

# NATURE AND GRACE

A JOURNAL OF CATHOLIC SPIRITUALITY AND WELL-BEING

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## The Paradox of Intimacy: Our Fear of the Shadow

NATURE AND  
GRACE SEEK TO  
DWELL IN ONE  
PLACE. THAT IS  
WHY THE POET  
RUMI SAID,

'LET YOUR HEART  
BE SILENTLY  
DRAWN BY THE  
STRONGER PULL  
OF WHAT YOU  
REALLY LOVE.'

*Nature and Grace* is the ongoing work of this psychotherapist's reflection on what it means to be healthy, discerning Catholic in the modern world. Some of us, whether practicing or lapsed, or "recovering," struggle to integrate our Catholic culture and faith with our sophisticated worldviews. This journal attempts to show that such an integration is possible, and, more than that, leads to a deepening, life-giving maturation of faith and intellect.

The previous, inaugural issue (Autumn, 1997) first presented Catholic Christianity as a faith which rests on the experience of the writers of the Hebrew Testament, that the Divine is personal, and is interested in us. Further, our way of coming to know this God is similar to the way in which we come to know our parents, and ourselves: each is a process of intimate interaction. This led to an exposition of one of Catholicism's more troublesome doctrines, that of original sin, as reflecting a psychological truth: that we are both wounded and graced by our parents, our social and historical place, even our genetic heritage. Our (w)holiness is born in this context. The issue finished by acknowledging the first half of a paradox: that we want so much to believe in a personal, loving God, Who knows us intimately, in Whose arms we can completely rest. Just like a perfect parent, or lover, or friend. But the second part of the paradox, of course, is that we are also afraid to be seen so nakedly.

Our fear of being seen in our fullness, both our radiance and our ugliness, reflects our resistance to really looking at our shadow. We prefer to own only the ideal side of ourselves, and this alone we admit into the developing ego. This is how the cut-off from our real selves begins. This is how our chosen cut-off from God begins. The shadow is a part of the human psyche named by the late psychologist Carl Jung, and is described in the article found on page 4, *Being Loved for Who We Are*.

By sheer serendipity, the life of the shadow, and our fear of it, was so powerfully and painfully illuminated for this author recently that I feel compelled to share the story. This reflection, under the column heading, "Confessional Piece," is called "Thoughts on a Conversion." It regards the recent state-sponsored execution of rapist and murderer Gary Lee Davis. In short, after weeks of preparing to write about the shadow, I found myself, on both the Sunday preceding his execution, and the day it was carried out, in a state in which I was woefully in touch with the shame of my shadow and its pain. There were many facets: fear of rejection by everyone, the self-hate of ones *own* rejection, remorse due to identification with those harmed by ones shadow, and finally, a hope for forgiveness by someone, or Someone. Perhaps my story resonates. —L.T. *I invite reader response to this story, and to any article in Nature and Grace.*

To choose life over death is to choose the fluidity of water over the rigidity of stone. —apologies to the unknown author

## Confessional Piece

# Reflections on a Conversion: From Denial of the Shadow to Reconciliation

*I was taken over by the recognition of what it would be like if I committed such a grave sin that no one could ever forgive me.*

*Editor's note: The subject of this issue is the place of the shadow in the human psyche, and its need for attentiveness in our personal spiritual work. For me, a recent bit of shadow work took place while reflecting on my feelings toward violent criminals and capital punishment. I tell this story because it helps me address our human tendency to hide from our shadow, and to project it away from ourselves onto others. As maturing Catholics, we all will face times when we painfully recognize our own shadow, and this is when we most need to trust and know the mercy of God and the church community.*

The winter season is nearing. Advent calls me to notice God calling me to new life. This is not when I normally think of the more Lenten theme of reconciliation. But here I am, in the midst of a turning so powerful that tears can still come when I remind myself. Reconciliation seems to conjure tears. And then, peace.

