

Mystical Experiences in a Community of Men

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A reflection for the Greenfield Group

November 28, 2005

In the Fall of 1993 when a few friends and I, all men active at First Parish noticed that a good friend and former Chair of the Parish Committee was undergoing a deep and painful mid-life crisis, we created a small Men's Group to make sense of life as we were experiencing it. We began by talking about intimate relationships and meaning. Over time we created a series of retreats so that we could move beyond simply talking, and begin to experience being in our bodies and enlivening our lives. The fellow whose crisis we had initially come together around would not let us intellectualize this confessional exploration, for as we went deeper we all discovered that we too were in an existential crisis, in one form and to one extent or another, with each of us carrying deep wounds and sorrows that had never been properly healed, and each of us seeking a path to wholeness. It was this sense of the universal angst of being men in late 20th Century America, and the inadequacy of reason as a path towards true healing, that eventually led a group of eight of us to form a closed, confidential, men's spiritual exploration group which could openly explore the mystical path to our own wholeness and wellbeing.

An excerpt written in my journal early in that journey (1994) will give some taste of how that journey began: "This weekend spent alone with seven men is an oasis within the constant role demands of my everyday life. There is plenty of opportunity for comradely pleasures. We buy groceries, we cook, and we eat. We hike, swim, play poker, tell stories, pontificate (I pontificate). Yet the most delightful part is that I have no role but to be one of eight men. I am not father, spouse, son, brother, I just am. I am not employer, salesman, adviser, worker; I have no financial responsibilities. I just am, and this weekend there is nothing better to be."

In our search for direct experiences of meaning we eventually discovered a retreat center on a mountain in Vermont, run by a retired UU minister and his wife (who had trained with a Celtic Shaman), where we could individually and collectively experience what we came to call a Vision Quest into our sense of being. I personally participated in five of these Vision Quests over the next six years, giving them up only after my Ordination as a UU minister. Several men in the group recognize my calling

to ministry as an outgrowth of these Vision Quests. Each of the men who came for more than one or two years were similarly transformed, each gradually grew to become more clearly and dearly their truest selves as a result of the mystical experiences that these quests entailed.

We developed a pattern where we would go together up to the mountain, maximizing our bonhomie and comradeship during the several hour trip up to Vermont. We would then begin through meditation and centering exercises to prepare ourselves for the ordeal of the next several days. We each picked a site on which to spend the next four days, out of sight of each other but with adequate water, wood for burning, and some form of shelter from the weather. We early on discovered that our questing was far more successful when we fasted for the entire four days. For our visions became far more colorful, and seemingly meaningful, when the glucose levels in our circulating blood dropped to miniscule amounts, and our brains shifted over to ketone chemistry to fuel our minds. Often by the fourth day of each quest, the barrier between self and other would become blurred, opening the possibility of becoming one with all being, resulting in exultations of joy!

Because I had begun to explore the Christian mystics, I experimented with some of the classical Christian paths into unknowing. In 1998 I experimented with “The Way of the Pilgrim”, repeating 5000 times without ceasing the prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me a sinner.” This eventually brought me into my first experience of talking directly with God (recorded in my journal as it happened):

Today it seems the sun stood still for a few hours, early afternoon lasted for most of the day. The sky would be clear, then gradually it became overcast, threatening of rain, then gradually it cleared again to blue skies with the sun unmoved from its position. It is as if time did not exist during those hours in which I was talking to God. Of course I don't have a watch, so I don't know objectively what happened, but a very long time passed with the sun always in the same spot in the sky. For part of this time I had a fire, and every once in a while I needed to add a large log to keep it going. I went through five or six consecutive large logs, and still the sun stood still and God spoke.

During the period the sun stood still I said the Jesus prayer 1000 times, I observed the diversity of life on the site, I washed in the brook, and I talked to God. He offered to answer any of my questions, so I asked and he answered. I thought a lot about those questions and his answers. He taught me how to sing the Jesus prayer as a form of worship and reminded me of the song “In the Garden” from my childhood. I built a large fire assuming under a totally overcast sky that dusk must be near. While watching this fire slowly burn down he told me many more things about how to act, what not to fear, about abundance and scarcity, and about the meaning of my life. I fed the fire for hours.

Finally I became exhausted and laid down to take a nap. My head, my spirit was full. When I awoke some time later, the sky had cleared but the sun had not moved. I thanked God for all that he had taught to me, and began to rebuild the fire as the sun resumed its course across the sky.

There were seven men on that mountain that day and no other experienced the sun pausing in its orbit as I did. My rational mind doesn't know what to make of this. Each of the men had different experiences, depending upon their own needs and expectations. Some became intimately connected with the earth, or their spirit guides, or the animals that surrounded us on these retreats. On subsequent quests I experienced deep dialogues with my father; or my dead brother; one night I encountered the experience John of the Cross termed the "Dark Night of the Soul"; on another "that joy which surpasses understanding"; and several times I encountered "the incredible lightness of being". My rational mind has never been able to fully make sense of these mystical experiences, but for me and several of the other men, they were truly transformative, in the best sense of that word. Mystical experience for me is beyond rational understanding, but could be readily accessed in this community of men who trusted and supported each other in our spiritual search.