

Mary Johnson and the Birdman of Alcatraz

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What does it mean to be in the world, but not of it? Or, as David just read for us from the Gospel of John, to be in the world, but not belong to it? Jesus was praying to God for his disciples, for his beloved friends, as he was about to leave them. He knew they had all been transformed during the years they traveled with him, and he knew they were all about to receive the Holy Spirit as a new way to receive guidance and inspiration. This is important, because, as Jesus seems to know, it won't be easy to live in the world and belong to God at the same time.

'Belong' seems like a great translation to me, by the way, because it comes from the Old English meaning "being with", "concerned with", "close at hand."

I'll be honest with you, if I stop to think how much time I spend 'being with' God, compared with how much time I spend 'concerned with' the demands of the world, I'd have to say that I belong mostly to the world these days. If I look honestly at my level of stress and anxiety for the last few weeks, I'd have to say the world and I are much too close.

Who would have thought that I could get so lost, so distracted from "being with" God while finishing up seminary courses? How did I get so far away from my inner life, the place where I can "be with God" by studying Theology?

One answer is that when things are really important to me, I tend to leave meditation and time with God out of it. No time for an inner life; stuff in the world is too real right now! I have to get busy -- read, interpret, write, and remember. Make sure my professors and my fellow students know how brilliant and insightful I am—there's no time for silence, for doing nothing!

Even though the irony is not lost on me, I am still way too susceptible. Where do I go wrong? How do I get back to "being with," belonging to, God? How do I coordinate being in the world but not belonging to the world? Maybe you feel the same. Running from one activity to the next and then trying to get enough sleep to start over again the next day.

Even church can be one of "those things!"

But relax, you made it here and you all look great!

I actually went to class with my shirt inside out a few days ago. It was the first time I'd ironed anything in decades, but I had a presentation to do and I was nervous and over-compensating. I remembered that it's usually good to iron things inside out, so I did. Then threw it on and ran out the door. I didn't notice until someone else commented. I have also appeared in public more than once in this lifetime wearing two different shoes after getting dressed in a dark room.

In this moment, though, we are all here together. In the words of Howard Thurman:

“We have time to wait in the quietness for some centering moment that will redefine, reshape, and refocus our lives.”

Thurman was a strong advocate for taking time to be with God, to remember who we belong to. He believed that, in the silence, in the centering moment, God transforms us into people who belong to God.

This silence is not just the absence of noise; it involves waiting. Waiting patiently. Being still. Centering ourselves on the place within where the Light of the Spirit glimmers.

Thurman seemed to be continually aware of the presence of the Spirit. He wrote:

“How wonderful it is, beyond all power fully to understand, that our lives are never left to themselves alone. It does not matter where we are, nor what tasks consume our energies; there is always present something more than we ourselves are at any given moment. Always we are visited.”

Thurman is not talking about cell phones or social media, their pings and dings notifying us that our friends and acquaintances are thinking of us—it's not that kind of perpetual visitation. This is something that lives within us. Something we may not see in others because it isn't necessarily visible to the eye. And something within ourselves that we may not consider very often, as distracted as we are by all of our worldly obligations.

Contrary to every impulse of popular culture, every way it measures goodness and success, we need those centering moments, those moments of being with, belonging to God, to allow the Spirit to transform us enough to belong to God, to work for the Kingdom of God.

George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends (the Quakers) wrote, “There are miracles in the spirit of which the world knows nothing.” Because the life of the

Spirit within us is deeply personal and private, we sometimes don't count it as "real."

But I believe that if we want to meet God, the inner landscape is our holy ground. If we can open the door to the mystery and miracle of the Spirit, allowing It to teach our hearts and our minds, we will be blessed and bless others.

Here's where the Birdman of Alcatraz comes in!

I was probably six years old, because we moved just before I turned seven. I can see the room in the house we lived in at the time -- the green vinyl reclining chair I leaned on, the closely woven orange tweed carpeting I sat on, the gray afternoon sunlight that came through the windows, and the television surrounded by a dark wood console. I was sitting about six feet away from the screen contemplating the movie I had just finished watching. It was *The Birdman of Alcatraz*, starring Burt Lancaster.

At the beginning, I could see that Lancaster was playing an angry, dangerous criminal thrown into solitary confinement by several prison guards. But there was something about him that caught my interest. He seemed sad underneath all of the violence and fury. The newspaper headlines that flashed on the screen said he had murdered someone and would be in prison for life. That sounded awful. One mistake and he had to pay for it forever. He could never make up for it!

At six, I had no experience of committing a crime worse than watching TV when I wasn't supposed to, but I remember feeling the huge weight of the prisoner's guilt and the finality of having to live the rest of his life in prison.

After what must have been a montage of months or years of anguished pacing and lying flat on a narrow bed staring up at a bare lightbulb—when I least expected it—a tiny sparrow with an injured leg landed on the stone sill of Lancaster's barred window. His face softened. Little by little, the tiny bird grew tame and one day it jumped onto Lancaster's huge hand. Little by little, Lancaster became absorbed in caring for the sparrow. By the end of the film, his prison cell was full of bird cages and piles of thick books. He was doing important ornithology research! One ordinary little sparrow helped this huge, angry, violent man find tenderness within himself, and allowed him to become someone who valued life and actively participated in protecting it.