Several years ago I was reaching burn-out working with hospitalized adult victims of horrible childhood sexual crimes. Back then, I once quipped to a colleague that I was very "pro" capital punishment. I called it "capital problem-solving." "Let me fire the first shot," I'd say, in my desperation to clean up the streets and protect my child, your child, from harm. My anger at perpetrators whips up quickly, and I am quicker to lash out, for justice, safety, defense. "Us" and "Them," white hats and black. It was simple and sure. (I am learning that when I am angry and sure, I need to ask myself if I am projecting my own shadow onto whatever subject is at hand.)

Maybe the "turning" began when I became a mother. When I saw my own failures at keeping cool, at maintaining empathy every time my child needed that from me, I began to sink into despair. My

values about mothering committed me to being her champion, her protector, her *mommy*, yet I was also the chief person who hurt her feelings and sometimes dented her small, developing sense of self. A lot of humility comes with mothering.

Then came October, and the media hype about the upcoming execution of rapist and murderer Gary Lee Davis. His was about to be the first execution in Colorado in thirty years. After the governor's final refusal of clemency, Davis reportedly said, "I guess I agree with the governor...I don't think the way I've changed outweighs what I did to Ginny May and her family." Apparently Davis gained empathy for his victims after he lost a step-daughter to cancer. A reporter from the *Denver Post* said Gov. Roy Romer "didn't doubt that Davis had changed and experienced some measure of rehabilitation." Davis seemed to find healing in these words, despite continuing to face the death sentence. Regarding the governor's recognition of his contrition, Davis said, "That may not be enough for clemency, but it's enough for me." *How powerful an influence toward hope or despair is the acknowledgment, or disregard, of another person toward us. I am reminded of what theologian (and mother) Margaret Hebblethwaite wrote in her book **Mothering and God**: "I have sometimes woken in the night after going to confession, bowled over by the surprise of the forgiveness that I did not even know I wanted." (p. 122)*

The day before his execution, Davis reportedly lost track of time, living as he was in a holding cell, steps from the death chamber, with a lightbulb burning twenty-four hours a day. He thought it was only Saturday, and was visibly disturbed when a reporter interviewing him told him it was already Sunday. My initial reaction was, *well, your victim spent her last hours being tortured by you and your accomplice, pleading for her life. You deserve to lose your last hours.* But then a strange thing happened: his shocked face evoked my empathy, and tears began running

down my cheeks. I found myself beginning to identify with his fear. And then, it was as if I was in a trance: I was taken over by the recognition of what it would be like if I committed such a grave sin that *no one could ever forgive me*. I was caught in the grip of fear and despair that would result if I were *cast out, beyond redemption*. Still in this strange painful state, I went to Mass that Sunday morning. Surely others there would be praying about this, and for this man, for his victims, for all of us sinners. I sat in the back of the chapel, literally sweating. I needed to hear about forgiveness, and the love and mercy of God. The Gospel that morning was about the rich man who asked Jesus how he could gain heaven. The homilist did not mention tomorrow's execution, although the reading gave ample opportunity: "Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: You must not kill...'" (Mark 10:18-19)

The Prayers of the Faithful were spoken, and I, barely containing my weeping (feeling embarrassed by it at the same time), wanted to speak a prayer for Davis, for all those who go to their deaths in fear, and for how a State-sponsored act makes us all complicit, all without mercy: no more than Davis was to his victim on her knees. But just as quickly as the few spoken prayers from the congregation began, they were abruptly over, and the celebrant moved on in the Order of the Mass. I was shocked. Not a word had been spoken to answer my needful state. Still in my "trance," I felt slapped. I took Communion, and had to leave. I'm sure anyone who may have noticed must have thought, *There goes a woman who's having a particularly bad day!* (At best!) I drove home, telling myself to get a grip, but crying out loud by now. I said to Jesus, (in this moment we were quite familiar), *"Your mercy is so needed in this world! This is too painful."* After a while the "trance" left me, wrung out and utterly sad. I wrote in my journal that night: *When no prayers of the faithful mentioned him, I felt afraid. Afraid that this church is not one in which my sins could be forgiven. What a lonely place to stand: outside the doors. If we don't pray for him, then we really aren't praying for ourselves, either. Our power to project our collective shadow is, sadly, alive and well. Projected off of us, and onto the "other."*

