

The Journey from Head to Heart

While making *Endless Exodus*, a film on undocumented migrants illegally crossing our southern border, I learned that migration is in our genes.

*Christ migrated from heaven to earth
so we could migrate from earth to heaven
by learning to love.*

Before I started filming poverty in slums around the world, I was searching for God through my intellect...reading, studying, probing. It was not until I encountered people on the peripheries of life—the homeless in Philadelphia, Detroit, and Los Angeles, the migrants from El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico, the refugees in camps in Uganda and Kenya, the people dwelling in massive slums in East Africa, the lepers in Brazil and Jamaica, the people living on a mountain of garbage in The Philippines, the untouchables in India, people suffering from cruel injustices and barbaric violence in Haiti, and children dying of malnutrition around world.

*Only after encountering these beautiful people
did my search for God make the migration
from my head to my heart.*

Along the way, certainty became less important than understanding. As I look back on my life's journey from the empty church in Rome to a crowded slum in Haiti, I see how all my impulsive moves were orchestrated by the choreography of the Spirit. Mine was a spirituality of just showing up. By grace I met holy people living their faith to the fullest, even during times of doubt, uncertainty, and darkness. My teachers appeared in the films I made.

*During the last year in Haiti,
grace has never been stronger
nor the crosses heavier.
Now I struggle to remain compassionate
in a place of extreme violence.*

At end of our lives, there will be only one question to answer: On the journey of my life, did I learn to love?

If God is love, then loving must be the key to a godly life on earth...which means there can be no room in our lives for unkindness, hatred, or violence in any form. Allow me to explain.

I was deeply wounded by two people in Haiti whom I loved and trusted. But those wounds were, in time, a gateway to life's deeper meaning and the ability to forgive all who have harmed me in ways large and small during my life. The wounds became a means of a deeper healing.

Haiti is a place of external peril. It is also a place I had to go through in order to find the paradise within me.

*In the darkness of night
before Rome
I fled from God,
yet God came for me
and filled me with delight.*

I have changed so much during my years in Haiti, but those mostly internal “faith/spiritual” changes are difficult to express in front of room of more than 100 people, as each of you is in different place on your own spiritual journey. You are here tonight because you are looking for something more, something deeper.

The impact Thomas Merton had on my life is, for the most part, unknown even to me. His words, his struggles with prayer and holiness, somehow became part of my consciousness.

Over time, I slowly came to see that the call to holiness was an open invitation to enter fully into a committed relationship with God.

But how do we do that? Our lives are already filled with obligations and struggles, stuffed with too many demands and things to do. But if we even take baby steps to responding to God’s constant embrace of us, God graciously nurtures growth in the relationship, by using events, circumstances, and people in our earth-bound lives as instruments to hasten a contemplative outlook on life.

Prayer, however we define it, becomes a vital part of our day. This does not happen overnight. It takes time and lots of watering for the seed of contemplation to flower.

I was once concerned with my anemic prayer life. I tried praying the Liturgy of the Hours, but grew weary of it. One day I suddenly realized that I prayed better with a camera in my hands. Through the lens of my camera, I saw more clearly the suffering of humanity and the beauty of God’s creation. As my prayer became more natural in the events of my day, I encountered more fully the Author of my life...and all of life.

Prayer led my mind to stillness. In stillness, I found the unruffled calmness the mystics of all faith said was required to encounter God. In prayer, whether holding a camera or eating a pizza or visiting an art museum, I became more aware of God’s presence. Prayer was all about communion with God, no matter where I was or what I was doing.

In all the many books I’ve read about the saints and mystics down through the ages, I saw the same pattern repeating itself in a wide-range of people: their personal encounter with the creator slowly transformed them into a Divine likeness as it gently erased all traces of un-God-like substance within them. I needed a giant eraser. There is still more, much more, within me that needs erasure.

