

EXPLORATIONS

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The Wordless Word

Suzanne Farnham
Founder

In Thomas Keating's discipline of Centering Prayer, each person adopts a "sacred word" to utter silently to help them be drawn into a contemplative state. Other traditions use a mantra, a chant, or a concise verbal breathing prayer such as the Jesus Prayer. For over sixty years, such practices served me well. Suddenly they all failed me.

It then came to me that verbal words originate in the head, where consciousness resides. But contemplation beckons us into what Carl Jung spoke of as the unconscious, where all that we have experienced but cannot remember lies hidden. This includes the collective unconscious, the shared experiential inheritance of humankind through the ages. The unconscious is a gateway to God's love, truth, and creative energy. The spiritual quest is an endeavor to raise what is unconscious to consciousness.

Now my pathway to contemplation is to flex my body rather than utter a word, to awaken every cell of my body—all the way to the tips of my fingers and the tips of my toes—to God's abiding presence.

The unconscious seems to be embedded in the body. This suggests to me the use of a physical "word" rather than a verbal or mental word. Now, my pathway to contemplation is to flex my body rather than utter a word, to awaken every cell of my body—all the way to the tips of my fingers and the tips of my toes—to God's abiding presence. I can do this randomly during the day without calling attention to myself. Sometimes in solitude and privacy, this physical word becomes more vigorous—shaking my body to bring all the cells to attention. Sometimes stretching out spread-eagled is a way to reach out and connect with God's energy.

Living with my wordless word is opening me to what lies in my unconscious. Although I have a very long way to go to fully integrate the practice into my life, the effort is already affecting my relationship with God—making it deeper and more intimate.

God is good. Hallelujah!

Enough for Me

**The Rev. Timothy Grayson
Timonium, MD**

When I told an elderly priest friend that I would be traveling to the Holy Land to participate in a ten-day pilgrimage entitled Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus, he laughed. “How can you say that you’ll be walking in the footsteps of Jesus?” he snorted. “The land has changed immeasurably in 2,000 years and the imprints of Jesus’ sandals have long since disappeared.” “Well,” I said, “I still want to go. Just to be in the same places where the Gospels tell us Jesus preached, taught, and healed will be enough for me.”

My visit to the Holy Land was the first part of a three-month sabbatical I embarked on at the beginning of May. I was lucky to receive a grant from the Lilly Foundation that paid for all my expenses—a huge blessing. And behind my plans for this pilgrimage to the Holy Land was the hope that I might experience something of what led the 19th-century poet Gerard Manley Hopkins to exclaim, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.”¹ Perhaps selfishly, I not only hoped to see God’s grandeur in the land of Jesus’ birth but to receive a spiritual charge from it as well.



I read somewhere that certain sites become places of pilgrimage not necessarily because something holy occurred there but because people believe that something holy occurred there. No one knows the exact location of the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem, and the place known as Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified, cannot be specifically identified. But each year thousands of pilgrims flock to the sites where it is thought these places might have been. Over time, the spiritual resonance of these sites grows as more people visit them. Pilgrims bring their faith and their yearning to draw closer to God, and so it really no longer matters whether the pilgrimage site can be historically verified. What matters most is that God in Christ is worshiped and adored in those places, and the mystery surrounding them only adds to their allure.

The church at the Sisters of Nazareth Convent in Jesus’ hometown is steeped in mystery, because it is built on holy foundations. The church was constructed on the site of a Crusader church, which itself was built on top of a church from the Byzantine era. And underneath *that* church are the ruins of a house that is still being excavated and which dates back to the early years of the first century. Throughout history it has been common practice to build places of worship on sites deemed to be holy. In this instance, the discovery of this house caused great excitement, because a tomb was found at the structure’s lower level, and in that era only a so-called “righteous” person could be buried in their home. Local tradition holds that this house might have been the home of the Holy Family, because Jesus’ human father, Joseph, was said to be a “righteous man” (Mt. 1:19). Our guide told us that in Jesus’ day the population of Nazareth would have been about 200. Even if Jesus did not live in that house with his family, there is a strong possibility that he visited there. I did not need carbon dating technology and confirmation of this possibility as fact to shore up my faith. The excitement of knowing that I was standing in a house dating back to Jesus’ time was enough to make my heart beat a little faster, to sense that I was being drawn closer to Jesus through mystery rather than certainty.

I had told an elderly priest friend that I really wasn't too concerned about precisely where Jesus had walked: that it would be enough for me simply to be in the general vicinity of where we know he had been. And as powerful as the interplay of landscape, biblical history, and religious belief was throughout my pilgrimage, in the end—perhaps predictably—it was the people I met along the way that left the most enduring impression. Again, Hopkins got it right, I believe, when he wrote, “for Christ plays in ten thousand places, Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his. To the Father through the features of men's faces”.²

I went to Israel to find Jesus among the storied geography of its holy sites, but he kept cropping up in the guise of fellow pilgrims and complete strangers. And that was enough for me.

1. *God's Grandeur*, by Gerald Manley Hopkins
2. *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, by Gerald Manley Hopkins

Tim Grayson, a member of the board of trustees of Listening Hearts, is beginning his eleventh year as rector of the Episcopal Church of the Messiah in Baltimore.

Imago Dei

**Mike Croghan
Herndon, VA**

You're a fractal,
whose winding paths can't be traced –
yet whose every crooked corner
replicates the lovely pattern of the whole.

You're a hologram,
which can be cut and cut to pieces –
yet whose every severed fragment
contains the unbroken image of the entire.

You are made in the image of God!
You are formed in the likeness of God!
And so am I.

Now, tell me the rule
which weighs heavier in God's balance
than the precious worth and dignity
of me or you.

Mike Croghan is a spiritual vagabond whose soul is a bit Anglican, a bit Quaker, a bit Buddhist, and a bit skeptic. His faith communities include the Church of the Common Table and the Church of the Holy Comforter (Episcopal), both in Vienna, VA. Mike is a trustee of Listening Hearts Ministries, and is working on becoming a poet.

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Listening Hearts Ministries
provides a range of programs,
publications, and services that teach
people the practice of spiritual
discernment through prayerful listening
in supportive communities.

*...God's uncreated energies are within us
and are continually creating us.*

— George A. Maloney, S.J.

Ministry vs. Job

Anna Sandberg

If you are doing it just because no one else will, it's a job
If you are doing it to serve the Lord, it's a ministry.

If you quit because someone criticized you, it's a job
If you keep on serving, it's a ministry.

If you do it as long as it does not interfere with your other activities, it's a job
If you are committed to staying, even if it means letting go of other things, it's a ministry.

If you quit because no one thanked you or praised you, it's a job
If you stick with it even though no one recognized your efforts, it's a ministry.

It's hard to get excited about a job
It's almost impossible not to get excited about a ministry.

If your concern is success, it's a job
If your concern is faithfulness and service, it's a ministry.