*In fairness to the celebrant and all those praying together that morning, I see now that I was caught in my own unconscious projection: I could only imagine that the whole Christian community represented there that morning would reject me as I was rejecting myself.* Recognizing this, I saw that if I could have mercy for a monstrously sinful man, then I could, and would, need to have it for myself. If we as Christians have no mercy, we are then teaching our children, and the world, that God has none, either. Not that we will ever be able to offer perfect mercy, nor fully extend our hands in reconciliation; not on our strength alone. But each of us yearns for this, from loved ones, from the community, from God. It may take a lifetime for any of us to fully appreciate the harm we do, and the depth of our sorrow and need for healing. Then we become ready to ask for reconciliation. When we, represented by the State, interrupt the life of a perpetrator, we abort that person's chance to someday come to recognize his own need for mercy, for forgiveness, and in this process, become able to give birth to his own empathy and sorrow for his victims. I shudder at this loss of not only his healing, but our hope of it.

But thankfully, the grace of God does not rely on our understanding of this. For in the end, I believe in the possibility of reconciliation. At the vigil in front of the Governor's mansion the night Davis died, many prayers were spoken from those of many faiths. A woman from a Catholic parish offered this prayer, the one that left me weeping: *"May the spirit of Virginia May receive the spirit of Gary Lee Davis this night in reconciliation before the Lord."* I hope he finally stands inside the doors, his shadow redeemed. My God, what a tearful, peaceful gift this would be!

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*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
that saved a wretch like me  
I once was lost, but now am found  
Was blind, but now I see.*

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*If we Christians  
have no mercy, we  
are then teaching  
our children, and  
the world, that God  
has none, either.*

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Catechism 101

## Being Loved for Who We Are, and In Spite of Who We Are: Facing Our Shadow

*To confidently ask for strength in our weakness is to ask for the redemption of the shadow, not its removal from the psyche.*

Catholic spirituality, like all Christian spirituality, presents us with an invitation to enter into relationship with a God Who is personally interested in each of us. You and I are invited into intimacy with God. Completely. Sins and all. We are a package deal, and God knows this. What relief to know, as Victor Hugo put it, that we are loved, not only for who we are, but *in spite of who we are*.

Most of us struggle to believe this. We tend to believe that we are not good enough to be loved. In their book *Good Goats: Healing Our Image of God*, authors Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn and Matthew Linn write that this is because we have images of God as vengeful. We see God as a prosecutor and judge. But Jesus teaches us that God is a defense attorney. Some of us believe that God loves only the parts of ourselves we love, and hates the parts we hate. We assume God is as stingy, judgmental, and merciless as we are. We believe that we cannot be acceptable to God until we have become without fault. In response to this fear, the Linns reply:

*The good news of...[the] New Testament stories is not: God loves the repentant sinner. Rather the good news is: God loves and heals the unrepentant sinner. (p. 22)*

Jesus makes this message clear throughout the Gospels, and the Church continues it in the marking of Good Friday and Holy Saturday as the remembrance of Jesus' death and descent into hell. The Linns cite theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar as saying that in hell, Jesus showed "utter solidarity with sinners," and "identifies completely with them, to the point of dying on the cross as one of them." (p. 33)

But when will we believe we are fully acceptable in ourselves? And where

did such doubt come from?

The previous issue explored how we form a sense of ourselves by experiencing our parents' attitude toward us as infants and children. They mirror back to us the person they see. If they seem to like us, we feel safe being here, and we develop a solid sense of identity. We are not afraid of our parents; we trust them to love us. These two factors form a good foundation for a trusting relationship with God. This is the ideal.

