the experience is integrated into just being, when being is enough and nothing is absent or called for, then God is less form. Indeed, it is hard not to be an impostor when one speaks of God, for one almost needs to create something separate from God in order to view God. But when there is nothing separate, no clinging or condemning, when there is no desire for control or evasion, then all that remains is God.

Encounter with God Through the Senses

by BROTHER DAVID STEINDL-RAST



"In my best, most alive moments — in my mystical moments — I have a profound sense of belonging."

WHEN SOMEONE ASKS ME about my personal relationship with God, my spontaneous reply is a question: What do you mean by God? For decades I have spoken about religion with people all over the world, and I have learned that the word "God" must be used with utmost caution if we want to avoid misunderstandings. I also find far-reaching agreement among human beings when we reach that mystical core from which all religious traditions spring. Even those who cannot identify with organized religion are often deeply rooted in mystical experience. This is where I find my reference point for the meaning of the term "God." The term must be anchored in that mystical awareness in which all humans agree before they start talking about it.