As the music and the credits played, my first thought was that human beings are capable of a vast spectrum of behavior, from murdering another human being to caring deeply for a tiny, ordinary sparrow.

In a flash, I felt certain at that very moment that this was true of me and of everyone I knew. It was the 'knowledge' that we are all capable of doing utterly horrible things and exquisitely beautiful things. All of us.

There weren't inherently good people and inherently evil people, each wearing a different colored hat so they could be identified more easily.

That meant that there was something beneath all of our good and bad and mediocre actions that remained untouched by them. There was a part of us where Spirit glimmered, even though it wasn't visible to the eye.

Of course, I didn't have language for it at the time, the ideas were captured by images from the film, and the intuition or emotion that went with them.

I believed in this glimmer that came to me in an intuitive blast after watching a movie. And I was sure it was the reason for the prisoner's transformation.

It was the reason to forgive and the reason to keep trying when things seemed impossible. It was the reason to believe in and encourage others, and much later, it was the reason to believe in and encourage myself. This was the glimmer that Jesus saw deep in the eyes of the woman at the well, the man called Legion, and the Roman soldier who wanted help for his beloved servant.

Epiphanies can seem more complicated in the Real Adult World, however. People are most often judged by their actions and must abide with their logical and lawful consequences. Even worse, sometimes people suffer innocently for the actions of others. They reap what someone else sowed and have to live with the heart-breaking injustice and the life-shattering grief. It can be difficult to hold onto a belief in the miraculous glimmer as a participant in the Real Adult World.

But one day, I heard the voice of Mary Johnson, a real woman, on the radio. Her story shows me how the Spirit can work within each of us, right here and right now, in our ordinary lives, to create the Kingdom of God, slowly but surely.

Mary's only son was shot and killed at the age of sixteen by another young man he didn't know, at a party. The killer, whose first name is Oshea, was caught, tried, and sentenced to prison. I'll read you part of the transcript of the radio interview as Mary told her story:

The root of bitterness ran deep, anger had set in and I hated everyone. I remained like this for years, driving many people away.

But then, one day, I read a poem which talked about two mothers – one mother whose child had been murdered and the other mother whose child was the murderer. It was such a healing poem all about the commonality of pain and it showed me my destiny.

Suddenly I had this vision of creating an organization to support not only the mothers of murdered children, but also the mothers of children who had taken a life.

I knew then that I would never be able to deal with these mothers if I hadn't really forgiven Oshea. So, I put in a request to the Department of Corrections to meet him.

Never having been to a prison before, I was so scared when we got there and wanted to turn back. But when Oshea came into the room, I shook hands with him and said, "I don't know you and you don't know me. You didn't know my son and he didn't know you, so we need to lay down a foundation and get to know one another."

We talked for two hours during which he admitted what he'd done. I could see how sorry he was and at the end of the meeting, for the very first time, I was genuinely able to say that I forgave Oshea.

He couldn't believe how I could do this and he asked if he could hug me. When he left the room I bent over saying – "I've just hugged the man who'd murdered my son".

Then, as I got up, I felt something rising from the soles of my feet and leaving me. From that day on, I haven't felt any hatred, animosity, or anger. It was over. In March 2010, we gave Oshea a welcome home party.

Mary welcomed her son's murderer to live in the duplex apartment adjacent to hers, and she has been there to guide and support him as he works to create a new life.

We cannot control the deaths, the divorces, the hurricanes, the wars the floods, the misunderstandings and the suffering we must endure in our lives, even when we are in the world but not of it.

On the other hand, our reaction to these painful vicissitudes is our personal responsibility. We can only seek within for the glimmering place, where the energy of Life, the Spirit of God, can sustain and guide us.

We must do this to be able to continue working for the Kingdom of God, for the chance to add our voices to the cry for justice, the healing power of love, forgiveness, hope, and compassion instead of yielding to despair.

Even when constrained by the thick stone walls and the surrounding ocean, the Birdman of Alcatraz found freedom through the love, the Life, the Spirit that glimmered within him and found expression through his relationship with an ordinary sparrow.

Even though she lost her son forever, Mary Johnson chose forgiveness rather than the hatred we would all agree she was justified in feeling. It took Mary Johnson nine years to decide to visit her son's killer in prison. It might take me nine lifetimes. But slowly, little by little, Mary forgave him because she knew she belonged to God and not to the world. In time, she had the love, the wisdom, the insight, and the courage to see the glimmer in the man who killed her son. Mary Johnson, and lots of "ordinary" people like her in this world, are truly building the Kingdom of God in this world. And they are doing it by choosing the transformation that is possible through the Holy Spirit working within.

We can all be part of that, if we take the time to "wait in the quietness for some centering moment that will redefine, reshape, and refocus our lives."