But in the case of rejection, neglect, or outright abuse by our parents (or primary caregivers), this ideal is not met. Then fear and self-doubt are learned. Neither is this ideal met in even the best of family life, for we learn from our parents, siblings, playmates and teachers that some behaviors and feelings are not acceptable (not only the harmful ones, but also the ones that are *appropriate but provocative*). The Hebrew Testament prophets were rejected for provoking the status quo, which was God's will). In either case, we begin, as children, to identify ourselves with the behaviors and feelings that are acceptable, and deny those that are not. We cannot afford to do otherwise. So while we remain aware of some faults, and work on them throughout our lives, the ones we feel the most shame about are denied and pushed out of awareness. The *shadow* is the name for the unconscious place in the human psyche which contains *and remembers* these unacceptable aspects of our personalities.

Even though our egos refuse to become aware of these repressed parts of ourselves, the shadow tries to make us aware. One way is through recognizing our *projections*. We project onto other people the traits, both good and bad, that we cannot own in ourselves. We tend to dislike the same type of person over and over, often because they seem to embody a negative trait we don't recognize in ourselves. And we tend to fall in love with those who seem to embody traits we don't realize are held within us, needing to be nurtured into

awareness so we can use them.

In referring to the denial of our sinfulness to the realm of the shadow, the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery takes on new meaning. Those who would stone the woman to death, drop their stones when Jesus calls them on their projection of their own sinfulness onto her. He confronts them with their moral superiority: "If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7).

It seems to be part of human nature, then, *and a tendency of the nature of the religious person*, to fall into the trap of the ego to seek spiritual perfection by *denying* his or her own faults (and, out of a fear of spiritual pride, to deny our gifts). In our need to reassure ourselves that we are acceptable, and to keep what is unacceptable at a safe, unconscious distance, we sometimes become rigid and overscrupulous in our religious observances. We Catholics have so many beautiful, powerful rituals with which to act out our desire to live in keeping with our moral ideals and love of God. They are not meant to shame us, but sometimes *we* distort their use in order to keep our shadows safely in check, as if this brings perfection.

An example of compulsive, shadow-denying religious observance is when we misuse a penance, such as saying ten *Hail Marys* in goal-oriented, perfectionistic way. Fortunately, we can pray with the intention of

*encountering* our dis-owned shadow, and for this, the repetition of the *Hail Mary*, and any prayer of supplication, is just right, as long as we are confident of the promise of mercy for the whole self, which is evident in these prayers. Not surprisingly, many such prayers are made to Mary, who, as Mother of God, reminds us of the mothering, loving quality of the divine:

*Mary, we return with confidence to you who are always ready to listen with a mother's affection and powerful assistance...Refuge of Sinners, grant us... liberating strength in our weakness. (from the Novena in Honor of the Immaculate Conception).*

To confidently ask for *strength in our weakness* is to ask for the redemption of the shadow, not its removal from the psyche. Perhaps the shadow's redemption can be appreciated in the parable of God's mercy found in Luke, in which the man with a hundred sheep will leave the ninety-nine to go after the lost one. Finding it, he *joyfully* takes it on his shoulders (15:4-7). God does not cast this part of ourselves out. Neither should we. This Advent, may we recall Zechariah's prophecy that his son, John the Baptist, would prepare the way for the Lord, Who would show the "tender mercy of our God...to give light to those who live in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:76-79)

**Nature and Grace** is a progressive quarterly journal which explores the vitality of Catholic spirituality in the light of the science and art of psychotherapy. It is produced by Laura Thor, MSW, LCSW, at ~~2925 Perry Street, Denver, CO, 80212, (303) 477-0647 (business hours only, please)~~

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December: Courageous Incarnation—Patricia Washburn, 839-9605

January: Catherine of Sienna: A Woman for Our Times—Cathy Mueller, 433-1506 (w), 233-4553 (h).

January: Group Spiritual Direction for Women, bi-weekly through April—Laura Thor, 477-0647

February: Intro. to Group Spiritual Direction—Rose Annette Liddell, 777-1193

March: The Way She Sees God—Mary Jo Fagundo, 665-2542

March: Divorce as a Journey with God—Laura Thor, 477-0647

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