Over time, as I was filming dire and deadly poverty around the world and especially in Haiti, I was, through prayer, unlocking the vault to my deepest self where God was already abiding at the core of my being without my awareness. God was essentially hidden from me yet patiently waiting for me. I was too busy to realize this.

Sadly, many people today never get to know themselves beyond what is on the surface. Many have bought into our culture's obsession with striving for a luxurious lifestyle. I know my life seemed empty even though my home was filled with every gadget and convenience imaginable. I saw no trace of God or peace, because I did not realize God could not be found in noise and restlessness. As the saints and mystics of all faiths down through the centuries had learned, God is a friend and lover of silence. For so many today, silence has become a foreign language.

For me, sitting prayerfully in silence has become an antidote to the rising dysfunction and destruction that engulfs so much of modern life. Today a sense of division is growing, as more and more people see those who look different, think differently, act differently, and believe differently than they are considered an enemy and as a result civility and dialogue are shrinking. In these angry and divisive times silence becomes a path to compassion and mercy.

To guard against the onslaught of distraction our culture hurls at us each day, I learned to incorporate structured time for spiritual reading and reflection. Prayer helped me flee the storm of harmful inner thoughts and the constant noise of life these days. Without hardly noticing, my prayer life moved from being mechanical and extrinsic to being mystical and intrinsic. I see now how this helped me endure eight years in Haiti. I had learned to look through my fear and doubt to be able to touch the wounds of my neighbors and to encounter God.

My prayer life did not focus on asking for divine favors; its aim was to help me grow in continual abandonment to God, no matter how often I fail...and I failed many times a day.

In my film *Holy Pictures*, I said: "The only thing standing between me and God is me." It took a long time from writing that on a theoretical level to understanding it on a practical level.

To really pray is to surrender your own power and to leave your self behind.

Christ reminds us of our own finiteness. The gospel makes it clear that to save ourselves we must give up all security, any notion of being self-sufficient. We must look at the world with wonder, gratefully receiving it anew, with its mysterious promise of the infinite.

Through everything, the saints and mystics of our faith were able to see the face of the Risen Christ, our Friend, who secretly shares with each of us the bread of affliction and the wine of mirth.

Contemplation cultivates a spirit of receptivity and a listening heart. To fully enter into silence, we need to drop all preoccupations to be awake only to the presence of the moment...and that is the hardest part.

The quest for God is a journey, a pilgrimage to the depths of the soul.

In truth, I'm really not a writer or a filmmaker. I'm a seeker...and a sinner. Sin is basically a failure to love and is an act of selfishness.

Conversion is always going to be a movement away from selfish egocentricity to unconditional self-emptying love of others, which is not a journey we naturally want to embark upon because it will cost us everything. I learned that the hard way. The more possessions and pleasures I let go of the freer I was.

By decreasing the many things you now cherish, the addiction will weaken, and you will be awakened to a new reality, and, in time, encounter the living God...not empty words about God.

The pen and the camera were a means for me to discover the truth about life and God. It was a journey that began in a conversion in an empty church in Rome and that conversion is on-going until the end of my days on this beautiful and mysterious planet.

Please sit it in silence for a few a few minutes...

For most of my life, all I could see was the hiddenness of God. Somehow, without my realizing it, in Haiti I found the way to God through the misery and nothingness of my false self. I saw more clearly my true self and my complete dependence upon God. Eventually I felt God's love more tangibly. Love is a mystical force that opens the door to forgiveness and mercy. The slums of Haiti stripped me bare of all pretensions. I stood amid the turbulence of overwhelming want, feeling the pain, and not knowing how to respond.

In time, I saw how my eyes, my hands, my mouth were to become a means of expressing God's love and mercy. With my mouth, I can utter kind words of support to someone who is depressed and give a smile to each sad face I encountered. With my arms, I can embrace an abandoned child. With my legs, I can walk among the suffering, and with my faith help them carry their crosses. To the person who has become hardened and hopeless, I can give my heart."

May God give you peace.

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